

The Case Involving the Ukrainian Plane Crash in Iran Five Years Ago Is Being Re-Examined to Address Deficiencies, According to the Head of Iran's Armed Forces Judicial Organization

Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi Has Said That the Release of the Country's Frozen Funds Is a Constant Priority for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Relevant Institutions

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Trump Will Not Rule Out Using Military Force to Take Panama Canal, Greenland



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Iraq Important Neighbor, Strategic Partner for Iran



TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian officially welcomed the Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al Sudani at Sa'dabad Cultural and Historical Complex on Wednesday.

Following the official welcoming ceremony, the Iranian and Iraqi officials held a meeting where the two sides reviewed the latest issues related to bilateral ties and regional issues.

Pezeshkian and Sudani also attended a joint press conference to speak about the details of their bilateral meeting.

Addressing this presser, the Iranian President said, "Today we discussed the recent developments in the region, we had good discussions about the development of bilateral cooperation in all dimensions and fields."

"Developing relations with neighbors, including our dear neighbor Iraq, is the priority of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," he said.

Describing the Republic of Iraq as an important neighboring country and a strategic partner of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pezeshkian expressed satisfaction with the level of relations between the two countries.

"We are pleased that the relations between the two countries are ongoing at the highest level and the scope of bilateral cooperation at different levels is increasing day by day," he said.

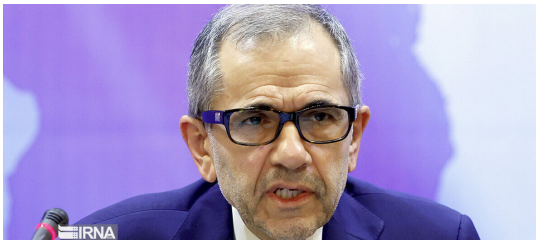
The Iranian President stated that the Islamic Republic of Iran has always wanted peace, stability, and development for its neighboring countries.

Regarding common concerns of Iran and Iraq about the current developments in Syria, Pezeshkian said, "Stability and peace in Syria, maintaining the territorial integrity of Syria, confronting the activities of the terrorist groups, the necessity of the withdrawal of the Zionist regime from the occupied areas, paying attention to religious sentiments, especially in the issue of Shiite holy places, were among these concerns."

"In this meeting, we once again discussed and reviewed the implementation of the Tehran-Baghdad security agreement and the comprehensive cooperation program of the two countries," Pezeshkian said, adding that regarding the importance of economic and commercial cooperation, good plans and programs were discussed in this meeting."

According to Pezeshkian, strengthening relations in customs fields, the presence of Iranian and Iraqi companies in joint investment projects, facilitating road transport and increasing the transit of goods and passengers, strengthening border markets were among the issues discussed in this meeting.

Iran Ready for Nuclear Talks Within Framework of JCPOA



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran is prepared to negotiate with Western powers within the framework of a nuclear deal it signed in 2015 to lift the economic sanctions imposed on the country over its nuclear program, says Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht-Ravanchi.

Takht-Ravanchi, a former envoy to the United Nations, made the remarks in an interview with the Italian magazine Affari Internazionali and the radio station Radicale, outlining Iran's position regarding the now-stalled nuclear talks with European powers. Those talks are expected to resume before US President-elect Donald Trump returns to the White House in less than two weeks.

He emphasized that any negotiations will be conducted within the framework of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which the United States unilaterally abandoned under Trump in 2018, leaving its fate in limbo to this day.

As a member of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Takht-Ravanchi stated that Iran is inherently entitled to a peaceful nuclear energy program. He insisted that these rights have been repeatedly violated by the other parties involved. The long-standing dispute over Iran's nuclear program largely stems from the denial of its rights under the NPT, the senior diplomat added.

Tensions further escalated when, he said, Iran's dossier was unjustly referred to the United Nations Security Council, resulting in multiple rounds of sanctions against Iran.



U.S. Made Grave Miscalculation About Iran Over Past Decades

TEHRAN (MNA) - The Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei says the Americans perpetrated mistakes concerning Iran throughout these several decades on most occasions after the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei says the United States has, on most occasions, committed mistakes concerning its attitude towards Iran throughout the past decades.

Ayatollah Khamenei made the remarks during a Wednesday meeting with people from the north-central Iranian city of Qom on the occasion of the anniversary of a January 9, 1978 uprising in support of the late founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini that preceded the 1979 victory of the country's Islamic Revolution.

"Under the [regime of Iran's former] Pahlavi [monarchy], the country used to serve as a formidable fortress for American interests," the Leader noted, Press TV reports.

"It was from the heart of this fortress that the Revolution was born and bubbled up. The Americans did not realize [this], were duped, lagged behind, and became oblivious," Ayatollah Khamenei remarked.

The Leader described the issue as "the Americans' miscalculation" vis-à-vis Iran. "After the Revolution, the Americans perpetrated mistakes concerning Iran throughout these several decades on most occasions," Ayatollah Khamenei observed.

The Leader said his remarks were mostly addressed towards those "who are intimidated by the US's policies."

Ayatollah Khamenei, however, dismissed existence of much of a cordial relationship between the Iranian nation and some European states.

The Leader differentiated, though, between Iran's relationship with the European countries and the US.

"The US has lost a massive political and economic wealth as a result of Iran's Revolution. And it has expended much fortune over the past 40-odd years towards taking Iran out of the Islamic Revolution's grip," the Leader noted.

"And it has failed to do so," Ayatollah Khamenei remarked, adding, "The US is after making up for its defeat. Therefore, it resorts to whatever sort of enmity towards Iran that it can."

Ayatollah Khamenei said Washington had incurred "profound rancor" towards Iran. "The US had brought Iran under its possession, but the country was wrested out of its grip and control. Therefore, its grudge towards the Islamic Republic and the Revolution is long-standing," the Leader noted.

"The US [however] would not let go easily either. It has suffered defeat in Iran, and seeks to make up for this defeat."

Ayatollah Khamenei's remarks were meant as a response to questions posed by some about why Iran would negotiate with the Europeans, but was not prepared to enter negotiations with the US. Observers describe the Islamic Revolution as a force that took the global anti-colonial movement to the next level, calling it a symbol of the fight for a just and multipolar world order.

