

The Aerospace Force of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Has Launched a Large-Scale Military Exercise in the Central Province of Isfahan on the Periphery of the Natanz Uranium Enrichment Facility

# IRAN NEWS

The Date Corresponding to the Martyrdom of Iran's Former President Ebrahim Raeisi and His Companions Has Been Registered as the "Day of the Martyrs of Service" and a National Day in Iran's Calendar

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### Enemy Attempts to Undermine the Resistance Front



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TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has underscored efforts by adversaries to destabilize the resistance front, emphasizing the psychological tactics used against regional forces. Speaking on Tuesday at a ceremony honoring managers and employees aligned with the ideology of Martyr General Qassem Soleimani, Araqchi highlighted the resilience and evolving strength of the resistance movement.

Araqchi pointed out that the blows dealt to the Syrian Army were more psychological than military. "Through media campaigns and psychological warfare, the Syrian Army was made to feel defeated before even engaging in battle," he said. He urged vigilance against such tactics, which aim to weaken morale and create despair.

Araqchi described Soleimani's school of thought as rooted in resistance, built upon the ideologies of the late Imam Khomeini and strengthened by the guidance of Iran's Supreme Leader. He noted that Soleimani not only theorized resistance but also translated it into action, creating a robust front that continues to challenge Zionist and imperialist forces in the region.

"The resistance front has faced challenges, sacrifices, and martyrs, but it has grown stronger," Araqchi asserted, dismissing any notion that recent attacks could undermine its mission. He affirmed that the movement's foundation is solidified by the blood of martyrs, a concept that adversaries fail to grasp.

Araqchi highlighted the interconnectedness of resistance and diplomacy, emphasizing that the two complement and strengthen each other. "Diplomacy relies on the strength of the resistance, and the resistance opens pathways for diplomacy to achieve national interests, security, and dignity," he explained.

He also stressed the role of media in this triad, warning that adversaries are heavily investing in narrative-building and cognitive warfare through advanced technologies and social media. "Their aim is to destabilize the resistance front by exploiting media to sow despair and fear," Araqchi said.

Reflecting on lessons from the Syrian conflict, Araqchi pointed to the significant psychological impact of media manipulation. He called for proactive measures to prevent enemies from leveraging media to erode morale or instill hopelessness.

### Localization and Knowledge-Based Innovation Key to Countering Sanctions



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Minister of Industry, Mining, and Trade has emphasized the importance of localization and leveraging knowledge-based enterprises to combat sanctions. He also highlighted the need to utilize the steel industry's potential to strengthen technical expertise and foster domestic collaboration.

Speaking at the sixth Iran National Steel Exhibition, held at Tehran's Milad Tower, Minister Seyyed Mohammad Atabak announced the development of a comprehensive package addressing energy challenges in industries, prepared in collaboration with the private sector, and submitted to the Cabinet.

"We hope this package will gain approval in various commissions to alleviate some of the problems faced by industries, particularly the steel sector," the minister noted.

Atabak underlined the critical issue of energy imbalances, which he identified as one of the biggest threats to the steel industry. "Frequent power and gas shortages have created significant disruptions for industries, including steel, and posed challenges for the country's economy," he said.

He also pointed to ongoing efforts to address these imbalances at the Cabinet level, adding that the President has supported these initiatives.

Highlighting the importance of sustaining production, Atabak announced plans to reestablish a Central Steel Committee under the Ministry of Industry, Mining, and Trade.



TEHRAN - Government spokesperson, Fatemeh Mohajerani, has affirmed that the recent move toward a single-rate currency system was a necessary step to combat corruption and stabilize the economy. She highlighted that the exchange rate has already dropped below 80,000 toman and expressed optimism about further improvements under the Central Bank's policies.

Speaking at a press briefing, Mohajerani extended greetings for the Islamic month of Rajab and the New Year, while reflecting on the past year as one marked by violence and unrest globally. She called for peace in the year ahead.

She commemorated significant national events, including the anniversary of Amir Kabir's martyrdom, the passing of renowned figure Hojatoleslam Rafsanjani, and the tragic incidents involving the Ukrainian plane crash and the Sanchi oil tanker. Mohajerani underscored the historic contributions of Amir Kabir, such as establishing Dar ul-Funun and launching nationwide vaccination programs, amidst resistance from colonial powers.

Addressing the recent fluctuations in the currency market, Mohajerani attributed the spike to both domestic and international factors, including seasonal demand during the Christian New Year and speculative activities. She emphasized the necessity of moving toward a unified exchange rate system to curb corruption, adding that the government remains committed to further stabilizing the currency.

Regarding a parliamentary motion to impeach the Minister of Economy, she noted that this is a legitimate right of parliament and part of the democratic process.

Mohajerani discussed the status of Iran's compliance with FATF (Financial Action Task Force) agreements, stating that most of the protocols are already implemented. Two pending items are under review by the Expediency Council. She emphasized the importance of aligning with global standards to attract foreign investment while ensuring the country's interests are safeguarded.

On the sensitive issue of mandatory hijab, Mohajerani explained that government institutions are weighing societal impacts before implementing new regulations. She described hijab as a cultural and educational matter deeply rooted in Iranian history.

The government spokesperson, in response to a question about Iran's foreign policy regarding negotiations and lifting sanctions, emphasized:

"The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is shaped based on the guidance of the Leader of the Revolution, adhering to the three principles of dignity, wisdom, and expediency. In this regard, we are prepared to negotiate with global powers to lift the sanctions. We are a nation open

to negotiation, and it was the United States that violated the signed agreement."

In response to a question about the fate of the detained Italian journalist in Iran, he stated:

"With the prudence we observe in the judiciary, we hope this issue will be resolved quickly. This matter is by no means retaliatory, and with the efforts being undertaken by the diplomatic apparatus, we hope the problem concerning this journalist will be resolved promptly."

The spokesperson addressed long-standing discussions on relocating the capital from Tehran due to population density and ecological strain. She revealed that Makran is a potential candidate and that expert committees are examining the logistical and economic implications. However, she stressed that the matter is not an immediate priority.

On the issue of Iranian truck drivers facing difficulties at the Turkish border, Mohajerani announced that a delegation is en route to resolve the situation. She praised truck drivers' contributions and reaffirmed the government's commitment to safeguarding their rights.

Regarding industrial disruptions due to energy shortages, she noted that a support package is being finalized to compensate for the impact of gas and electricity cuts on manufacturers. She underscored the importance of balancing residential energy needs with industrial demands.

