

Head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) Announced an 18% Growth in the Country's Non-Oil Trade During the First Nine Months of the Current Iranian Calendar Year, Which Began on March 20, 2024

# IRAN NEWS

Education Minister Alireza Kazemi and Serbia's Ambassador to Iran Damir Kovacevic Met in Tehran and Agreed to Include the Names of Famous Iranian Figures in Serbian Students' Textbooks

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## Hezbollah's Will Imposed on Israel: The Story Continues



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Major General Hossein Salami, Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), stated that Hezbollah has successfully imposed its will on Israel, emphasizing that "the enemy is exhausted and no longer knows what to do. The enemy has no place to escape, while the resistance front is at the peak of its power today."

In his speech at the fifth anniversary of General Qassem Soleimani's martyrdom in Kerman, Salami paid tribute to the martyrs of the Islamic Revolution, especially General Soleimani. He expressed his joy in attending this commemoration in Kerman, among "honorable, resilient, and compassionate people with deep affection and steadfastness."

Salami recalled the unforgettable scenes in Kerman in 2019, describing the immense public outpouring of grief and solidarity during Soleimani's funeral. "The crowd seemed endless, like a vast ocean. The love and devotion of the people were palpable," he said, adding that such moments might never be replicated.

He praised Soleimani's legacy, stating, "General Soleimani shaped history for decades. Despite challenges like last year's explosion, the people's determination to honor him has only grown stronger, showcasing the unshakable dignity bestowed by God."

Highlighting Soleimani's humility and dedication, Salami described him as a selfless leader who lived for God and sought no reward. "He detested being in the spotlight, worked tirelessly to save Muslims, and ensured no public property was misused under his watch," he remarked.

Salami also recounted Soleimani's pivotal role in confronting enemies of Islam, noting, "When adversaries sought to destroy Muslims, Soleimani stepped in to thwart their plans. He faced dangers head-on, whether in Afghanistan or elsewhere, to defend the oppressed and protect their dignity."

## Yemen Warns Israelis



SANAA (Dispatches) - A high-ranking member of Yemen's popular resistance Ansarullah movement advises the illegal settlers in the occupied Palestinian territories to leave those areas for where they came from as Yemen will not cease its retaliatory anti-Israeli operations.

Hizam al-Assad, member of Ansarullah's Political Bureau, made the remarks in a post on X on Monday.

"Whoever wants to get to sleep comfortably has to leave for either Cypress or their own country," he said.

The official insisted that Yemen's Armed Forces would sustain their pro-Palestinian strikes as long as the Israeli regime kept up its war of genocide against the Gaza Strip, and did not stop the attacks that it has been carrying out against Yemen to try to stop the Arab Peninsula nation's operations.

"We will not leave Gaza alone," he said.

The official had earlier underlined that the regime would keep being faced with surprise military strikes on the part of the Yemeni forces as long as it retained its aggressive approach towards his country.

"Our military operations will keep targeting the heart of the occupied territories," he had stated.

"These surprises will last until the regime ceases its aggression and siege against Gaza," Assad had noted, referring to a simultaneous smothering blockade that Tel Aviv has been deploying against the coastal sliver.

## Iran Urges UNSC to Hold U.S. Accountable for Threats Against Nuclear Sites

TEHRAN - Foreign Ministry Spokesman Esmail Baghaei has censured US national security adviser Jake Sullivan's recent remarks against Iran's peaceful nuclear program, urging the UN Security Council to hold Washington accountable for threatening to attack the country's nuclear facilities.

Sullivan has reportedly presented US President Joe Biden with options for potential strikes on Iranian nuclear sites if Tehran decides to move toward a nuclear weapon -- an allegation Iran has denied over and over again -- before the inauguration of Donald Trump later this month. The presentation was made in a secret briefing several weeks ago, the Axios news site reported, citing three unnamed officials.

Speaking at his weekly press conference in Tehran on Monday, Baghaei said the threat has been repeated many times, adding that from a legal perspective, threatening to use force against countries is a violation of the United Nations Charter.

"This threat against peaceful nuclear facilities is considered a threat to international peace and security, and the Security Council must intervene in these cases and hold the US government accountable," he stated.

He added that the Iranian people have shown that they will act decisively in defense of their national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and dignity.

Baghaei also commemorated the fifth anniversary of the US assassination of Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, hailing him as a national hero and a champion in the fight against terrorism.

He also noted that January 7 marks Palestine's "Day of the Martyr," drawing attention to ongoing atrocities in the occupied territories. Baghaei labeled these acts as genocide, condemning the actions of Israel and its supporters as a permanent stain on their reputations.

On a more celebratory note, Baghaei extended congratulations to Armenian and Orthodox Christian compatriots on the occasion of Jesus Christ's birthday, observed today by their communities.

The spokesman pointed out to the details of the Iran-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, noting that the agreement encompasses various dimensions in the fields of economy, trade, energy, environment, and issues related to defense and security.

Baghaei also said that the document is an update of the cooperation agreement that was signed by the two countries in the late 1990s.

## Makran, Potential Relocation of Capital City

TEHRAN - First Vice President has addressed pivotal national issues, including the potential relocation of the capital city, emphasizing the Makran region as a prime candidate due to its strategic location and lack of limitations.

In a meeting of the Supreme Council of Foreign Relations held on Monday, January 6, 2025, with the presence of the Foreign Minister, Mohammad Reza Aref discussed Iran's active engagement in regional organizations and the country's broader diplomatic strategy.

Aref highlighted Iran's membership in key regional alliances like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, BRICS, and the Eurasian Union, noting significant international interest in Iran's participation. However, he acknowledged areas for improvement, particularly in Africa and the Americas.

"Our approach combines political and economic diplomacy as complementary tools," Aref said. "In some cases, economic diplomacy supports cultural and scientific efforts, and vice versa." He emphasized the importance of a holistic strategy for strengthening international ties.