Iran Is Ready for All Parties Return to Agreement and Mutual Obligations

TEHRAN (IRNA) - President Masoud Pezeshkian while referring to the 2018 U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the failure of the European parties to the deal to compensate for the pullout despite Iran's living up to its commitments said that the Islamic Republic is ready for the return of all parties to the agreement and fulfilling mutual obligations.

The Iranian president made the remarks in separate meetings with the new ambassadors of Armenia, Ireland, the UK, Turkmenistan, Sierra Leone, Kenya, Cuba, Kuwait, Mauritania, and the Netherlands, and while receiving their credentials and welcoming them.

President Pezeshkian pointed out that his administration is seeking to promote consensus inside the country and friendly interactions with nations across the world.

Israel's war on Gaza was also one of the topics the Iranian president discussed with the new British ambassador, Hugo Shorter.

Pezeshkian criticized Western countries' inaction on the Zionist regime's "unprecedented crimes" against innocent women and children in Gaza.

He said the inaction is totally unacceptable and unjustifiable, considering Western states' claims that they champion human rights.

More worse is that the US and some European countries send weapons to "this criminal regime", added Pezeshkian, while emphasizing that Iran seeks to establish tranquility, security and peace in the West Asia region and elsewhere in the world.

In his meeting with the new Dutch ambassador Emiel de Bont, Pezeshkian said that his



public stance has focused on forging consensus inside and interaction with the world even during the presidential election campaign in Iran.

The Zionist regime however tried to obstruct the progress of that approach since my inaugural day and drag us to war by assassinating Mr. Haniyeh, the official guest of the Islamic Republic," the president said in reference to the July 31 assassination of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh who attended Pezeshkian's inauguration ceremony in Tehran a day earlier.

In his meeting with the Kenyan, Mauritanian and Sierra Leonean ambassadors, the Iranian president emphasized the importance of further expansion of his country's ties with the three African countries.

Pezeshkian also discussed expansion of Iran's ties with the new ambassadors of Turkmenistan and Armenia, which are both neighbors of the Islamic Republic. He said that boosting relations with neighbors is the strategic policy of Iran.

During talks with the new Cuban envoy Jorge Fernando Lefebre Nicolas, President Pezeshkian said both Iran and Cuba have paid and continue to pay prices over their fight against imperialism, adding that independent countries can support each other in resolving the problems they face.

The Iranian president, in his meeting with the new Kuwaiti ambassador Mishal Ahmad Al-Mansour, emphasized the need for forging brotherly ties among Islamic countries.

All the foreign envoys expressed their countries' readiness to expand relations with the Islamic Republic.

Iran Rejects Macron's Baseless, Contradictory Remarks



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran has strongly rejected French President Emmanuel Macron's recent anti-Iran allegations, calling them "baseless and contradictory."

The Foreign Ministry spokesman said on Tuesday it is regrettable that instead of the apartheid regime of Israel, whose leaders are wanted by the International Criminal Court, the French president incriminates Iran, which has always respected international law.

Esmail Baghaei stressed that it is Israel, which poses a real and immediate threat to regional peace and stability but still enjoys the full support of the US and some European countries, including France.

He said the Israeli regime "has continuously expanded its military aggression and expansionism to various countries in the region, in addition to continuing its occupation and genocide in occupied Palestine."

Regarding Macron's claims about Iran's peaceful nuclear program, Baghaei said Tehran's nuclear activities are within the framework of international law and under the strict and continuous supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency.

He also rejected allegations about Iran's intervention in the Ukraine conflict, saying such irresponsible statements are meant to distort the facts.

The Foreign Ministry spokesman expressed surprise and regret at the French president's concern about Iran's interactions with African countries, saying, "Countries that have a history of violent colonialism in Africa cannot determine the fate of independent African countries and other nations with the same mentality."

Various Real-World Scenarios Performed in Eqtedar 1403 Drills



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The chief commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says various real-world scenarios were designed and implemented during a large-scale military exercise to protect the Natanz nuclear facility in Iran's central province of Isfahan.

"We tried to perform what we expected the enemies would do in real-world conditions in the form of preplanned scenarios during the [Eqtedar (Authority) 1403] war game. Fortunately, encouraging results and fairly valuable achievements were obtained," Major General Hossein Salami said.

He added that the Iranian Armed Forces have made impressive progress in the field of air defense over the past few months.

"Since this domain of our defense capabilities is among the most determining spheres, it was necessary to once again exhibit the capabilities our air defense systems in a nearly real-world and very precise situation," Salami pointed out.

Also on Tuesday, the IRGC Aerospace Force employed a new air defense missile system equipped with loitering munitions during the Eqtedar 1403 drills.

The IRGC has not provided much information about the specifications of the air defense system, codenamed 358, which launches drone-based missiles.

Moreover, the air defense division of the IRGC Aerospace Force employed point-defense tactics (self-defense at close ranges) to protect the Natanz nuclear site by engaging with 30 aerial targets in the exercise.

Short-range air defense systems, such as Dezful and Tor-M1, could detonate drones and cruise missiles at low altitudes.

Iran's short-range Dezful air defense system is seen during the Eqtedar (Authority) 1403 war game near the Natanz nuclear site in Iran's central province of Isfahan on January 7, 2025.

Iranian forces also activated Dey-9 air defense missile system to practice interception of a bunker buster dropped from a warplane.

The homegrown air defense system could track, intercept and destroy the heavy weapon in less than 15 seconds at a distance of 17 kilometers away from the nuclear site.

Additionally, the IRGC Aerospace Force operated many other air defense systems to practice electronic warfare tactics.

IRAN NEWS



Tehran-Van Train Service to Resume Next Month

TEHRAN (ILNA)- Following agreements between Iran and Turkey, the Tehran-Van passenger train service will resume next month. The Iranian Railways Company announced the decision after numerous meetings and bilateral discussions between senior officials of Iran and Turkey's railways.

The Tehran-Van train initially began operations in July 2019. At the time, officials described it as a collaborative effort to strengthen regional partnerships and promote tourism in Iran and Turkey. However, the service was suspended shortly after its launch and remained inactive for several years.

Finally, with renewed agreements between the two countries, the Tehran-Van train is set to recommence operations next month.