Mohajerani refuted claims of reduced oil production, linking recent currency fluctuations to increased holiday-season demand. She assured that efforts are underway to stabilize exchange rates and enhance economic resilience.

Responding to inquiries about potential nuclear negotiations with the U.S., Mohajerani reiterated Iran's readiness for dialogue under principles of dignity, wisdom, and national interest. She also addressed the recent detention of an Italian journalist, expressing hope for a resolution through legal channels.

The spokesperson welcomed progress in unblocking digital platforms, hinting at broader initiatives to expand online access as part of Iran's digital governance strategy.

In response to questions about welfare programs, Mohajerani highlighted plans for implementing electronic subsidy cards to better target economic assistance for vulnerable populations. She reassured that government strategies are in place to address economic pressures on citizens while fostering long-term stability.

The press briefing ended with a reaffirmation of the government's commitment to addressing national and international challenges through comprehensive planning and collaboration with various stakeholders.

### Iran Embassy Slams British MP's Support for Soleimani Assassination



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Iranian embassy in London has censured Conservative British MP Tom Tugendhat for "absolutely unlawful" endorsing of the "arbitrary assassination" of Iran's top anti-terror commander General Qassem Soleimani ordered by Donald Trump.

In a post on its X account on Monday, the embassy rejected Tugendhat's claim that Trump's decision to authorize the assassination of Soleimani triggered a chain of events that finally led to the overthrow of former Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.

Tugendhat, a former UK security minister, also predicted that Iran would collapse in a few years.

"It's absolutely unlawful and immoral to endorse arbitrary killing and assassination," the embassy wrote.

It added that calling for war and aggression against a member state of the United Nations is "extremely reckless".

"Only an ignorant and irresponsible person with a troubled background can be so low as to approve lawlessness, incite violence and suggest attacking another nation," the Iranian embassy emphasized.

The British MP's claim was made shortly before the fifth martyrdom anniversary of General Soleimani in Baghdad.

The United States assassinated General Soleimani, former commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units, in a drone strike near Baghdad International Airport on January 3, 2020.

Both commanders were admired by Muslim nations for eliminating the US-sponsored Daesh terrorist group in the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

The US assassination drew a wave of condemnations from officials and movements throughout the world and triggered huge public protests across the region, with Iraqi lawmakers approving a bill two days after the attack demanding the withdrawal of all foreign military forces led by the United States from the country.

### IRGC to Unveil 2 New Underground Missile, Floating Cities



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says it will unveil two new underground missile and floating cities along the coasts of the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman that accommodate a broad range of cruise and ballistic missiles.

Brigadier General Ali Mohammad Naeini, who is also the head of the IRGC's Public Relations Department, made the announcement on Monday.

He said the military facilities would be inaugurated in a ceremony during the large-scale and specialized Payambar-e-Azam (The Great Prophet) 19 war game, which kicked off in the western regions of Iran on Saturday. IRGC Commander Major General Hossein Salami was in attendance.

He said the Zionist enemy is well aware of the fact that the skies over the occupied territories are wide open to the Iranian Armed Forces, and the forces can strike Israeli assets with more precision, swiftness, and destructive power.

Naeini further said the IRGC is prepared for large and complex battles on any scale and is ready for the moment the order is issued to operate against the Zionist entity.

"The power and production of weapons and missiles in quantity, skills, and design have increased day by day, and we have acquired new capabilities."

"The Iranian nation should know that the enemy has never had the upper hand in any battle."

"We have never suffered an intelligence defeat from the enemy. The enemy constantly creates narratives to compensate for the intelligence and military defeats suffered at the hands of the Islamic Republic of Iran," the IRGC spokesman said.

He said new developments in West Asia led to false enthusiasm and misconception within the Israeli regime.

"We tell the enemies that we are always ready and capable of taking action at any moment."

## Iran and China to Collaborate on Producing News Documentaries

TEHRAN - Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance has called for active media collaboration between Iran and China to produce news documentaries, highlighting opportunities for deeper cultural and media exchanges.

Minister Seyyed Abbas Salehi met with Zong Peiwu, the Chinese Ambassador to Iran, to discuss strengthening media cooperation. Salehi emphasized the potential for producing documentaries and reports that portray accurate and positive images of both nations to their respective peoples.

Salehi highlighted the significance of culture as a vital component of relations between nations with ancient civilizations. He noted that the historical and cultural heritage of both countries offers numerous opportunities for collaboration. "Iranian cinema has a prominent position in Asia and globally," Salehi said, urging greater participation in each other's film festivals and joint productions to foster closer ties.

He also recalled China's participation as a special guest at the Tehran International Book Fair during his previous tenure, describing it as a lasting and beneficial milestone in cultural relations.

Salehi stressed that Iran regards China as a strategic partner and a trusted ally, particularly during challenging times. He added that the close ties between the two nations continue to flourish under the current administrations, with comprehensive strategic agreements covering cultural, artistic, and sports programs. President Masoud Pezeshkian has also prioritized relations with China, as evidenced by high-level meetings, including those at the BRICS summit.

To commemorate the 55th anniversary of official diplomatic relations, Salehi proposed implementing cultural initiatives, such as museum exchanges. Recent collaborations include



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showcasing Iranian artifacts under the theme "The Splendor of Ancient Iran" in Chinese cities and displaying Chinese artifacts in Iran.

Salehi pointed to the potential for growth in tourism, emphasizing the need to enhance exchanges and reach a more desirable level of cooperation. He also mentioned the strong capabilities of Iranian illustrators and writers in book-related fields, suggesting these could further deepen cultural ties.

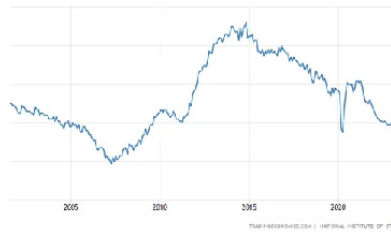
He underlined the mutual interest in promoting language education. With the growing popularity of Chinese language studies in Iran and Persian studies in China, he suggested expanding opportunities for language and cultural exchanges. He also advocated for establishing cultural centers in both countries to enhance mutual understanding.

Recognizing the shared heritage of Iran and China as continuous and ancient civilizations, Salehi emphasized the importance of balanced dialogue to counter dominance and unilateralism in international relations. "Cultural foundations strengthen economic and political relations," he said, adding that the two nations can model dialogue-based cooperation for the world.

Chinese Ambassador Zong Peiwu echoed the sentiments, emphasizing the strategic importance of cultural relations between the two nations. He highlighted the practical value of cultural and human exchanges and expressed optimism about further expanding cooperation.