Aref stressed the importance of ambassadors as comprehensive representatives of Iran. "Ambassadors should not see themselves solely as Foreign Ministry officials. They must coordinate efforts across all government sectors to manage relations effectively," he stated. He also advocated for deploying trade and scientific advisors in key countries.

Acknowledging the vital role of the private sector, Aref reflected on past limitations that excluded private entities from critical sectors. "Today, we see how effectively the private sector drives innovation and progress, especially in technology and exports," he said.



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

He urged the private sector to take the lead in attracting domestic and expatriate investments to achieve the country's 8% growth target outlined in the seventh development plan. "The capital of Iranians abroad is a valuable resource that must be utilized securely and efficiently within the country," Aref emphasized.

He described the ongoing sanctions as "unjust and inhumane," asserting that Iran is open to negotiations but committed to countering sanctions. "Overcoming sanctions is ingrained in the Iranian spirit," he remarked, emphasizing the need for stability and investor confidence.

Highlighting the economic potential of Iran's extensive coastline, Aref advocated for policies to capitalize on maritime resources. He identified the Makran region as a focal point for development and a potential site for relocating the nation's capital, given its strategic advantages and lack of constraints such as water scarcity.

"Makran represents an opportunity for transformative and sustainable development," Aref said, adding that foreign and domestic experts may be consulted to ensure effective planning.

Aref noted that discussions about relocating the capital have been ongoing for 30 years, but the Makran region is now a serious contender. "Tehran faces challenges in delivering services due to its limitations. Makran offers a promising alternative," he concluded.

The First Vice President called for intensified diplomatic, economic, and cultural efforts to ensure Iran's growth and resilience. He also urged regular evaluations of joint commissions with other nations to strengthen international partnerships and advance key initiatives.

## Iran to Stage Extensive Anti-Terror Operations in Land, Air, Sea for Two Months



TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian military commander says the country will stage a massive anti-terror campaign across its skies, lands and waters for the next two months to combat terrorist groups.

"These [operations] will be held on the basis of a scheduled timeline, starting today and continuing for the next two months," Brigadier General Ali Shadmehri, deputy coordinator of Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters, said.

He added that elite forces will be engaged in these operations, and the forces' command network will be tested.

The commander emphasized that state-of-the-art technologies, equipment and methods will be used in all the operations, which are aimed at maintaining and enhancing the preparedness of the Armed Forces.

He noted that units from the Army's Ground Force in the country's east and west and the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) in west, southwest, and south as well as tens of thousands of Basij (volunteer forces) in provincial guard units will participate in the operations across different provinces.

The IRGC Ground Force on Saturday launched the large-scale and specialized anti-terror campaign, codenamed Payambar-e-A'azam (Great Prophet) 19, in Iran's western province of Kermanshah, as part of attempts to raise its combat preparedness and get further ready to confront potential security threats against the country.

Various specialized divisions and units of the IRGC Ground Force, particularly from the Mirza Kuchak Khan Brigades are participating in the military exercises.

Iranian military forces hold routine exercises according to a detailed schedule in various parts of the country in order to test their weaponry and equipment, and evaluate their combat preparedness.

The country's officials have repeatedly underscored that the country will not hesitate to strengthen its military capabilities, including its missile power, which are entirely meant for defense, and that Iran's defense capabilities will never be subject to negotiations.

## Judiciary Chief Calls for Swift Release of Eligible Prisoners



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Judiciary Chief, Hojatolislam Mohseni Ejei, has emphasized the importance of ensuring that no prisoner who qualifies for pardon or release remains incarcerated, urging swift arrangements for the release of eligible prisoners.

Speaking on Tuesday, at a session of the Supreme Judicial Council, Ejei highlighted the significance of the upcoming months of Rajab, Sha'ban, and Ramadan, describing them as a period full of blessings, self-improvement opportunities, and community betterment. He encouraged judicial officials to maximize the potential of these months by enhancing their service to the public, ensuring respect for citizens, and expediting judicial proceedings.

Ejei further stressed that this period is an ideal time for increasing efforts to rehabilitate prisoners and facilitate their reintegration into society. He called for more collaboration with religious figures and clerics to aid in prisoner rehabilitation and social reintegration programs, and for providing additional support to prisoners' families, including facilitating easier visitation and offering various forms of assistance.

The Judiciary Chief also urged a focused effort to expand peace-building and reconciliation efforts, particularly through the work of arbitration councils and courts, to foster forgiveness and leniency in criminal matters, especially in cases involving victims and their families.

As the end of the year approaches, Ejei noted the urgency of addressing pending cases. He advised judicial bodies to handle matters swiftly and thoroughly, particularly in light of upcoming holidays, to avoid delays and ensure that this year's cases are resolved before the year ends.

# IRAN NEWS



## Iranian Trade Delegation to Visit Tajikistan on January 15

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - In line with the upcoming visit of the Iranian President to Tajikistan on January 15-16, the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture (ICCIMA) has announced plans to send a trade delegation to Dushanbe, Tajikistan. This initiative, organized in collaboration with the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran, aims to strengthen commercial ties between the two nations.

The delegation, led by ICCIMA President Samad Hasanzadeh, will include representatives from leading Iranian companies. The program includes a series of activities such as conferences, business-to-business (B2B) meetings with Tajik companies and officials, visits to industrial and commercial centers, and discussions at the Iranian Embassy in Tajikistan.

## FATF Adoption Promotes Financial Transparency and Boosts Foreign Investment



TEHRAN - The President of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture emphasized that adopting and implementing FATF (Financial Action Task Force) standards would enhance financial transparency, strengthen international relations, attract foreign investment, reduce financial risks, combat money laundering, promote foreign trade, and lower financial transaction costs for the country.