Iran and Uzbekistan Form Tourism Technical Committee



TEHRAN - Fariddin Nasriyev, Uzbekistan's Ambassador to Tehran, met with Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, to discuss strengthening bilateral relations and cooperation in the fields of tourism, cultural heritage, and handicrafts.

Salehi Amiri expressed hope that the meeting would bolster ties between Iran and Uzbekistan. He highlighted the Iranian government's commitment to enhancing relations and emphasized that this goal requires strong initiatives from both embassies and their representatives.

The minister referred to his recent meeting with Aziz Abdulkhalkimov, Uzbekistan's Deputy Prime Minister, during which the two sides agreed to sign a memorandum of cooperation. Salehi Amiri stressed the importance of forming a joint Iran-Uzbekistan tourism technical committee to boost the number of tourists and deepen cultural connections between the two nations.

Salehi Amiri also emphasized Iran's readiness to increase flight frequencies, negotiate with Uzbek airlines, and connect travel agencies from both countries to facilitate tourist exchanges.

He highlighted the significance of shared UNESCO-listed intangible cultural heritage items, including Nowruz, the Rebab musical instrument, illumination art, fasting traditions (Ifar), sericulture and silk weaving, and miniature painting. The minister noted that joint festivals could help familiarize the two nations with each other's attractions and cultural commonalities, ultimately fostering greater political and cultural ties.

Additional cooperation areas discussed included experience sharing in excavation and restoration, medical tourism, organizing joint handicraft exhibitions, and exchanging expertise among artisans.

Uzbek Ambassador Nasriyev reaffirmed Uzbekistan's interest in expanding relations with Iran. He expressed readiness to facilitate the entry of Iranian tourists, establish the tourism technical committee, and hold negotiations with Iranian travel agencies and airlines.

Earlier Nasriyev met with Ali Akbar Safaei, Iran's deputy Minister of Transport and Urban Development and head of the Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO), to discuss strengthening bilateral and regional transport and transit collaboration.

The meeting emphasized facilitating trade between the two nations, the PMO portal reported.

As reported, discussions focused on streamlining multimodal transportation between Iran and Uzbekistan via Iranian ports in the country's northern and southern regions.

The PMO expressed readiness to swiftly address issues faced by Uzbek traders and businesses along regional corridors passing through Iran. The two sides also discussed organizing reciprocal trade delegations, including visits by Uzbek technical representatives, traders, and transport companies to explore Iran's port capacities for enhanced transit options within the framework of the International North-South Transit Corridor (INSTC).

Additionally, the meeting highlighted the importance of establishing joint regional corridors to facilitate the smooth movement of Uzbek goods to Russia and India, leveraging Iran's port infrastructure to achieve the goals set by the presidents of both nations.

Warning Signals from Iran's PMI Indicate Deepening Recession



TEHRAN - Iran's economy witnessed a sharp downturn in December 2024, marking one of its most profound recessions. The Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) for both the overall economy and the industrial sector recorded significant declines after seasonal adjustments. This decline underscores the need for urgent policy intervention to prevent further economic stagnation.

According to the Iranian Chamber of Commerce Research Center, energy shortages and power outages have severely disrupted production, forcing manufacturing facilities to operate well below capacity. Additionally, exchange rate fluctuations have driven up input costs, leaving small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) grappling with insufficient financial resources, limited foreign exchange allocations, and restricted access to loans.

Declining domestic demand and weakened exports have exacerbated the recession, as external markets failed to compensate for falling local consumption. Experts emphasize the need to address trade barriers and revise foreign exchange policies to strengthen export capabilities and mitigate the ongoing economic crisis.

The PMI for the overall economy fell to 43.9 in December, its lowest since May. After seasonal adjustment, the index stood at 45.5, the lowest since July. This indicates a sharp contraction in economic activity, sounding an alarm for policymakers.

Several underlying components of the PMI also revealed troubling trends: Production Output: Dropped to its lowest in four months; New Orders: Hit a six-month low; Delivery Times: Slowed to their weakest performance since early 2023; Employment Levels: Declined for the second consecutive month, reaching a four-month low.

Notably, inventory levels of raw materials hit their lowest point in 22 months, while input prices surged to their highest since mid-2023, reflecting severe cost pressures.

The PMI for new orders recorded 41.8, its lowest since July, indicating diminished consumer purchasing power and shrinking domestic demand. Meanwhile, the export index, at 46.4, reflects a four-month low, driven by declining foreign demand and persistent trade policy issues.

The industrial PMI also painted a bleak picture, dropping to 44.8, the lowest in five months. Adjusted figures placed it at 46.8, reflecting a sharp decline in production activity. Factors contributing to the downturn include: Production Volume: Dropped to 44.3, its lowest since mid-2024, as many firms operated at reduced capacity due to power outages and input cost surges; Raw Material Inventories: Fell to a multi-year low of 43.6, with companies struggling to secure supplies due to rising foreign exchange costs and limited financial resources; Employment: Shrunk to 48.9, as businesses reduced their workforce to manage costs.

Input costs surged, with the raw material price index reaching 86.5, the highest since early 2024. This increase has driven up the cost of finished goods, although weaker market demand has limited manufacturers' ability to pass on these costs fully. Inflationary pressures are expected to intensify in the coming months, further burdening businesses and consumers.

To combat the economic downturn, experts recommend: Stimulating Demand: Introducing measures to boost consumer and business spending; Reducing Production Costs: Addressing energy shortages and stabilizing the currency to reduce input costs for businesses; Enhancing Export Competitiveness: Revising foreign exchange policies and removing trade barriers to facilitate external market access.

The government must also implement targeted support measures to stabilize the business environment, manage inflationary pressures, and ensure a more predictable operating landscape for businesses.

The PMI's forward-looking component, measuring economic activity expectations, fell to 47.7, the lowest in 31 months. Persistent power outages, currency volatility, and rising costs have heightened uncertainties, making it difficult for businesses to plan for the future.

Without swift policy interventions, Iran risks falling deeper into recession, with prolonged impacts on employment, production, and trade. This calls for immediate action to restore confidence and set the economy on a path to recovery.

Electricity Exchange Agreement With Pakistan Extended



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Mustafa Rajabi Mashhadi, in an interview, emphasized that ensuring electricity supply for the Iranian people remains the primary priority of the Ministry of Energy. He noted that currently, Iran imports more electricity than it exports.