Ambassador Zong also noted the increasing interest among Iranian youth in learning Chinese, alongside growing opportunities for Persian language studies in Chinese universities. In conclusion, both sides reaffirmed their commitment to enhancing cultural ties and producing collaborative news documentaries to reflect the rich histories and modern aspirations of Iran and China.

# IRAN NEWS



## Unemployment Rate Drops to 7.2% in Autumn

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The unemployment rate for individuals aged 15 and older decreased to 7.2% in autumn, indicating that this percentage of the active population (employed and unemployed) remained jobless. A comparison with the same period last year (autumn 2023) reveals a 0.4% decline in the unemployment rate.

According to the results of the Labor Force Survey for autumn 2024, 41.2% of individuals aged 15 and older were economically active—meaning they were either employed or unemployed. However, the economic participation rate showed a slight 0.3% drop compared to the same period last year (autumn 2023).

## Turkey Warns of Seizure of Iranian Trucks



TEHRAN - Turkey has warned that Iranian trucks parked on its soil may be confiscated if not removed promptly. This announcement has raised significant concern among Iranian truck owners and drivers, especially those who recently purchased used trucks for fleet upgrades.

Alireza Ahmadi Fini, head of the Fuel and Transport Management Center, discussed the challenges surrounding fleet renewal, the import of new trucks, and Turkey's ultimatum regarding Iranian trucks stranded at customs.

He emphasized that modernizing the country's heavy vehicle fleet is crucial for reducing air pollution. He noted that since 2021, approximately 54,000 vehicles have received technical approval for import, with 38,000 entering the fleet. This achievement was made possible through cooperation between the Ministry of Industry, Mines, and Trade (MIMT) and the Traffic Police.

Previously, the entire import process was managed by the Road Maintenance and Transportation Organization (RMTO). However, changes under the Automotive Industry Organization Law transferred responsibility for import registration to MIMT and the Trade Development Organization.

Ahmadi Fini explained that the 2022 budget law allowed truck imports under specific provisions until March 2024. Beyond that, the new regulations under the Automotive Industry Organization Law took effect, altering import conditions. This change required collaboration with MIMT to implement new procedures for importing trucks, buses, and other vehicles.

The official highlighted that since July 2023, MIMT has handled import registrations under the updated regulations. However, delays in currency allocation have prolonged the import process for some trucks, leaving many stranded at customs.

## Budget for Development Projects Insufficient



TEHRAN - The Minister of Roads and Urban Development stated that allocated budgets are insufficient to complete development projects, revealing that less than 20% of this year's ministry budget has been disbursed in cash.

Farzaneh Sadeq, during a joint meeting with members of the Parliament's Budget and Planning Commission on Monday night, highlighted the imbalances and challenges in budget allocation. She emphasized the need for fairness, transparency, and leveraging private sector capabilities while urging MPs to support national projects that benefit the public and the government.

After listening to the concerns and demands of MPs and receiving reports from her deputies about the state of the country's rail and road infrastructure, Sadeq expressed gratitude for their active presence. Addressing the head of the Budget and Planning Commission, she said:

"I understand your commitment to budget realism, and I acknowledge that the 2024 budget bill approved by Parliament significantly differs from the one submitted by the government."

The minister referred to the existing financial imbalances in the country, noting that provisions to mitigate these issues within the budget would support executive actions in the road and housing sectors. She stressed:

"Budgets are limited, but fairness in their allocation remains essential. However, transparency must precede fairness."

Sadeq added that even the limited budget is not being adequately distributed across all areas. The ministry is currently reviewing allocations nationwide, particularly focusing on delayed projects that urgently require attention.

Highlighting the critical role of private sector involvement, Sadeq stated: "We are developing packages to attract the private sector's participation. Unfortunately, past interactions with private entities were not favorable, which eroded their trust and confidence."

To restore this trust, the minister underscored the need to simplify regulations and introduce incentives. She assured that the ministry would work to remove bureaucratic hurdles and called on Parliament to provide legal assistance when necessary.

Touching on housing development, Sadeq revealed efforts to connect 800,000 affordable housing units to banking facilities, with ongoing progress in this area.

In conclusion, Sadeq expressed hope that joint efforts between the government and Parliament would yield positive outcomes and instill confidence among citizens. She emphasized that cooperation and mutual support would help address public demands and foster optimism.

She further noted that constructive criticism and support from MPs would guide the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development in the right direction.



## Iran's Foreign Trade Development Hinges on FATF Membership

TEHRAN - The president of the Iran Export Confederation has emphasized the necessity of Iran's accession to the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) to strengthen its foreign trade. Mohammad Lahouti stated that developing international trade without FATF compliance is unattainable, underscoring the government's commitment to resolving the issue.

Speaking to IRNA, Lahouti acknowledged the adverse effects of sanctions on Iran's economy and foreign trade but highlighted that being on the FATF blacklist poses a more significant challenge. "While sanctions are detrimental, the bigger issue is Iran's placement on the FATF blacklist," he said.

He expressed hope that the 14th government would swiftly address the hurdles preventing Iran's membership in the FATF. "Without resolving this issue, we risk losing trade partners like Russia and China," Lahouti warned.

Lahouti explained that Russia and China have extensive trade relations with Europe and the U.S. and are unlikely to engage in financial and banking transactions with Iran due to FATF concerns. "Failing to address this will result in the loss of these crucial markets," he cautioned.

The confederation president also noted the direct impact of FATF on trade agreements. "Without resolving the FATF issue, no one will be willing to engage in financial or commercial interactions with Iranians. We will be forced to resort to outdated methods, such as circumventing sanctions and relying on rial-based transactions, which increase trade costs and diminish competitiveness in global markets," he explained.

Lahouti stressed that addressing financial and banking challenges and adhering to international agreements could open new export markets. Conversely, he warned that continuing the current situation would harm Iran's trade balance.

He also underscored that resolving the FATF issue is more critical than lifting sanctions. "Some countries are interested in collaborating with Iran, but our lack of FATF membership creates an obstacle. Global banking networks are essential for these interactions," Lahouti added.

In recent developments, Iranian Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance Abdolnasser Hemmati announced on January 1 that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei had approved a renewed review of the bills related to FATF membership by the Expediency Discernment Council. Hemmati said, "I heard from the President that the Supreme Leader has agreed to the reconsideration of the Palermo and CFT bills."

These twin bills were approved by the 10th Iranian Parliament but faced objections from the Guardian Council. They were referred to the Expediency

Discernment Council for further review in 2020. However, no final decision was reached, leaving the bills in limbo.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, who has prioritized facilitating international financial and trade exchanges, stated in a September press conference that his administration would formally request Parliament to revisit the FATF-related bills.