In a meeting with the chamber's representatives, heads of its 20 commissions, and leaders of economic organizations, Samad Hasanzadeh remarked that a recent discussion with the President provided an opportunity to address foreign investment, FATF membership, trade expansion, and energy imbalances. He expressed optimism that these engagements would yield positive outcomes for the private sector.

Highlighting the President's favorable view on FATF membership and the Supreme Leader's approval for its reconsideration by the Expediency Council, Hasanzadeh noted that the private sector is prepared to collaborate with officials to advance this agenda.

Hasanzadeh acknowledged significant challenges in the currency, financial, and energy sectors, which have intensified since the start of the year, impacting economic activities. He mentioned efforts to address these issues, including correspondence and meetings with national authorities.

The Central Bank Governor, Mohammad Reza Farzin, introduced an exchange market plan, which is being implemented with the private sector's involvement. The initiative aims to resolve persistent challenges faced by exporters since 2018, including exchange rate volatility and rising costs of raw materials and imports.

Hasanzadeh revealed that the Central Bank has pledged to inject significant funds into banks to support small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Additionally, the chamber has proposed a plan to address financial losses in the private sector caused by energy shortages and forced shutdowns. He suggested a phased repayment approach to mitigate financial constraints faced by the Ministry of Energy and related organizations.



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TEHRAN - The Tehran Chamber of Commerce hosted a meeting between its officials and members of the Iran-China Parliamentary Friendship Group. Discussions focused on proposals from the private sector to facilitate trade, expand commercial ties, and enhance mutual cooperation between the two nations.

Members of the parliamentary group, including Ruhollah Najabat, Meysam Zohourian, Amirhossein Sabati, Mehdi Taghiani, and Jalil MirMohammadi, emphasized the friendly relations between Iran and China. They highlighted the potential to leverage China's capabilities to broaden Iran's commercial ties.

At the outset, the head of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce underscored the importance of strengthening collaboration between the chamber, as the hub of private sector activities, and the Iranian Parliament, as the voice of the nation. He announced the establishment of a parliamentary office within the chamber to facilitate direct dialogue between economic players and lawmakers, particularly those representing Tehran Province.

According to the chamber's public relations office, Mahmoud Najafi Arab stated that in October, a private sector delegation, accompanied by five parliamentarians, participated in the Eurasian Economic Forum in Armenia. This visit aimed to explore avenues for enhancing trade relations with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

Najafi Arab lauded the parliamentary support for ratifying the free trade agreement with the EAEU, which he described as a positive step for the private sector, given the union's significant potential for boosting trade.

He also highlighted a recent visit to Shanghai and Beijing, where the chamber's delegation signed several agreements with counterpart organizations during the China Import Expo. He expressed hope that these efforts would lead to a significant role for the chamber in facilitating trade with China.

Referring to a meeting with President Masoud Pezeshkian, Najafi Arab noted the president's mention of the Supreme Leader's emphasis on reconsidering Iran's adherence to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). He stressed that resolving issues related to sanctions and FATF could significantly boost trade with China, as these challenges are seen as

barriers by Chinese stakeholders.

Tehran Chamber of Commerce Secretary-General Fereydoun Verdi-Nejad called for serious government attention to fostering trade with China. He pointed out the absence of an Iranian ambassador to China, which sends a negative signal to Beijing. He urged a more focused and proactive approach to developing economic and commercial relations.

Verdi-Nejad highlighted China's market as a valuable opportunity for Iranian exports amidst ongoing sanctions. He lamented lost opportunities due to delays and called for greater efforts to capitalize on remaining prospects.

He outlined the chamber's strategies, including fostering provincial trade, leveraging special trade zones with fewer international restrictions, and collaborating with Iranian expatriate business networks in China.

The Tehran Chamber of Commerce has identified China as one of its eight priority countries in its strategic plan. Verdi-Nejad outlined objectives such as boosting non-oil exports, attracting investment, and improving bilateral ties through civil institutions like the chamber.

He also emphasized the potential of long-term collaboration between the private sector and the Iran-China Parliamentary Friendship Group to strengthen diplomatic and trade relations.

Mehdi Zohourian, Vice Chairman of the Iran-China Parliamentary Friendship Group, highlighted foreign trade challenges, including restricted access to financial resources. He called for direct trade routes with China to reduce reliance on third-party countries for transactions.

Amirhossein Sabati, the group's second vice chairman, emphasized the importance of a strategic partnership with China to alleviate external pressures. He urged the private sector to provide well-researched proposals to the government, cautioning against expecting the administration to solely shoulder trade facilitation amid its daily responsibilities.

The group members expressed regret over the government's withdrawal from Japan's Expo 2025, describing it as a lost opportunity. They called for stronger involvement from the Tehran Chamber of Commerce and affirmed parliament's readiness to mediate and address the private sector's concerns.

## Iran and Oman Accelerate the Implementation of IT Agreements



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In a meeting held at Iran's Ministry of Information and Communications Technology on Monday, Minister Seyyed Sattar Hashemi discussed enhancing collaborations with Omani Ambassador Ibrahim bin Ahmed Al-Muaini. The minister highlighted the cultural ties between the two nations as a foundation for strengthening cooperation in communications, technology, and innovation.

Referring to a recent visit by Oman's Foreign Minister to Iran's President, Hashemi stressed the need for accelerated efforts to operationalize agreements signed in communications and information technology. He emphasized the significant potential for advancing bilateral relations and cooperation in various fields.

Minister Hashemi underscored the importance of joint efforts to develop communication infrastructure and international corridors. He specifically pointed out the strategic importance of the India-Oman-Iran-Russia corridor in boosting regional connectivity.

He also highlighted the role of Iran's National Post Company, the Payam Special Economic Zone, and Payam Airport, all under the Ministry of ICT, as key platforms for fostering collaboration. The Payam Special Economic Zone hosts numerous companies and factories producing a variety of ICT products, making it a potential hub for bilateral partnerships.