Regarding the extension of the electricity exchange agreement with Pakistan, he stated: "This agreement was signed last year under international commitments and bilateral agreements between the two countries. It has been extended for the upcoming year with no significant changes to the volume of electricity exports. Export levels remain below the capacity of the established transmission lines."

The spokesperson for the electricity industry explained that electricity exports to Pakistan occur at levels lower than the contractual agreement and are carried out during periods of surplus capacity. He stressed that the current exchange does not exacerbate the electricity supply imbalance within the country.

Acknowledging the challenges facing the power sector, he said: "The Ministry of Energy and the electricity industry are fully aware of the current difficulties. Our colleagues in the electricity sector are working tirelessly to address these issues, and efforts are underway to minimize power supply problems by delivering more natural gas to power plants."

In conclusion, the spokesperson highlighted that to compensate for domestic shortages, the Ministry of Energy has been importing electricity from neighboring countries, and at present, the volume of electricity imports exceeds exports.

Iran Strengthens Health Technology Collaboration with Cuba in Latin America



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran has established the most significant strategic partnerships and collaborations in health technology within Latin America, particularly with Cuba, according to a senior health official.

Ali Jafarian, Senior Advisor to the Minister of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education, highlighted these ties during the coordination meeting of the 19th Iran-Cuba Joint Commission. He noted that Cuba's advanced health technologies have enabled Tehran and Havana to collaborate on various health-related projects, such as the development of the hepatitis vaccine and the Pasteurcovac vaccine.

Jafarian also revealed ongoing efforts to develop the pneumococcal vaccine, emphasizing the importance of the Iran-Cuba Economic Cooperation Joint Commission, which has been entrusted to the Ministry of Health for further advancements.

Mohammad Hossein Niknam, Special Assistant to the Minister and Director-General of International Cooperation at the Ministry of Health, pointed out the political and economic significance of the 19th Joint Commission. He noted that it follows the signing of a 10-year comprehensive strategic program between Iran and Cuba last year. He added that the signing of documents during this commission will significantly boost bilateral relations.

Niknam highlighted the recent high-level exchanges between the two nations, including Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel's visit to Tehran last month, and Iran's president and prime minister's reciprocal visits in recent years. These visits underscore the depth of the bilateral relationship.

During the 19th Commission, seven bilateral agreements involving various organizations have already been finalized, with four more under review. A list of health cooperation projects has also been exchanged. Niknam expressed optimism that the outcomes of this meeting would yield fruitful results for both countries.

Mohammad Reza Nazeri, Director-General of Economic Coordination at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, emphasized the strategic nature of Iran-Cuba relations. He cited mutual support in political, economic, and human rights arenas, which elevate the importance of their ties. Nazeri added that Iran's economic diplomacy focuses on expanding trade with friendly nations, particularly in Latin America, making relations with Cuba a priority.

Iran's Trade Balance Improves by \$5.5b Under Fourteenth Administration



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - According to a report from Iranian Customs, the trade balance of Iran improved significantly during the tenure of the Fourteenth Administration. Between early September and January 5, 2025, non-oil exports reached \$22.5 billion, marking a 24% increase compared to the same period in 2024.

In terms of weight, non-oil exports amounted to 59 million tons during this period, showing an 18% growth compared to the previous year.

The report also highlights that the country's imports during the same timeframe totaled \$25 billion, a 4.5% decrease compared to the corresponding period in 2024. Additionally, the volume of imported goods was 12.8 million tons, a 20.5% decline year-over-year.

Overall, Iran's total trade, including imports and exports, reached \$47.5 billion during this period, reflecting a 7% increase compared to the same period last year. The total trade volume by weight also rose by 8.5%, reaching 71.8 million tons.

Customs data further reveals that Iran's trade balance improved by 69%, amounting to a \$5.5 billion gain during the Fourteenth Administration's tenure. This contrasts with the same period in the previous year, where non-oil exports were valued at \$18 billion and imports at \$26 billion.

Iran's Footwear Exports Rise by 32% Amid Boost in Production



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran has reported a 32% increase in footwear exports during the first eight months of the current Iranian calendar year, compared to the same period last year, according to the Deputy Minister of Public Industries at the Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade. A total of 160 million pairs of shoes were produced during this period.

Speaking at the inauguration of Iran's largest footwear industry exhibition held at the International Exhibition Center in Tehran, Deputy Minister Ebrahim Sheikh shared the details of the sector's growth. Organized by the Association of Machine-Made Shoes in Qom Province, the exhibition highlights the country's advancements in the footwear industry.

"In the first eight months of last year, \$58 million worth of machine-made shoes were exported to various countries. This year, the figure has risen to \$78 million, marking a 32% growth," Sheikh said. He added that there are currently 8,337 active footwear production units in the country.

The domestic production of shoes also saw an increase, with 160 million pairs produced during the first eight months of this year, compared to 158.5 million pairs in the same period last year. Sheikh noted that the industry has the potential to reach a nominal production capacity of 300 million pairs annually.

Highlighting the economic potential, Sheikh stated, "The Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade aims to increase the annual export revenue from footwear to \$1 billion." The industry currently employs 115,000 people directly, with 35,000 in industrial units and 80,000 in artisanal workshops.

During the event, Hojatoleslam Abdolhossein Khosropanah,

Secretary of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, emphasized the need to establish a specialized university and a science and technology park dedicated to the footwear industry.

"The governance model for footwear production is being realized," Khosropanah said, acknowledging the transformative efforts of the Qom Province Association of Machine-Made Shoes. He noted that the association has identified 300 unresolved challenges in the industry that need the attention of knowledge-based enterprises.

The Secretary also highlighted other initiatives by the association, including the establishment of vocational schools and the introduction of specialized footwear courses in technical institutes. "The next step is the creation of a dedicated footwear university to further enhance education and innovation in this sector," he added.

Khosropanah emphasized the broader need for specialized institutions, such as universities for automotive, household appliances, and footwear industries, to address specific sectoral challenges. "We can now claim to have achieved a governance model for national footwear. However, this is just the beginning," he stated.

He also called for efforts to address key challenges faced by producers, particularly the availability of raw materials. Proposing the establishment of a footwear science and technology park in Qom, he suggested collaboration with universities to enable domestic production of raw materials.