Subsequently, on October 3, Deputy Executive and Acting Chief of Staff of the Presidential Office Mohammad Jafar Qaem Panah confirmed that the government had submitted a request for the Expediency Discernment Council to reexamine FATF membership. He expressed optimism for achieving domestic consensus on the issue.

Government spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani also reported in October that coordination efforts between the government and the council to revisit the FATF issue had commenced.

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is an intergovernmental body established in 1989 by the G7 to develop and promote policies to combat financial crimes, including money laundering and terrorist financing. Headquartered in Paris, FATF sets international standards aimed at protecting the global financial system.

Most FATF members are developed countries from Europe and North America. Membership requires adherence to internationally accepted financial standards and a commitment to implementing FATF recommendations. Countries failing to comply are placed on the FATF's blacklist or greylist, signaling financial risks and isolating them from the global banking system.

Countries in the FATF blacklist face severe repercussions, including restricted access to international banking, reduced trade opportunities, and potential economic sanctions from institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

Iran's placement on the FATF blacklist significantly hampers its ability to integrate with the global banking system and engage in international trade. Without addressing FATF requirements, Iran risks further economic isolation, jeopardizing its trade relationships and diminishing its prospects for economic recovery.

The Iranian government's renewed focus on FATF membership reflects its recognition of the critical role this issue plays in shaping the country's economic future. Resolving the FATF impasse could pave the way for expanded trade opportunities and greater economic stability.

## 30,000 Starlink Users in Iran



TEHRAN - In a recent meeting of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce's Transformation, Innovation, and Productivity Commission, Pouya Pourhosseinlou, the head of the Internet Committee at the E-Commerce Association, discussed the critical issues facing Iran's internet landscape. He highlighted three main challenges: restrictions (filtering), sanctions, and network access problems.

Pourhosseinlou emphasized the efforts to expand network access in recent years, particularly under the 13th government's push to develop fiber optics. However, he noted that filtering has significantly reduced internet quality in Iran. Amid these restrictions, the use of satellite internet, particularly Starlink, has surged. According to the E-Commerce Association, there are now over 30,000 Starlink users in Iran.

While satellite internet provides an alternative for Iranians to access the web, it comes at a high cost. Pourhosseinlou warned that relying on such expensive methods depletes the country's foreign currency reserves and diminishes public confidence in domestic efforts to improve internet services.

Although there has been some improvement in Iran's internet quality in recent months, Pourhosseinlou said it still hasn't returned to pre-September 2022 levels. He expressed hope that conditions would normalize by mid-winter. However, widespread restrictions have led to increased network pollution, with free VPNs turning mobile devices into "zombies" and causing disruptions to both domestic and international internet traffic.

Pourhosseinlou criticized the inconsistency in filtering policies, questioning how a single judge could block Telegram while

approval from high-ranking officials, including the heads of all three branches of government, has failed to lift the ban. He called for greater transparency and accountability from the Supreme Council of Cyberspace.

He also highlighted the impact of power outages on internet access. While in major cities like Tehran, power cuts may seem insignificant, in remote areas, they result in a complete loss of connectivity.

Hamidreza Ahmadi, another member of the E-Commerce Association, pointed to the influence of the so-called "VPN mafia" on Iran's internet landscape. He stated that while the existence of such a mafia is unconfirmed, the most effective solution to counter their impact would be to lift filtering restrictions.

Ahmadi noted that a significant portion of the country's VPN market relies on foreign providers, many of which pose security risks. He added that some Israeli companies are involved in the development of these VPNs, and even free VPNs often compromise users' IP addresses.

He also stressed the importance of affordable, high-speed internet over costly alternatives like Starlink. He also pointed out that filtering remains the primary issue for high-traffic websites, while sanctions limit access to specialized sites. For example, Iranians are barred from 17% of the top 100,000 websites globally due to sanctions. Many websites show Iranian users a 403 error, despite not being legally required to impose such restrictions.

## Iran's Competitive Edge in the Tajikistan Market Declines



TEHRAN - Mohammad Hossein Roshank, the head of the Iran-Tajikistan Joint Chamber of Commerce, shed light on Iran's declining competitiveness in the Tajikistan market. He attributed this to the high production costs in Iran, which diminish its ability to rival countries like China, Turkey, and the UAE, known for offering lower-priced goods. Tajikistan, a market driven by affordability, is increasingly favoring these nations as they aim to secure greater market share through cost-effective production.

Roshank emphasized that Iran-Tajikistan relations, which had weakened due to political challenges, began to improve shortly before the 13th presidential administration. Efforts under the current administration have significantly bolstered these ties, and an upcoming visit by the 14th administration could further strengthen political, economic, and cultural relations.

Key economic priorities for Iran-Tajikistan trade include signing a preferential trade agreement to boost Iranian businesses' competitiveness in Tajikistan. Another crucial aspect is establishing a banking system between the two nations to streamline transactions. Additionally, cultural similarities between the two countries provide significant opportunities to promote tourism, particularly health tourism, as Iran has substantial potential to attract medical tourists from Tajikistan.

Roshank noted an issue with the existing visa agreement: while no visa is required for direct travel between Tehran and Dushanbe, other departure points in Iran or Tajikistan necessitate one. This oversight in the agreement, which names the cities instead of the countries, complicates travel. Efforts are underway to launch flights between Shiraz and Dushanbe to facilitate easier travel. Shiraz, with its frequent flights to Dubai, could also become a transit point for Tajik travelers heading to the UAE.

The annual trade volume between Iran and Tajikistan is approximately \$300 million, significantly lower than the peak of \$1 billion in the 1990s. Roshank highlighted that some Iranian traders route goods through Uzbekistan due to its free trade agreement with Tajikistan, leading to undervalued trade statistics between Iran and Tajikistan.

While Iran enjoys a trade surplus with Tajikistan, the latter's primary exports, such as cotton, nuts, and aluminum, do not align with Iran's import needs. Moreover, Tajikistan's aluminum exports are exclusively tied to Russia.

## Economic Delegation to Accompany President on Visit to Tajikistan



TEHRAN - The President of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce announced that private sector representatives will accompany President Masoud Pezeshkian on his upcoming political and foreign visits. Notably, a group of Tehran Chamber's economic activists will join the President on his January 16th trip to Tajikistan.

In a press briefing on Tuesday, Mahmoud Najafi Arab emphasized the government's focus on privatizing state-owned enterprises. He noted that the President had stressed this issue in a recent meeting with the Chamber of Commerce members and directed the Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade to ensure the government exits this sector by the end of the year.