Behzad Akbari, Deputy Minister and CEO of Iran's Infrastructure Communications Company, also attended the meeting. He expressed interest in expanding collaboration with Oman Telecommunication Company (Omantel). Akbari described Iran-Oman cooperation in communication infrastructure as an opportunity to grow the region's digital ecosystem.

"Oman serves as a hub for submarine cables in the region," Akbari noted, adding that Iran's access to Central Asia and Europe could position both countries as pivotal players in global connectivity. He also highlighted investment opportunities in digital infrastructure, including data centers and cloud facilities, with potential for large-scale data centers in cities such as Chabahar, Mashhad, Tehran, and Tabriz.

Ambassador Al-Muaini acknowledged Iran's advancements in information technology despite U.S. sanctions. He affirmed Oman's willingness to strengthen ties, particularly in communications and IT. After reviewing potential collaboration areas presented during the meeting, Al-Muaini assured that he would relay the discussed opportunities to the Omani government and Ministry of Communications.

This meeting marks another step toward operationalizing agreements and enhancing technological cooperation between Iran and Oman, reinforcing their role in shaping regional and global digital ecosystems.

## Iran Civil Aviation Organization Welcomes Increased Flights from Saudi Arabia to Iran



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The spokesperson for Iran's Civil Aviation Organization (CAO) announced that the organization welcomes the increase in flights from Saudi Arabia to Iran under bilateral agreements.

Since the restoration of political ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia last year, efforts to strengthen tourism relations between the two neighboring nations—both sharing a common history and religion—have been a priority.

On October 18, 2023, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Tourism proposed signing a tourism cooperation agreement with Iran. He expressed Saudi Arabia's interest in hosting more Iranian visitors while encouraging Saudi tourists to explore Iran.

Starting Tuesday, December 5, 2024, Iran Air resumed the "Mashhad-Dammam-Mashhad" route with two weekly flights on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Passengers departed from Mashhad's Shahid Hasheminejad International Airport on an Airbus A319 for Saudi Arabia's Dammam Airport. This route was revived after a nine-year hiatus.

Following the successful relaunch of the Mashhad-Dammam route, which saw strong interest from citizens of both countries, Iran Air doubled its weekly flights to four.

On Sunday, December 29, 2024, during a conference at Tehran's Milad Tower, Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, announced that flights from Saudi Arabia to Mashhad had commenced, with Riyadh seeking to expand the number of flights. He also highlighted plans to attract tourists from other countries, including Bahrain and Kuwait, in the future.

Jaafar Yazerlou, CAO spokesperson, confirmed that the organization supports increasing Saudi flights to Iran as part of mutual agreements. He revealed that a Saudi airline had recently submitted a request for scheduled flights between cities in Iran and Saudi Arabia, which is currently under review.

This development, accompanied by enthusiastic reception from passengers at both ends, promises to enhance economic interactions, expand tourism—especially religious tourism—and deepen cultural ties between the Muslim nations of Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as other neighboring countries.

## Decline in Iran's Transit Importance for Turkey



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Fatemeh Ghanbarpour, Vice President of the Transport, Transit, and Logistics Commission at the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, told ILNA about ongoing efforts to prevent the suspension of Iran's Green Card membership. She stated: "Iran Insurance is a member of the COB convention, and reinsurance processes are underway. Since reinsurance operates as an insurance company linked to the COB, which is an international body overseeing the Green Card insurance system based in Brussels, we are striving to have the Iranian Chamber of Commerce introduced as the guarantor to the COB. This would place Green Card insurance under the chamber's umbrella, similar to what happened with the TIR carnet system."

She added that Central Insurance, being a government entity, has been removed from the process of issuing Green Card insurance for Iranian drivers. Instead, the reinsurance company now acts as the representative of COB. However, as this is still in the trial phase, it is not issuing insurance policies yet.

Ghanbarpour explained the reasons for halts in the movement of Iranian and Turkish trucks at the border between the two countries: "The Transport Commission of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce had previously warned, in a meeting with the Anti-Smuggling Task Force, about the repercussions of imposing fuel taxes on Turkish trucks transiting through Iran. Such measures would lead to reciprocal

actions by Turkish authorities."

She emphasized: "Our officials fail to recognize that Iran is surrounded by corridors, faces sanctions, and lacks Green Card insurance. Despite this, when taxes were collected from Turkish trucks and deposited into the treasury, authorities welcomed the revenue without considering that the cost of losing Turkey's transit trade exceeds the revenue gained from selling fuel at the differential price charged to foreign and even Iranian trucks. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also failed to respond to the Chamber's letters on this matter."

Ghanbarpour highlighted that Turkey, with its access to corridors, developments in Syria, and access to the Red Sea, is gradually reducing its reliance on Iran's transit routes. She added:

"Corridors such as Basra and Zangezur are being established. Currently, Turkish trucks transit through Iran to deliver goods to Qatar and the UAE. However, once the Basra Development Road becomes operational, Iran's role in trade between Europe, Turkey, and Gulf nations will diminish. These corridors will replace Iran's rugged roads as the preferred transit route for Turkish and European goods. These challenges have weakened Iran's bargaining power in negotiations with Turkey."

## Government's Priority: Providing Housing for Low-Income Groups



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Farzaneh Sadegh, Minister of Roads and Urban Development, emphasized the government's commitment to housing low-income groups during a cordial meeting with members of the Parliament's Civil Engineering Commission at the Ministry's headquarters.

After listening to the representatives' remarks, she stated: "Both your constructive criticism and support are instrumental in improving our performance. Your well-intentioned critiques lead to policy adjustments and better outcomes."

During the session, Minister Sadegh proposed forming a "Housing Committee" comprising members of the Civil Engineering Commission, the Deputy Minister for Housing, and other related officials to intensify efforts in achieving the housing goals set out in the Seventh Development Plan.