The largest exhibition of Iran's footwear industry, inaugurated by the Qom Province Association of Machine-Made Shoes, runs from January 8 to 11, from 10 AM to 7 PM. It aims to attract both domestic and international traders and showcase the country's capabilities in footwear production and innovation.

Finland Recovers Anchor in Baltic Sea Cables Investigation

COPENHAGEN (Dispatches) - Finnish police said on Tuesday they had recovered a lost anchor from the seabed as part of an investigation of suspected sabotage against power and internet cables in the Baltic Sea. Finland last month seized the Eagle S tanker carrying Russian oil on suspicion the vessel had damaged the Finnish-Estonian Estlink 2 power line and four telecom cables by dragging its anchor across the seabed. "The location where the anchor was found is along the route of the Eagle S ... towards the western end of the drag trace found on the seabed," Finland's National Bureau of Investigation said in a statement. Finnish lawyer Herman Ljungberg, who represents the ship's owner, United Arab Emirates-based Caravella LLC FZ, said the alleged damage happened outside of Finland's territorial waters and that the country thus lacked jurisdiction to intervene.



French Far-Right Figurehead Jean-Marie Le Pen Dies at 96



PARIS (Dispatches) - Jean-Marie Le Pen, who died Tuesday aged 96, was the far-right bogeyman of French politics, infamously dismissing the Holocaust as a detail of history and spending half a century whipping up anger over immigration.

The co-founder of the far-right National Front - later renamed the National Rally - was eventually booted out of the party by his daughter Marine for anti-Semitism.

A former paratrooper, Le Pen sent shock waves through France in 2002 when he made it to the second round of the presidential election, which was won by Jacques Chirac.

Le Pen, who seemed more at ease in the role of provocateur than would-be president, appeared as surprised as everyone else by his spectacular breakthrough.

Years later, he boasted that the rise of the far right around Europe showed his ideas had gone mainstream.

His daughter Marine's right-hand man, National Rally leader Jordan Bardella, hailed Le Pen's influence in a carefully worded tribute.

"As a soldier in the French army in Indochina and Algeria, as a tribune of the people ... he always served France and defended its identity and sovereignty," the 29-year-old said on X.

The French presidency issued a more terse statement, saying "history will judge" Le Pen's role in the country's political life.

Born in the port of La Trinité-sur-Mer in the western Brittany region on June 20, 1928, he was the son of a seamstress and a fisherman.

His father's fishing boat hit a mine during World War II, killing him - a loss that hit the young Le Pen hard.

Anxious to see action, Le Pen volunteered for service in two wars in French colonies - the First Indochina War (1946-1954) in Vietnam, and then in Algeria (1954-1962).

Shortly after his return from Algeria he entered politics and became France's youngest MP at 27 when he was elected to parliament in 1956.

But he was unable to resist the lure of the battlefield.

Later that year, he took part in the Franco-British military expedition to seize the Suez Canal, and a few years later joined forces fighting to keep Algeria French.

Trump Will Not Rule Out Using Military Force to Take Panama Canal, Greenland

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. President-elect Donald Trump refused on Tuesday to rule out using military or economic action to pursue acquisition of the Panama Canal and Greenland, part of a broader expansionist agenda he has promoted since winning the Nov. 5 election.

Trump, who takes office on Jan. 20, also floated the idea of turning Canada into a US state, said he would demand far higher defense spending from NATO allies and promised to change the name of the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of America.

Still two weeks away from taking office, Trump has begun outlining an aggressive foreign policy with little regard to diplomatic considerations or the concerns of US allies.

Asked at a press conference at his Florida resort whether he could assure the world he would not use military or economic coercion as he tries to gain control of the Panama Canal and Greenland, Trump said, "No, I can't assure you on either of those two. But I can say this, we need them for economic security."

Trump criticized American spending on Canadian goods and military support for Canada, saying the U.S. derives no benefits from doing so, and called the border between the two countries an "artificially drawn line."

He suggested he would impose tariffs on Denmark if it resists his offer to purchase Greenland, which he said is vital to U.S. national security. Shortly before Trump's comments, his son Don Jr. arrived in Greenland for a private visit.

Denmark has said Greenland, a self-governing part of its kingdom, is not for sale.

"I don't think it's a good way forward to fight each other with financial means when we are close allies and partners," Denmark's Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said late on Tuesday in response to Trump's comments.

Canada's minister of foreign affairs, Melanie Joly, said on X, "President-elect Trump's comments show a complete lack of understanding of what makes Canada a strong country. Our economy is strong. Our people are strong. We will never back down in the face of threats."

Panama's top diplomat also pushed back on the incoming U.S. leader's threat to retake the key global waterway, which the US had built and owned before handing over control to the Central American nation in 1999.

"The only hands that control the canal are Panamanian and that's how it will continue to be," Foreign Minister Javier Martinez-Acha told reporters on Tuesday.

Ambassador Daniel Fried, a retired U.S. diplomat now with the Atlantic Council think tank, said Trump's comments painted a picture of national power as territorial expansion and compared him to a "19th century imperialist."

Seizing Greenland, Fried said, "would destroy NATO, because it would make us no different than Vladimir Putin," Russia's president.

Trump's promise to rename the Gulf of Mexico echoed his previous vow to revert the name of Denali, the highest mountain peak in North America, to Mount McKinley. Former President Barack Obama changed the name of the Alaskan mountain in deference to Native Americans.

Mexican Economy Minister Marcelo Ebrard, who is expected to play a key role in looming US-Mexico trade issues, appeared to dismiss Trump's call to rename the shared body of water later on Tuesday.

"Today I'd tell you if we saw each other in 30 years, the Gulf of Mexico will still be called the Gulf of Mexico," he said, adding that the Mexican government would not get drawn into the debate.

Typically, the US Board of Geographic Names sets geographic names, though presidents have also renamed geographic features via executive action.

Trump said NATO members should spend 5% of their gross domestic product on defense, a significant increase from the current 2% target.

"I think NATO should have 5%," he said. "They can all afford it, but they should be at 5%, not 2%."

Trump has frequently complained that most NATO members are not paying their fair share, and he floated demanding an increase in NATO defense contributions during the campaign.