"Privatizing state companies presents a significant opportunity for the private sector to leverage these capacities," Najafi Arab said. He added that the President is strongly committed to reducing government involvement in business, which opens further opportunities for private enterprises.

Najafi Arab highlighted that a recent meeting on December 31st between Iran's Chamber of Commerce members and the President focused on three primary issues: energy, foreign exchange, and a consensus-driven market. He also mentioned that the Chamber has sent two letters to the Ministers of Economy and Industry, addressing concerns about energy shortages, foreign exchange challenges, and the economic impact of these issues.

Najafi Arab also noted the President's support for Iran joining the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). He revealed that discussions on the matter have reached the Expediency Council, with hopes that the issue will soon be resolved. The Chamber of Commerce has pledged to assist in achieving this goal.

## Brazil Announces Indonesia Entry Into BRICS

BRASILIA (Dispatches) - Brazil yesterday announced that Indonesia had become a full member of BRICS, a bloc of developing economies increasingly seen as a counterweight to the West.

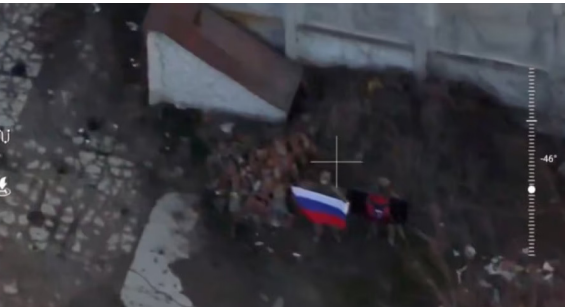
Brazil's foreign ministry said in a statement that Southeast Asia's most populous country "shares with the other members the will to reform the institutions of global governance and contribute positively to cooperation within the Global South."

Brazil, which holds the rotating presidency of the grouping in 2025, said Indonesia's bid to join the bloc had been approved during a summit in 2023 in Johannesburg.

BRICS was created in 2009 by founding members Brazil, Russia, India and China. South Africa joined the following year. Last year, the grouping expanded with Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates becoming full members.



## Battle Rages in Western Russia as Moscow Reports Gains in Ukraine



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia said its forces had made important gains in eastern Ukraine while continuing to fend off a new Ukrainian offensive inside the Kursk region of western Russia, where a second day of fierce fighting was under way.

The Russian defence ministry said its forces had captured the town of Kurakhove, 32 km (20 miles) south of Pokrovsk, a Ukrainian logistics hub toward which Russian forces have been advancing for months.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Moscow had suffered big losses in five months of fighting in Russia's Kursk region with nearly 15,000 killed. He made no mention of Kurakhove.

The Russian ministry said taking Kurakhove, which had held out for many weeks, would enable its forces to boost the pace of their advance in Ukraine's Donetsk region. It also said it had captured Dachenske, a village five miles (8 km) Pokrovsk.

Viktor Trehubov, spokesperson for Ukraine's Khortytzia group of forces, told Reuters that, as of Monday morning, Kyiv's forces were still engaging Russian troops inside Kurakhove.

The General Staff of Ukraine's military, in a late evening report, said Russian forces had launched 25 attacks on Ukrainian positions around Kurakhove, but said nothing about the town changing hands.

Ukrainian bloggers said servicemen were subjected to constant fire from multiple rocket launchers and guided, or glide, bombs. One report said that Kurakhove had been "practically lost".

Ukrainian monitoring group DeepState, which tracks the front line using open sources, showed most of Kurakhove under Russian control.

Both sides are fighting to improve their battlefield positions before U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, who has pledged to bring a quick end to the nearly three-year-old war, takes office on Jan. 20.

## Quitting as Canada PM, Trudeau Blames Own Liberal Party's Backstabbing



OTTAWA (Dispatches) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Monday said he would step down in the coming months after nine years in power, bowing to pressure from lawmakers alarmed by his Liberal Party's miserable showing in pre-election polls.

A subdued Trudeau, among the most prominent progressive leaders in the world, told a press conference that he would stay on both as prime minister and Liberal leader until the party chooses a new chief within months.

"This country deserves a real choice in the next election, and it has become clear to me that if I'm having to fight internal battles, I cannot be the best option in that election," Trudeau said.

He also announced parliament would be prorogued, or suspended, until March 24.

That means an election is unlikely before May at the earliest, so Trudeau will remain in charge - at least initially - of dealing with the threat of crippling tariffs once US President-elect Donald Trump takes office on Jan. 20.

The next election must be held by Oct. 20 and polls show voters angry over high prices and a shortage of affordable housing will elect the opposition Conservatives and hand the Liberals a resounding defeat, no matter who leads the party.

In recent weeks unhappy Liberal lawmakers openly called on Trudeau to quit after his finance minister resigned and accused him of "political gimmicks" to win back voters.

"I am not someone who backs away from a fight, particularly when a fight is as important as this one is," Trudeau told reporters outside his residence as temperatures dipped to minus 15 degrees Celsius (5 degrees Fahrenheit).

"But I have always been driven by my love for Canada ... and it has become obvious to me with the internal battles that I

cannot be the one to carry the Liberal standard into the next election."

Trudeau, 53, took office in November 2015 with a message of hope and "sunny ways" and won reelection twice, becoming one of Canada's longest-serving prime ministers and winning plaudits from progressives for his focus on gender parity policies.

But his popularity started dipping two years ago as prices of groceries and housing rose in the post-Covid period, and his fortunes never recovered.

An Ipsos Canada poll released on Dec. 22 showed the Conservatives had 45% support among decided voters, with the Liberals and the left-leaning New Democrats on 20% each. Such a result on election day would mean a huge Conservative victory.

Parliament was originally due to resume on Jan. 27 and opposition parties had vowed to bring down Trudeau's minority government as soon as they could. But with parliament returning only on March 24, the earliest they could present a non-confidence motion would be some time in May.

Trudeau said he had asked the Liberal Party to set in motion a leadership contest but did not say how long it would take. A new party leader would become prime minister immediately, and lead the Liberals into the next election.

U.S. President Donald Trump reacted to Trudeau's announcement by repeating earlier comments that Canada would gain from becoming the 51st US state and complaining about Canada's trade surplus with the United States.

"The United States can no longer suffer the massive Trade Deficits and Subsidies that Canada needs to stay afloat. Justin Trudeau knew this, and resigned," he said on Truth Social.