Addressing comments from some commission members, Sadegh highlighted the need for accurate data in the "TAM" housing system. She noted: "By linking this system with the Ministry of Labor, Cooperation, and Social Welfare's database, we discovered that a portion of the 800,000 applicants for subsidized housing belong to income deciles 8 to 10. This contradicts the government's priority, as outlined in Article 31 of the Constitution, which is to provide housing for the low-income and underprivileged groups in deciles 1 to 3."

Sadegh reiterated that the Ministry's housing initiatives, including land allocation and urban development projects, prioritize these lower-income deciles.

### North Korea Fires Suspected Mid-Range Missile

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea fired what appeared to be an intermediate-range ballistic missile out to sea on Monday, coinciding with a visit by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Seoul during a period of political turmoil in South Korea. South Korea's military said the missile was launched eastward at around noon (0300 GMT) shortly after Blinken met with South Korean Acting President Choi Sang-mok.

In that meeting, Blinken emphasised Washington's "unwavering" security commitment to South Korea and called for a strong joint defence posture to prepare for possible North Korea provocations, according to an official readout.

Choi is standing in for impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol whose Dec. 3 declaration of martial law stunned the country and led to his suspension from duties on Dec. 14.



# IRAN NEWS

### Meloni Boosts Ties With Trump in Surprise Visit to Florida



WEST PALM BEACH (Dispatches) - Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni said she was ready to work with Donald Trump after making a surprise visit to Florida to meet the president-elect before his inauguration on Jan. 20.

Meloni, who has led a right-wing coalition in Italy since Oct. 2022, met Trump at his Mar-a-Lago residence late on Saturday in a trip that had not been announced in advance.

"Lovely evening with Donald Trump who I thank for the welcome," Meloni posted on social media, with a picture of her and Trump.

"Ready to work together," she added on X, alongside the Italian and U.S. flags.

No details of the talks were released, but Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini said they covered issues including the plight of Cecilia Sala, an Italian journalist detained last month in Iran.

"Well done Giorgia Meloni for visiting Donald Trump to talk about peace, industrial and commercial cooperation, security, and the freeing of Cecilia Sala," Salvini posted on X.

Meloni was greeted with applause after an introduction by the president-elect, according to videos shared on social media by reporters and others.

"This is very exciting. I'm here with a fantastic woman, the prime minister of Italy," Trump told the Mar-a-Lago crowd, according to a media pool report. "She's really taken Europe by storm."

Meloni is seen as a potentially strong partner for Trump given her conservative credentials. She has also forged a close relationship with billionaire tech CEO Elon Musk, a close Trump ally.

### South Korea Police Seek to Extend Arrest Deadline for Impeached President



SEOUL (Dispatches) - South Korean investigators trying to arrest suspended President Yoon Suk Yeol have asked for an extension to the warrant that expires today, with the embattled leader holed up in his residence.

The former star prosecutor has defiantly refused questioning three times before a failed arrest attempt saw hundreds of protective guards block investigators trying to detain him over a bungled martial law decree last month.

Investigators from the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) said they will ask for an extension to a warrant due to expire today.

"The validity of the warrant expires today. We plan to request an extension from the court today," said Lee Jae-seung, deputy director of the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO), in a briefing to reporters.

He added they had asked for the police's help to detain Yoon because of the difficulties investigators had faced, and would consult them on the timing of the warrant extension. Police have yet to accept the request.

Last week, a tense, hours-long standoff with hundreds of security forces forced investigators into a U-turn over security fears.

Yoon faces prison or, at worst, the death penalty if arrested after briefly suspending civilian rule and plunging South Korea into its worst political crisis in decades, but both he and his supporters have remained defiant.



## Israel, Hamas Clash Over Hostage Release Deal as Israeli Strikes in Gaza Intensify

GAZA (Dispatches) - Israel and Hamas wrangled over the details of a deal to halt fighting in the Gaza Strip and return hostages home, as Palestinian officials said intensified Israeli bombardments had killed more than 100 people over the weekend.

A Hamas official said the group had approved a list of 34 Israeli hostages to be returned as part of a deal that could eventually lead to a ceasefire. But Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's office swiftly issued a statement saying Hamas had not provided a hostage list.

A renewed push is underway to reach a ceasefire in the 15-month war between Israel and Hamas, and return Israeli hostages who were taken to Gaza, before U.S. President-elect Donald Trump takes office on Jan. 20.

The effort comes amid a surge in Israeli military action in the enclave. This weekend, Israeli airstrikes in Gaza killed 105 Palestinians, medics said. The Israeli military said it had killed dozens of Hamas militants.

The U.S. State Department said Israel must comply with international law and do "significantly more to ensure the protection of civilians". It added, however, that it supports Israel's right to defend itself.

Israeli negotiators were dispatched on Friday to resume talks in Doha brokered by Qatari and Egyptian mediators, and U.S. President Joe Biden's administration, which is helping to mediate, has urged Hamas to agree to a deal.

Hamas said on Friday it was committed to reaching an agreement as soon as possible, but it was unclear how close the two sides were.

A Hamas official told Reuters any agreement to return Israeli hostages would hinge on a deal for Israel to withdraw from Gaza and a permanent ceasefire or end to the war.

"However, until now, the occupation continues to be obstinate over an agreement over the issues of the ceasefire and withdrawal, and has made no step forward," the official said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Netanyahu has consistently said the war will only end once Hamas is eradicated as a military and governing force.

Israel launched its assault on Gaza in response to an Oct. 7, 2023 attack by Hamas militants on communities in southern Israel, killing about 1,200 people and taking about 250 hostages, according to Israeli tallies.

Israel's military campaign has since leveled swathes of the enclave, driving most people from their homes, and has killed 45,805 Palestinians, according to the Gaza health ministry.

Israeli military strikes continued throughout the Gaza Strip on Sunday, with an airstrike killing five people in a house in the Nuseirat camp in central Gaza, Gaza health officials said, and another killing four in Jabalia in the north of the enclave.