NATO estimated that 23 of its 32 members would meet its goal of spending 2% of GDP in 2024.

None of the alliance members, including the US, currently spends 5% of GDP on defense, according to NATO figures. Poland is the highest spender in GDP terms at 4.12%, followed by Estonia at 3.43% and the United States at 3.38%.

Trump also repeated his threat that "all hell will break out in the Middle East" if Palestinian Hamas militants do not release by the time he takes office hostages it abducted from Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, and still hold in the Gaza Strip.

"It will not be good for Hamas, and it will not be good, frankly, for anyone," he said.

His Middle East envoy, Steve Witkoff, told reporters he hopes to have good things to report on negotiations between Israel and Hamas by the time Trump is sworn into office.

Rescue Efforts Under Way After Earthquake in Tibet Kills More Than 120



BEIJING (Dispatches) - More than 400 people trapped by a strong earthquake in the foothills of the Himalayas have been rescued, Chinese officials said, while over 30,000 residents have been relocated, as the search for survivors entered a second day on Wednesday.

The epicentre of Tuesday's magnitude 6.8 quake, one of the region's most powerful tremors in recent years, was located in Tingri in China's Tibet region, about 80 km (50 miles) north of Mount Everest, the world's highest mountain. It also shook buildings in neighbouring Nepal, Bhutan and India.

Twenty-four hours after the temblor struck, survivors trapped under rubble will have endured a night in sub-zero temperatures and be at risk of succumbing to hypothermia and dehydration.

An initial survey showed 3,609 homes had been destroyed in the Shigatse region of Tibet, which is home to 800,000 people, Chinese state media reported late on Tuesday, citing local officials. More than 500 people and 106 ambulances had been dispatched to help the injured.

UAE Discusses Post-War Gaza Gov't With U.S. and Israel

DUBAI (Dispatches) - The United Arab Emirates has discussed with Israel and the United States participating in a provisional administration of post-war Gaza until a reformed Palestinian Authority is able to take charge, according to people familiar with the talks.

The behind-the-scenes discussions, reported by Reuters for the first time, included the possibility of the UAE and the United States, along with other nations, temporarily overseeing the governance, security and reconstruction of Gaza after the Israeli military withdraws and until a Palestinian administration is able to take over, a dozen foreign diplomats and Western officials told Reuters.

The UAE is a close security partner of the U.S. and, unlike most Arab governments, has diplomatic ties with Israel. The diplomats and officials said this provides the Persian Gulf state with some leverage over Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

After more than a year of war, Israel remains reluctant to outline its own vision for Gaza and the international community has struggled to formulate a viable plan, said the sources, who asked not to be identified because the conversations were private.

The diplomats and officials stressed the ideas that had emerged from the UAE talks lacked detail and had not been distilled into a formal, written plan nor adopted by any government.

In the behind-the-scenes talks, Abu Dhabi is advocating for a reformed



Palestinian Authority (PA) to govern Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem under an independent Palestinian state, the sources said - something that Israel has publicly opposed.

"The UAE will not participate in any plan that fails to include significant reform of the Palestinian Authority, its empowerment, and the establishment of a credible roadmap toward a Palestinian state," a UAE official told Reuters, in response to questions about the discussions.

"These elements - which are currently lacking - are essential for the success of any post-Gaza plan."

The PA was established three decades ago under the 1993-1995 Oslo Accords, signed by Israel and Palestinians, and given limited authority over the West Bank and Gaza. It still exercises some governance in the Israeli-occupied West Bank but was run out of Gaza in 2007 by Hamas after a brief civil war.

A U.S. State Department spokesperson told Reuters there had been talks with several partners, including the UAE, on options for governance, security and reconstruction, and that various draft proposals, plans and ideas had been put forward by partners.

"These have been deliberative discussions that continue, as we seek the best way forward," the spokesperson said, declining to comment further on "private diplomatic conversations".

Two Americans, Five Other Mercenaries Detained in Venezuela

CARACAS (Dispatches) - Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro on Tuesday announced the arrest of seven foreigners -- including two Americans -- whom he accused of being "mercenaries" trying to prevent him from being sworn-in for another six years in power.

Maduro said the Americans, two Colombian "hitmen" and three "mercenaries" from the war in Ukraine were involved in plotting unspecified "terrorist acts" ahead of his planned inauguration Friday.

"I am sure that in the next few hours they will confess," Maduro said in a broadcast on state television, before declaring a mass deployment of police and military across the country.

The announcement of Americans being detained came just hours after President Joe Biden welcomed exiled Venezuelan opposition candidate Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia in the United States.

During the meeting, Biden backed a "peaceful transfer back to democratic rule" in Venezuela and warned against further repression inside the country.

The United States and several of Venezuela's democratic neighbours believe Gonzalez Urrutia won a July presidential election by a landslide and that official results were falsified.

The opposition has called for "millions" of Venezuelans to turn out in protest Thursday to prevent Maduro from retaining power and being officially sworn in.

They face an uphill battle. The 62-year-old Maduro and his political mentor Hugo Chavez, who died in 2013, have between them ruled Venezuela for the last quarter century.



Both have swatted aside waves of international and domestic pressure, retaining power through populist appeal, disputed elections and the might of the military, police and paramilitary gangs.

Faced with a new challenge, Maduro has again turned to the security forces to dull international and domestic pressure.

His forces have detained several foreigners, including an Argentine policeman, rounded up local opponents and targeted family members of opposition leaders in hiding.

Gonzalez Urrutia said Tuesday his son-in-law Rafael Tudares was kidnapped from a Caracas street, spirited away in a gold-colored van.

The father of his grandkids was "intercepted by hooded men, dressed in black" during the morning school run.

Tudares remains "missing at this time," the 75-year-old diplomat-turned-opposition politician said in a social media post.

Opposition figurehead Maria Corina Machado said Tuesday her family had also been targeted.

In a message from hiding inside Venezuela, she accused "agents of the regime" of surrounding her mother's house, flying drones overhead and cutting power to the neighborhood.

"My mom is 84 years old, she's sick with chronic health problems" she posted on X, "Maduro and company, there is no limit to your evil. Cowards."

She has called for supporters to turn out in "millions" on Thursday and said she would be there herself.