## Austrian President Tasks Far-right Leader With Forming Gov't



VIENNA (Dispatches) - Austrian President Alexander Van der Bellen tasked the leader of the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) on Monday with forming a coalition government after a centrist bid to assemble one without the FPÖ collapsed unexpectedly over the weekend.

The announcement marks a dramatic reversal for the president, a former leader of the left-wing Greens who has long been critical of the FPÖ and has clashed with its leader Herbert Kickl, but few options remained to Van der Bellen after the centrists' failure to forge a coalition.

The eurosceptic, Russia-friendly FPÖ won last September's parliamentary election with 29% of the vote. It will now enter talks with its only potential partner, the conservative People's Party (ÖVP), seeking to lead a government for the first time since it was founded in the 1950s under a leader who had been a senior officer in Hitler's elite paramilitary SS.

"I have... tasked him with launching talks with the People's Party to form a government," Van der Bellen said in a televised address after meeting Kickl, adding: "I did not take this step lightly."

## North Korea's Kim Says New Missile Will Deter Rivals

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said a new hypersonic missile system tested this week would help deter the country's Pacific rivals, state media reported today, as Washington's top diplomat visited the region.

The test came two weeks before the inauguration of US president-elect Donald Trump, who has previously tried to woo North Korea, and coincided with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken's visit to the South.

"The hypersonic missile system will reliably contain any rivals in the Pacific region that can affect the security of our state," Kim, who oversaw the launch, said in comments carried by KCNA today.

The test came as Blinken visited strategic ally South Korea, a fierce rival of the North, with whom it technically remains at war. The top US envoy, now in Tokyo, was expected to address issues surrounding Pyongyang in talks with Japan later today.

It was North Korea's first since November, when it test-fired what it said was its most advanced and powerful solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).

In a statement, Kim said the missile flew for 1,500 kilometres (930 miles) - beyond the 1,100-kilometre (680-mile) figure given by South Korea's military - and travelled at 12 times the speed of sound before landing in the ocean.

"This is clearly a plan and effort for self-defence, not an offensive plan and action," Kim said.

However, he added that missile's performance could "not be ignored



worldwide," saying it was able to "deal a serious military strike to a rival while effectively breaking any dense defensive barrier."

"The development of the defence capabilities of the DPRK aiming to be a military power will be further accelerated," Kim said, using the acronym for the North's official name.

Images released by KCNA showed Kim observing the launch with his teenage daughter Ju Ae at an undisclosed location.

The location of the test site was also undisclosed, but images showed the missile launching from a remote piece of land surrounded by water on either side and trees stripped because of the winter cold.

Blinken and South Korean counterpart Cho Tae-yul condemned the launch at a joint news conference, where the outgoing US top diplomat said it showed the importance of deepening a three-way alliance with Japan.

The US diplomat also warned of growing cooperation between Pyongyang and Moscow, saying that they were working ever more closely on advanced space technology.

Blinken also voiced renewed concern that Russia, a veto-wielding UN Security Council member, would formally accept North Korea as a nuclear state in a major blow to global consensus that Pyongyang must end its programme.

US and South Korean intelligence believe that North Korea late last year sent thousands of troops to fight against Ukraine and has already suffered hundreds of casualties.

The nuclear envoys of South Korea, the US and Japan also held a phone call yesterday to condemn the launch, the news agency Yonhap said.

## U.S. Congress Certifies Trump Election Victory With Harris Presiding

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. Congress formally certified Republican President-elect Donald Trump's election victory on Monday during a session presided over by Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris, who lost the November contest.

The quadrennial ritual, clearing the way for Trump's inauguration in two weeks, went like clockwork and stood in sharp contrast to four years ago when a mob of Trump supporters stormed the Capitol in a failed bid to block the certification of then-President Trump's 2020 loss to Democratic President Joe Biden.

Trump continues to falsely claim that his 2020 defeat was the result of widespread fraud, and had warned throughout his 2024 campaign that he harbored similar concerns until his Nov. 5 defeat of Harris.

Harris oversaw the roll call of the states in the vice president's ceremonial role as president of the Senate. Known for her broad smiles and upbeat demeanor in public appearances, she stood stoic with hands clasped on the dais as she handed off certificates of each state's electoral votes for Trump and herself.

"Today was obviously a very important day, and it was about what should be the norm and what the American people should be able to take for granted, which is that one of the most important pillars of our democracy is that there will be a peaceful transfer of power," Harris told reporters at the Capitol. "I do believe very strongly that American democracy is only as strong as our willingness to fight for it."

Four years ago, then-Vice President Mike Pence had to preside over Biden's victory. In 2001, then-Vice President Al Gore had the same dubious distinction following a bitter battle between him and George W. Bush that ended so close that the U.S. Supreme Court ultimately had to put a stop to the legal challenges, leading to Bush being declared the



winner.

Sitting in the House chamber was Senator JD Vance, whose vice presidential victory was also certified by Harris. Vance stood and waved to the members in the chamber when his electoral vote total was announced.

"Congress certifies our great election victory today - a big moment in history. MAGA!" Trump wrote on his social media platform Truth Social earlier on Monday.

The joint session of Congress proceeded even as a winter storm hovered over the nation's capital, dropping about 6 inches (15 cm) of snow and snarling travel.

The final certification backed up preliminary findings that Trump won 312 Electoral College votes to Harris's 226.

Republicans also captured a majority in the U.S. Senate and held a narrow edge in the House in November's election, which will give Trump the party support he needs to implement his planned agenda of tax cuts and a crackdown on immigrants living in the country illegally.

Democrats did not try to block certification of Trump's victory on Monday.

"We must renew our commitment to safeguarding American democracy," No. 2 House Democrat Katherine Clark said in a statement earlier in the day. "As elected leaders, our loyalty must be to the Constitution, first and always. We are here to honor the will of the people and the rule of law."

Security inside and outside the Capitol was heightened in preparation for the certification and was expected to remain in place through Trump's swearing-in on Jan. 20.



## Lions Dominate Vikings for No. 1 Seed in NFC

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Jahmyr Gibbs had 170 yards from scrimmage and four touchdowns and the host Detroit Lions pulled away for a 31-9 win over the Minnesota Vikings on Sunday night to secure the No. 1 seed in the NFC playoffs for the first time in franchise history.

Jared Goff completed 27 of 33 passes for 231 yards, one touchdown and two interceptions for Detroit (15-2). Gibbs rushed for 139 yards and three touchdowns and caught five passes for 31 yards and one score. Sam Darnold completed 18 of 41 passes for 166 yards for Minnesota (14-3), which was held without a touchdown. The Vikings' nine-game winning streak ended.