Later in the day, an airstrike hit a police station in Khan Younis in southern Gaza, killing five people, medics said. It was not immediately clear if all the dead were police officers.

At nightfall, medics said an Israeli airstrike had killed three people in Bureij camp in central Gaza, bringing Sunday's death toll to 17.

The Israeli military said it had struck Hamas militants operating from the humanitarian area in Khan Younis, and an Islamic Jihad militant who it said had carried out attacks from the humanitarian area in Deir al-Balah.

In Gaza City's Sheikh Radwan neighbourhood, relatives and neighbours rushed to the Zuhd family's house, which was struck by an Israeli airstrike late on Saturday, killing seven people, medics said. The search continued on Sunday morning for four others believed to be trapped under the rubble.

Three men dug away debris with their bare hands to retrieve bodies and search for possible survivors.

The Israeli military said on Sunday its forces had attacked more than 100 targets across Gaza over the weekend, killing dozens of Hamas militants. It said it had also destroyed rocket launching sites that had been used to wage attacks on Israel in recent days.

## Zelensky Says Strong Trump Can Broker Peace With Russia, End Ukraine War

KYIV (Dispatches) - President Volodymyr Zelensky expressed optimism in an interview published Sunday that "strong" incoming US president Donald Trump will be able to force Russia into peace talks and end the war in Ukraine.

In a three-hour discussion with US podcaster Lex Fridman, Zelensky said the Republican president-elect will be vital to guaranteeing Ukraine's security, opening the way for a negotiated settlement also backed by European nations.

"Trump and I will come to an agreement and... offer strong security guarantees, together with Europe, and then we can talk to the Russians," Zelensky said, according to the published translation of the interview held in Kyiv over the New Year.

"We and Trump come first, and Europe will support Ukraine's position," he said.

Trump has frequently mocked Zelensky as a "salesman," while raising eyebrows in Washington by rarely criticising Russian President Vladimir Putin -- and even speaking admiringly of the Kremlin leader.

Trump said during his election campaign that he would bring peace to Ukraine immediately, although he has not said how. He has strongly criticised the massive military aid sent to Ukraine under President Joe Biden and has raised doubts over continued US involvement in the Western military alliance NATO.

However, Zelensky was full of praise for Trump, as well as his billionaire adviser Elon Musk, and suggested that the president-elect had the clout needed



to at least freeze Russia's invasion of its neighbor.

"I think that president Trump not only has will, he has all these possibilities, and it's not just talk. I really count on him, and I think that our people really count on him, so he has enough power to pressure him, to pressure Putin," Zelensky said.

The Ukrainian president said that European leaders are all waiting to see what Trump wants.

"When I talk about something with Donald Trump -- whether we meet in person or we just have a call -- all the European leaders always ask, 'how was it?' This shows the influence of Donald Trump, and this has never happened before with an American president," he said.

"This also gives you confidence that he can stop this war."

Zelensky also weighed into US politics, saying Republican Trump won his election against Biden's vice president, Kamala Harris, because he "was much more strong" than the Democrat.

Trump showed strength "intellectually and physically," Zelensky said. It "was an important point to show that if you want to have a strong country, you have to be strong. And he was strong."

Asked what Ukraine needed to agree to a ceasefire, Zelensky said security guarantees -- preferably within NATO.

He said that the West should at minimum guarantee security of unoccupied areas of Ukraine, continue weapons shipments and maintain punishing economic sanctions on Russia.

"If we do not have security guarantees, Putin will come again," he said.

Zelensky warned against a weakening of the US commitment to NATO or even an exit -- something Trump has hinted at repeatedly, claiming that longstanding allies are taking advantage of Washington.

A US exit would be "the end. That is, that's the death of NATO," Zelensky said.

The Ukrainian leader said Putin's goals are a "weak NATO," a "Ukraine which cannot survive on the battlefield," and to "prevent me from building a strong relationship with Trump."

Asked whether he would like to attend Trump's inauguration on January 20, Zelensky said this would only happen if "president Trump invites me personally."

"If he will invite me, I will come."

## Canada PM Trudeau Is Likely to Announce Resignation

OTTAWA (Dispatches) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is increasingly likely to announce he intends to step down, though he has not made a final decision, a source familiar with Trudeau's thinking said.

The source spoke to Reuters after the Globe and Mail reported that Trudeau was expected to announce as early as today that he would quit as leader of Canada's ruling Liberal Party after nine years in office.

The source requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

Trudeau's departure would leave the party without a permanent head at a time when polls show the Liberals will badly lose to the official opposition Conservatives in an election that must be held by late October.

Sources told the Globe and Mail that they did not know definitely when Trudeau would announce his plans to leave but said they expect it would happen before a emergency meeting of Liberal legislators on Wednesday.

An increasing number of Liberal parliamentarians, alarmed by a series of gloomy polls, have publicly urged Trudeau to quit.

The prime minister's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment outside regular business hours. The prime minister's regularly published schedule for Monday said he would participate virtually in a cabinet committee meeting on Canada-U.S. relations.

It remains unclear whether Trudeau will leave immediately or stay on as prime minister until a new Liberal leader is selected, the Globe and Mail report added.

Trudeau took over as Liberal leader in 2013 when the party was in deep trouble and had been reduced to third place in the House of Commons for the first time.

If he does resign, it would likely spur fresh calls for a quick election to put in place a



stable government able to deal with the administration of President-elect Donald Trump for the next four years.

The prime minister has discussed with Finance Minister Dominic LeBlanc whether he would be willing to step in as interim leader and prime minister, one source told the newspaper, adding that this would be unworkable if LeBlanc plans to run for the leadership.

Trudeau, 53, had been able to fend off Liberal legislators worried about the polls and the loss of safe seats in two special elections.

But calls for him to step aside have grown since December, when Trudeau tried to demote Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland, one of his closest cabinet allies, after she pushed back against his proposals for more spending.