Young Makes Halfcourt Shot at Buzzer as Hawks Edge Jazz

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Trae Young hit a halfcourt 3-pointer at the buzzer to give the visiting Atlanta Hawks a 124-121 win over the Utah Jazz in Salt Lake City. The Jazz tied the game with four seconds left on a 24-foot try by Collin Sexton. Atlanta, which had no timeouts remaining, inbounded to Young, who fired successfully from midcourt. The shot was reviewed and ruled good. Young finished with 24 points -- 10 in the fourth quarter -- and 20 assists to help Atlanta break a three-game losing streak. Atlanta also got 18 points, six rebounds and three blocks from Clint Capela and 17 points from De'Andre Hunter. Utah was led by Lauri Markkanen, who matched his season high with 35 points. Sexton added 24 points and Walker Kessler had 21 points, 10 rebounds and three blocks. The Jazz fell to 2-13 at home. Atlanta rolled to a 31-17 start before the Jazz began knocking down 3-pointers -- two by Markkanen and three by Patty Mills -- to cut the lead to 36-32 after one quarter. The Jazz got as close as 38-34, but the Hawks went on a 16-0 run for a 16-point lead with 7:58 left in the third. But Markkanen got hot, scoring 15 points in the quarter, and cut Atlanta's lead to 65-62 at intermission. Kessler kept the Jazz in the game by scoring 10 straight of its points in the fourth quarter, including a tip-in with 1:33 left that trimmed Atlanta's lead to 119-118. Young made two free throws to give the Hawks a three-point lead with 8.8 seconds left.

The Hawks played without second-leading scorer Jalen Johnson (right shoulder inflammation) for the second straight game. The Jazz were without ex-Hawks player John Collins (personal reasons), Keyonte George (left heel) and Brice Sensabaugh, who scored a combined 61 points in the last two games, because of illness. Both teams return to the court on Thursday. The Hawks complete their six-game road trip in Phoenix. Utah is at home against Miami, a team it beat in Miami by 36 points on Saturday. Meanwhile Quentin Grimes had 26 points, nine rebounds and six assists as the Dallas Mavericks snapped a five-game skid with a 118-97 win over the Los Angeles Lakers. Grimes matched his career high with six 3-pointers on 6-for-11 shooting. P.J. Washington shot 9 for 14 and finished with 22 points and eight rebounds for the Mavs, who shot 52% (18 of 38) from the field. The Mavericks ended their losing streak without their top scorers. Luka Donic has been out with a left calf strain since Dec. 25, and Kyrie Irving has been sidelined the past two games with a bulging disk in his back. Anthony Davis led the Lakers with 21 points and 12 rebounds. LeBron James added 18 points, 10 rebounds, and eight assists. Los Angeles lost its second straight and for the third time in five games. Los Angeles was 11 of 35 from 3-point range and shot 45% overall from the field. The Lakers were out rebounded 44-33 and trailed by as many as 21 points. Dallas hadn't lost six consecutive games since Jan. 23-Feb. 1, 2021.



Djokovic Makes Another Push for the Summit in Melbourne

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - The blazing fire of the golden era of men's tennis has been reduced to dying embers without Roger Federer and Rafa Nadal but Novak Djokovic can send one last flame shooting into the Melbourne sky at this year's Australian Open. Having ticked Olympic champion off his wishlist in Paris, Djokovic has the record for most Grand Slam singles titles in his sights and few would bet against him walking off Rod Laver Arena on Jan. 26 with the unprecedented 25th. Yes, at 37, the body is no longer what it was, and yes, world number one Jannik Sinner won both of their contests last year, but the fierce drive that made Serbia's favourite son the most successful male player of all time endures. "My main motivation comes from love and passion for the sport, and also the desire to keep competing," he said after losing to Sinner in the Shanghai Masters final in his last outing of 2024. "These are kind of the matches and challenges that I still strive for, to be in a position to play against the best players in the world, on the biggest stage, in the finals of some of the biggest tournaments in the world." In 2024, Djokovic failed to win a Grand Slam for the first time since 2017 - his other loss to Sinner came in the Melbourne semis - but he proved he was still a sensational tennis player on his day when he beat Carlos Alcaraz to win Olympic gold. There could be no place more appropriate for Djokovic to finally break free of his tie with Margaret Court on 24 Grand Slam singles titles than in her own backyard at Melbourne Park, where he has won the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup 10 times. Some quibble at the standard of some of the 11 Australian Opens that Court won, and others despise the 82-year-old for her politics, but a Grand Slam record is a Grand Slam record and Court shares it. Djokovic, like Court, won his first major at the Australian Open and he can end the debate definitively on his 22nd visit to Melbourne as a professional. Aside from the reliable band of supporters from the local Serbian community, Djokovic has rarely been the most popular player at Melbourne Park but he has always been among the best.

Newcastle Stun Arsenal to Close in on League Cup Final

LONDON (Dispatches) - Alexander Isak scored his 50th goal for Newcastle United as Eddie Howe's side took a huge step towards the League Cup final with a 2-0 victory at Arsenal on Tuesday. Isak struck shortly before halftime in the first leg of the semi-final at a chilly Emirates Stadium and then had a big role in Newcastle's second scored by Anthony Gordon after the break. Arsenal were left to rue their failure to convert several good chances with Gabriel Martinelli denied by the woodwork in the first half and Kai Havertz missing a golden opportunity. In-form Newcastle, who have not won a major trophy since 1955, will now be clear favourites to complete the job in the second leg on Tyneside next month. Tottenham Hotspur host holders Liverpool in the first leg of the other semi-final on Wednesday. Arsenal had been unbeaten in their previous 13 games in all competitions but were not at their best against a clinical Newcastle side who have taken a liking to north London.