The Lions clinched the NFC North title for the second year in a row. They will have a bye next week and have secured home-field advantage throughout the conference playoffs.

Broncos 38, Chiefs 0: The best day of Bo Nix's young career punched Denver's ticket to the playoffs, as the Broncos put together a rout of visiting Kansas City.

It marks the first time since their Super Bowl-winning 2015 season that the Broncos (10-7) have reached the postseason. Denver clinched the No. 7 seed in the AFC playoffs. Nix completed his first 18 throws and was 26-for-29 passing for the game, setting a career high with 321 yards, and he also had four touchdown passes. Marvin Mims Jr. had a pair of receiving TDs.

With the No. 1 seed in the AFC playoffs wrapped up, the Chiefs (15-2) rested several top players, such as Patrick Mahomes, Travis Kelce, Isiah Pacheco, Chris Jones, Jawaan Taylor and George Karlaftis. Quarterback Carson Wentz was 10-of-17 passing for 98 yards for Kansas City.

Panthers 44, Falcons 38 (OT): Miles Sanders rushed for a game-winning 1-yard touchdown in overtime as Carolina eliminated host Atlanta from playoff contention.

Bryce Young completed 25 of 34 passes for 251 yards and three touchdowns, adding two more scores on the ground for the Panthers (5-12), who scored their most points in a game this season.

Michael Penix Jr. threw for 312 yards, two touchdowns and an interception for the Falcons (8-9), who needed a win paired with a Tampa Bay Buccaneers loss to the New Orleans Saints in order to win the division. Bijan Robinson ran for 170 yards and two touchdowns, while Drake London caught 10 passes for 187 yards and two scores.

Commanders 23, Cowboys 19: Marcus Mariota's 5-yard touchdown pass to Terry McLaurin with three seconds left lifted Washington over Dallas in Arlington, Texas.

Relieving Jayden Daniels in the second half, Mariota was 15-of-18 passing for 161 yards and two touchdowns. He kept the game-winning 11-play, 91-yard drive alive with a 33-yard carry on fourth-and-1. The Commanders (12-5) nailed down the No. 6 seed in the NFC playoffs and won 12 games in a single season for the first time since 1991.

Trey Lance, the third overall pick of the 2021 NFL Draft, made his first start since Sept. 18, 2022, and was 20-of-34 passing for 244 yards for the Cowboys (7-10).

Bears 24, Packers 22: Cairo Santos drilled a 51-yard field goal on the final play of Chicago's season finale as the Bears ended a 10-game losing streak by edging host Green Bay.

The win also snapped the longest active winning streak by a team against one opponent. Chicago had lost its previous 11 games against Green Bay. Caleb Williams moved the Bears (5-12) 47 yards to set up Santos' heroics after Brandon McManus' third field goal of the afternoon, a 55-yarder, had given Green Bay (11-6) a 22-21 lead with 54 seconds remaining.

## Forest Tame Wolves to Maintain Unlikely Premier League Title Challenge



WOLVERHAMPTON (Dispatches) - Nottingham Forest's stunning season continued with a 3-0 victory at Wolves yesterday to give manager Nuno Espirito Santo a winning return to Molineux.

England international Morgan Gibbs-White and the in-form Chris Wood struck before half-time to take Forest to within six points of leaders Liverpool, who they host in their next Premier League game. Substitute Taiwo Awoniyi rounded off the scoring in stoppage time.

Defeat leaves Wolves outside the relegation zone only thanks to goal difference as they suffered a first defeat under new boss Vitor Pereira.

Forest remain third in the table but move level on points with Arsenal.

Even if a shock title challenge proves beyond Espirito Santo's men, they are building up an impressive cushion in the race for Champions League football next season.

They are five points clear of fifth-placed Newcastle and six in front of struggling champions Manchester City in sixth.

A top-four finish would guarantee a return to the continent's elite competition for the first time in 45 years for the two-time European champions.

However, fifth could also be good enough depending on how English club fare in European competition this season.

Gibbs-White savoured his return to the club where he spent the early part of his career.

In front of the watching new England manager Thomas Tuchel, the midfielder did his case for further international recognition no harm with a cool finish from Antony Elanga's pass.

Forest's unexpected rise from battling relegation until the final day of last season into Champions League contenders has been built on a solid defence and Wood's purple patch.

The New Zealand international turned in Callum Hudson-Odoi's low cross for his 12th goal of the season to double the visitors' lead just before half-time.

## Last-Gasp Abraham Goal Wins Super Cup for Milan in 3-2 Victory Over Inter

RIYADH (Dispatches) - A goal in added time from Tammy Abraham completed a stunning comeback for AC Milan who won the Italian Super Cup with a dramatic 3-2 victory over city rivals Inter Milan in Monday's final in Riyadh after going two goals down early in the game.

The win denied Inter what would have been an unprecedented fourth consecutive Super Cup trophy, and allowed Milan to equal Inter's haul of eight wins in the competition, with new manager Serge Conceicao lifting a trophy in his second game in charge.

The game was preceded by a spectacular light show at the King Saud University Stadium but the match only really sparked into life in the final seconds of the opening half.

Mehdi Taremi teed up Lautaro Martinez with a pass across the box and the forward used some neat footwork to deceive Malick Thiauw before firing a low shot through the legs of Theo Hernandez which beat Mike Maignan at his near post.

Two minutes after the interval Inter continued where they had left off. Stefan de Vrij played a long ball over the top which Taremi controlled beautifully and he drilled his shot into the bottom corner



to double their advantage.

Milan responded by sending on Rafael Leao, who immediately won a free kick just outside the area which Hernandez curled low around the wall and the ball crept just inside the post to re-open the tie.

A rejuvenated Milan pushed for an equaliser. Tijjani Reijnders had a shot blocked by the face of Alessandro Bastoni and Inter keeper Yann Sommer pulled off a fine save from an Alvaro Morata header.

Inter then had a chance to restore their two-goal advantage, but Carlos Augusto's header from close range came off the upright and into the arms of Maignan on the goal-line, but Milan found the equaliser with 10 minutes remaining.

Christian Pulisic, surrounded by three Inter players, controlled a cross from Hernandez and steered his shot into the far corner and it looked like the tie would be decided by a shootout, with no extra time to be played.

Milan, however, continued to press and they were rewarded when Leao pulled the ball back across the goal and Abraham, another substitute, was there for the simplest of tap-ins to break Inter hearts.

Conceicao, who replaced the sacked Paulo Fonseca last week, celebrated wildly with his players, while the Inter team slumped to the floor in disbelief.