Freeland quit instead and penned a letter accusing Trudeau of "political gimmicks" rather than focusing on what was best for the country.

Trudeau propelled the Liberals to power in 2015 promising "sunny ways" and a progressive agenda that promoted the rights of women and a promise to fight climate change.

But the everyday realities of governing gradually wore him down and like many Western leaders, the need to deal with the effects of the pandemic ate up much of his time.

Although Ottawa spent heavily to protect consumers and businesses, racking up record budget deficits, this provided little protection from public anger as prices soared.

A botched immigration policy led to hundreds of thousands of arrivals, straining an already overheated housing market.

## Man United Rally to Slow Liverpool Charge Towards Premier League Title



LIVERPOOL (Dispatches) - Manchester United rallied to snap a four-game losing streak and slow Liverpool's romp towards the Premier League title in a thrilling 2-2 draw at Anfield.

Liverpool move six points clear at the top of the table, with a game in hand to come, over second-placed Arsenal.

But this was an opportunity lost for Arne Slot's men after they came from behind to lead 2-1 through Cody Gakpo and Mohamed Salah's penalty.

"Of course it feels for us like two points dropped," said Slot.

United broke their six-year goal drought at Anfield to open the scoring in spectacular fashion through Lisandro Martinez and got the point a much-improved performance deserved when Amad Diallo levelled on 80 minutes.

A point edges United up to 13th in the table and seven clear of the relegation zone.

"I'm pretty upset. If we show this level at Liverpool, first in the league, why can't we do this everywhere? It frustrates me," said United captain Bruno Fernandes.

"Also, finally I did a proper performance. We said we need much more from ourselves to get more from this season."

Slot warned that United were "much better" than their shocking league position suggested ahead of the game and so it proved.

United had been carved open at will by Newcastle in a dismal 2-0 defeat last Monday that left manager Ruben Amorim declaring they were in a relegation battle.

Amorim's hand was strengthened by the return of Fernandes and Manuel Ugarte from suspension, while Kobbie Mainoo also returned to the starting line-up.

The Portuguese's plan to frustrate Liverpool worked but the home side did have the chances early on to make the breakthrough in the first half.

Gakpo prodded past the far post before Alexis Mac Allister's volley forced Andre Onana into a fine save

with his feet.

United took time to begin to impose themselves as an attacking threat but should have been in front before the break.

Rasmus Hojlund then had the best chance of the first half when he raced in behind the Liverpool defence but could not beat Alisson Becker.

However, confidence was suddenly coursing back into United players who have looked bereft in recent weeks.

The visitors' breakthrough came from an unlikely source as Martinez showed his strikers how to finish with a blistering hit in off the underside of the bar for just his second goal for the club.

The Anfield crowd were beginning to get restless as the league leaders were briefly at sixes and sevens.

However, Liverpool's position at the top of the table owes much to the depth of firepower they possess.

Even on a quiet day for Salah, they had an in-form forward to come up with the moment of magic required to turn the game.

Gakpo turned inside his Dutch international colleague Matthijs de Ligt and blasted high past Onana for his 10th goal in 15 games on the hour mark.

Mac Allister's header then flicked off De Ligt's outstretched arm inside the penalty area and a VAR review resulted in the awarding of a spot-kick.

Salah smashed low and hard beyond Onana for his 18th Premier League goal in 19 games.

However, United's spirited display got the point it merited to halt an alarming losing streak for Amorim so early in his reign.

Alejandro Garnacho's attitude has been questioned by his new boss but the Argentine came off the bench to make the equaliser as his low cross was turned in by Diallo.

And it should have been even better for United when Harry Maguire spooned Joshua Zirkzee's pass over the bar with the goal gaping deep into stoppage time.

## Australia End 10-Year Wait for Series Win Over India



SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Australia held their collective nerve to clinch a blockbuster five-test series against India 3-1 and take custody of the Border-Gavaskar Trophy for the first time in a decade.

In keeping with a pulsating series where momentum swung back and forth by the session, the fifth test remained on a knife edge until the final hour when Australia eased to a six-wicket triumph.

Perhaps helped by Jasprit Bumrah's inability to bowl because of a back injury, Travis Head and debutant Beau Webster guided Australia to their victory target of 162 runs with an unbroken fifth-wicket stand of 58.

The win in front of a packed house at a Sydney Cricket Ground bathed in pink for Glenn McGrath's cancer charity also ensured Australia will defend their World Test Championship title against South Africa at Lord's in June.

"It felt like it was kind of seesawing throughout the whole series so to finish it 3-1, to hold the trophy, is an amazing feeling," said Australia skipper Pat Cummins.

"I'm immensely proud, I absolutely love playing with these guys and it's been a lot of fun along the way as well."

The match had been played on fast forward over the first two days with 15 wickets falling on Saturday, and Australia removed four more in the first hour on a sunny Sunday morning to dismiss India for 157.

## USA Defeat Poland to Win United Cup

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Coco Gauff roared past Iga Swiatek to inspire team USA before Taylor Fritz sealed the United Cup title with victory over Poland's Hubert Hurkacz in Sydney.

Gauff opened with a statement 6-4, 6-4 win over Swiatek in 1hr 51min of hard-hitting tennis to fire a warning shot ahead of the Australian Open.

Big-serving Fritz then battled through against Hubert Hurkacz 6-4, 5-7, 7-6 (7/4) to spark wild celebrations as the Americans won the mixed-teams cup for the second time in three years after winning the inaugural event in 2023.

For Poland it meant falling at the final hurdle again after losing to Germany 12 months ago.

Gauff set the ball rolling with a second victory in a row over Swiatek after beating the former world number one at the WTA Finals in Riyadh on her way to the title.

Gauff had won all six of her previous singles and doubles matches this week and continued her streak when Swiatek double-faulted on match point at 4-5, 30-40 in the second set.