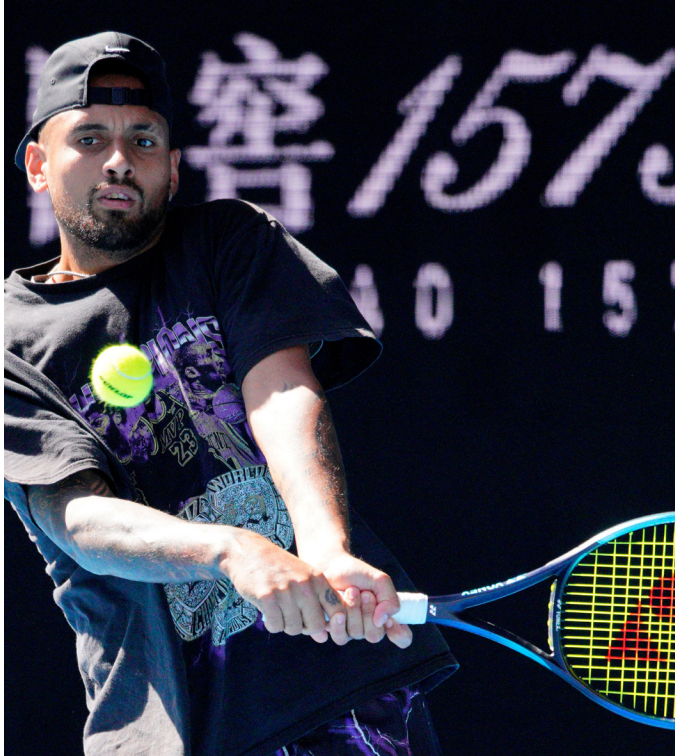


Three days ago they won 2-1 at Tottenham to move closer to the Premier League's top four and they returned to send the travelling Toon Army back up north in high spirits. Isak has been virtually unstoppable of late and he has now scored 10 goals in his last nine appearances for the club. Jurrien Timber also headed over the crossbar from close range for the hosts and Havertz was even more culpable after the break when he somehow failed to connect with a header with the goal gaping, the ball bouncing off his shoulder.

The Swede lofted one early half-chance over the crossbar but showed how lethal he is after 37 minutes when a long ball into the area fell into his path and he fired the ball high past David Raya into the roof of the net. It brought up the 25-year-old's half century in just 89 matches for the club, five games fewer than it took Newcastle great Alan Shearer. "First half he was electric, I thought he played really well. He scored but I just thought his general game was in a really good place," Newcastle manager Eddie Howe said. Arsenal had threatened with Martinelli curling a shot against the post from the edge of the area and Newcastle were forced into some desperate defending in one goalmouth scramble.

Kyrgios Pulls out of Djokovic Exhibition Event Ahead of Australian Open

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Nick Kyrgios has withdrawn from an exhibition event with Novak Djokovic scheduled for Thursday due to an abdominal strain, casting more doubt on the former Wimbledon finalist's chances of making his Australian Open comeback this month. Kyrgios, who has battled a succession of injuries since losing to Djokovic in the 2022 Wimbledon final, said on Wednesday he had pulled out of the 'A Night With Novak' event at Rod Laver Arena due to the issue. "Unfortunately won't be able to play my good friend this Thursday on the 9th as I've had an ultrasound on my abdominal and have a grade 1 strain," the Australian posted on Instagram. "Will be resting and doing everything I can to be OK by the Aus Open." The 29-year-old has struggled with knee, foot and wrist injuries and had already raised concerns about his participation in the year's first Grand Slam following a loss to Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard at the Brisbane International last week. Kyrgios, who last played at the Australian Open in 2022, said after his defeat in Brisbane he was worried that his wrist would not hold up at a Grand Slam. Despite his fitness concerns, Kyrgios has been named in Australia's Davis Cup squad to face Sweden on Jan. 31 and Feb. 1. The Australian Open begins on Jan. 12 at Melbourne Park. Meanwhile there is little doubt Carlos Alcaraz is one of the brightest stars of his generation with Grand Slam success on all three surfaces but the Spaniard will arrive at the Australian Open looking to conquer the final frontier of his young career.



Should he lift the Norman Brookes Challenge Cup at Melbourne Park later this month, the 21-year-old French Open and Wimbledon champion will become the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam - the feat of winning all four major titles. Victory would put the 2022 U.S. Open champion in the elite company of Fred Perry, Don Budge, Rod Laver, Roy Emerson, Andre Agassi, Roger Federer, Rafa Nadal and Novak Djokovic, cementing his status as a modern great. Alcaraz has not gone beyond the quarter-finals in his three previous visits to Melbourne, but that has not stopped the world number three from dreaming of glory in the Jan. 12-26 event. "I have it in mind to get a tattoo of a kangaroo," Alcaraz told Spanish outlet Marca recently, referring to the tradition of immortalising his major triumphs on his skin. "The goal is to complete the Grand Slam in Melbourne." For all his bullishness before the first Grand Slam of the New Year, Alcaraz will be aware he was somewhat overshadowed by Jannik Sinner in 2024, with the Italian enjoying a near-perfect season that included the Australian Open and U.S. Open titles. Defeat by Novak Djokovic in the Olympic final in Paris was another sobering experience for Alcaraz and some pundits began to question his consistency after a shock second round loss to the unheralded Botić van de Zandschulp at the U.S. Open.

Liverpool Owners Slam Door on Musk Takeover Talk



LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool's current owners, Fenway Sports Group (FSG), have insisted they have no intention of selling the club following claims made by Elon Musk's father, Errol Musk, who revealed his son's interest in purchasing the Merseyside club. When asked about Elon potentially acquiring Liverpool, Errol responded, "I can't comment on that, they'll raise the price," according to a report published in the Mail Online. However, when pressed about whether there was interest, he added, "Oh, yes. But that doesn't mean he's buying it. He would like to, yes, obviously. Anybody would want to -- so would I." The remarks quickly gained attention, sparking widespread speculation and debate. However, sources close to Liverpool have played down the possibility of a sale, with FSG reportedly uninterested in selling and stating that no approach has been made by the tech billionaire. In May, Liverpool was valued at £4.3 billion, making it the fourth most valuable football club globally. The amount would represent just over 1 per cent of Musk's total net worth. Errol explained that his family's connection to Liverpool might explain Elon's interest, saying, "His grandmother was born in Liverpool, and we have relatives in Liverpool, and we were fortunate to know quite a lot of the Beatles because they grew up with some of my family. So, we are attached to Liverpool, you know." Under FSG's ownership, Liverpool has experienced success, including a return to the top of English football and an expansion of Anfield. However, some fans have criticised the ownership for not spending enough on new players. Last year, the club posted a £9 million loss, a relatively small figure compared to some of its major rivals.