## Real Madrid Blast Five Past Club Deportivo to Cruise on in Copa del Rey



MADRID (Dispatches) - Real Madrid booked their place in the last 16 of the Copa del Rey with an emphatic 5-0 win over fourth-tier Club Deportivo Minera on Monday, with striker Arda Guler scoring a superb double.

Madrid took an early lead when Federico Valverde volleyed home in impressive style within five minutes. Eduardo Camavinga doubled the lead just eight minutes later with a bullet header, while Guler added a third goal before the half-hour mark.

"I'm happy to contribute goals to the team but my task is different, to help in the best possible way, defending and helping out," said Valverde after the match.

"I'm glad that the coach keeps taking me into account in every game, that he has confidence in me and even if I'm tired I'm always happy," the Uruguayan striker added.

The hosts came closest to scoring when striker Omar Perdomo unleashed a long-range effort that flew just wide of Madrid goalkeeper Andriy Lunin's far right post.

Luka Modric's brilliant finish into the far corner 10 minutes after the break, following a clever combination with Brahim Diaz, brought the crowd in the Cartagonova stadium to their feet in a festive atmosphere even though the home side were trailing.

"(Luka) is a gift for football and even more for those who can enjoy it up close," Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti said. "The fans, the players, the coach... for me it's a great gift. The way he prepares for this kind of match, as if it was a final. It's a very important example for our youngsters."

"The atmosphere was really good for the players. They stayed with the fans to sign shirts and that made it a fantastic match," the manager added.

Guler sealed the win with his second goal of the night two minutes from time.

Despite conceding five goals, Minera goalkeeper Fran Martinez saved several good shots including efforts from Valverde and Kylian Mbappe.

Cartagena's Deportivo Minera are currently top of Group 13 of the Segunda Federacion. Madrid lead LaLiga on 43 points, two clear of Atletico Madrid.

## Edwards' Treys Serve Up Wolves Win Over Clippers

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Anthony Edwards drained back-to-back 3-pointers late in the fourth quarter, and the Minnesota Timberwolves held on for a 108-106 win over the Los Angeles Clippers on Monday night in Minneapolis.

Edwards finished with 37 points, seven rebounds and eight assists for Minnesota, which snapped a three-game skid. Naz Reid scored 18 points off the bench, Donte DiVincenzo had 15, and Rudy Gobert grabbed a game-high 18 rebounds to go along with his eight points.

Norman Powell scored 25 points to lead Los Angeles. James Harden collected 22 points, eight rebounds and eight assists, and Ivica Zubac had 17 points, 16 boards and six blocked shots.

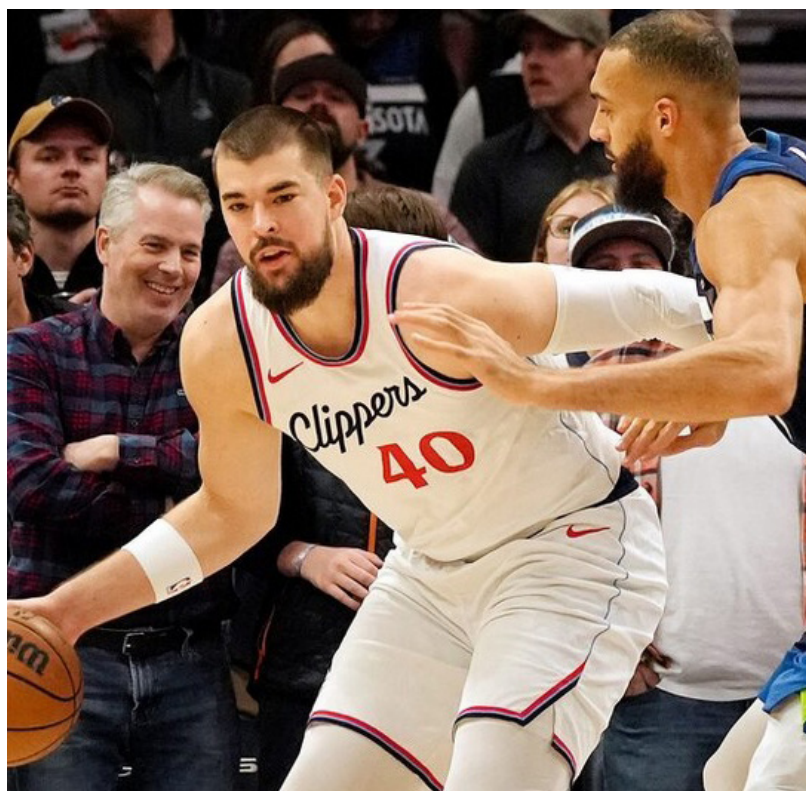
Clippers forward Kawhi Leonard scored eight points on 3-for-11 shooting in his second game of the season since returning from a knee injury. He played 21 minutes.

Edwards made the difference late in the fourth quarter. His 3-pointer put the Timberwolves ahead 103-101 with 1:12 to play.

After a defensive stop by Minnesota, Edwards took over again. He made another 3-pointer to increase the Timberwolves' lead to 106-101 with 34.9 seconds to go.

The Clippers led 96-91 with 4:07 remaining after an 11-0 run.

The Timberwolves scored the next six points to regain



a 97-96 edge with 3:05 remaining. That set up a back-and-forth finish that included a three-point play by Powell, who made a layup and a free throw to give the Clippers a 101-100 edge with 1:35 left.

The Timberwolves led 77-76 at the end of the third quarter. Minnesota led by four points before Nicolas Batum hit a 3-pointer with 0.3 seconds remaining in the quarter. The play was confirmed after an official review.

The Clippers led 53-46 at the half.

Amir Coffey helped Los Angeles to seize a 15-point lead in the first quarter when he drove toward the rim and made a floating jump shot. That increased the Clippers' advantage to 25-10 with 2:27 to play in the opening session.

The Timberwolves rallied with a 10-0 run late in the second quarter. Jaden McDaniels started the run with a layup and a 3-pointer before Edwards added a 3-pointer and Gobert made a basket to trim the deficit to 51-46 with 58.1 seconds left in the half.

Powell made a pair of free throws to finish the first-half scoring.

Meanwhile Tyrese Haliburton totaled 23 points and eight assists as the Indiana Pacers led for the final three quarters and moved over .500 for the first time with a 113-99 victory over the depleted Brooklyn Nets on Monday in New York.

Haliburton scored at least 20 for the fourth time in five games and sank four of Indiana's 11 3-pointers while shooting 5-of-12 overall. He also made all nine of his free-throw attempts.