"I think I have the belief that I am one of the best players in the world, and when I play good tennis, it's hard for me to be beaten," said Gauff, who won the award as player of the tournament.

The 20-year-old will go into the first Grand Slam of the year next Sunday unbeaten in singles since losing to world number one Aryna Sabalenka in the Wuhan semi-finals in October, and brimming with confidence.

"Today I think I played great tennis, and I'm happy to get a point," she said.

"It was tough today. I'm not gonna lie."

Gauff's victory left the United States one win away from lifting the title for the second time, and Fritz delivered after edging a third-set tiebreak to seal a tense encounter.

"It's been a great week," said Fritz.

"They're an incredibly tough team and the margins are very small," he added after a serve-dominated match that featured 30 aces and just three break points.

"I feel like it could have always gone either way. Just want to say thanks to my whole team."

Earlier, Swiatek took a medical timeout at 5-4 down in the second set to have strapping put on her nagging left thigh which has bothered her all week in Sydney.

After losing to Gauff, Swiatek left the court in tears, walking gingerly, but returned laughing and joking during the trophy presentations.

## Late Dembele trike Earns PSG French Champions Trophy in Doha



DOHA (Dispatches) - Ousmane Dembele's stoppage-time goal settled the French Champions Trophy, giving Paris Saint-Germain a 1-0 win over Monaco in a fixture played in Doha.

PSG's troubles in front of goal this season have often cost them in the Champions League, and they were thwarted throughout this game by a combination of poor finishing and some fine saves by Monaco goalkeeper Philipp Koehn.

However, it was ultimately a deserved victory for Luis Enrique's team in Qatar, as PSG won the trophy — the French equivalent of a Super Cup or England's Community Shield — for the 11th time in the last 12 seasons.

"It was a great game who play good football," said Luis Enrique.

"The result is well deserved and reflects our domination... against one of the best teams in France and in Europe."

## Tauson Secures First Title Since 2021; Sabalenka Wins Brisbane Int'l

AUCKLAND (Dispatches) - Naomi Osaka retired from the final of the Auckland Classic with an abdominal injury, a blow to the Japanese star just a week before the start of the Australian Open.

Playing in her first WTA final for three years, against Denmark's Clara Tauson, the four-time Grand Slam champion called for the physio after taking the opening set 6-4 and pulled out shortly afterwards.

Osaka's sudden withdrawal from the Australian Open warm-up event came as a shock after playing with no apparent problem in the 35-minute opening set, unleashing some powerful groundstrokes to break her opponent in the third and fifth games.

At the changeover, the 27-year-old stood and performed a series of stretches during a medical timeout.

After consulting with the trainer she shook the hand of Tauson, who picked up a third career title and her first since 2021.

Osaka didn't divulge details of what forced her withdrawal in a short court-side interview.

However, in a statement, the WTA said she retired "due to an abdominal injury".

"I just want to thank everyone for welcoming me to such a beautiful city and I had a lot of fun playing here and I'm really sorry about how



it ended," Osaka said.

"I hope you did enjoy the tennis that we did play and I'm just really grateful to be here."

It was an anti-climactic finish to the week for Osaka, who was chasing her first title in four years since winning the 2021 Australian Open.

Her most recent final appearance was at the Miami Open the following year, before taking a 15-month break and giving birth to her first child midway through 2023.

She returned to tennis 12 months ago and has climbed to 57th in the

world rankings.

Meanwhile Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka geared up for her title defence at the year's opening Grand Slam with a battling 4-6 6-3 6-2 win over Russian qualifier Polina Kudermetova in the final of the Brisbane International.

Sabalenka is bidding to become the first woman to lift three straight Australian Open trophies since Swiss Martina Hingis won from 1997 to 1999, and she will head to Melbourne Park brimming with confidence.

"I'm super happy to lift this trophy," said Sabalenka.

"It's a really important tournament before heading into the Australian Open. The final match was a bit tricky, (both of us) were over-hitting."

"I'm really curious about the average speed of our shots. It was a crazy match, and I'm really glad I got this win."

The world No.1 from Belarus, outclassed in last year's final by Elena Rybakina before going on to win a second straight Melbourne Park crown, appeared off the pace against Kudermetova and lost the first set by dropping her serve for a second time.

This fixture was supposed to be staged in Beijing on August 8 as the curtain-raiser to the French campaign.

However, it ended up being called off by the Chinese authorities, and Qatar — which owns PSG via Qatar Sports Investments — stepped in to stage the game.

It took place at Doha's Stadium 974, which hosted matches at the 2022 World Cup held in Qatar and which was not full for this match.

PSG won a clean sweep of the domestic honours in France last season and were looking to claim the first leg of another treble in this campaign.

A 4-2 win away in Monaco last month, when Dembele scored a double, allowed them to finish 2024 with a 10-point lead at the top of Ligue 1 from both Marseille and the principality club.

When Desire Doue pounced on a slack pass out by Koehn and sent a shot off the bar on eight minutes, it looked like it was going to be a long evening for Monaco.

Vitinha sent a shot just wide and Lee Kang-in had a thunderous strike tipped over by Koehn, although Monaco also threatened when a Maghnes Akliouche hit was turned away by Gianluigi Donnarumma.

Eliesse Ben Seghir also tested PSG's Italian goalkeeper shortly after the break, and Vanderson hit the post from a tight angle for Monaco, but PSG stepped up the pressure as the second half went on.

The game was nevertheless heading for penalties before the goal came in the 92nd minute, as substitute Fabian Ruiz was released down the left and sent a low ball across the penalty area for Dembele to convert at the far post.

It is the perfect start to a huge month for PSG, which will notably see them face Manchester City in a crunch Champions League fixture on January 22.

Monaco also have a key few weeks ahead of them, including games against Aston Villa and Inter Milan as they too seek to progress to the knockout stage of the Champions League.