

President Masoud Pezeshkian Said in a Televised Interviews in Sistan and Baluchestan Province That His Administration Will Pursue the Issue of Iran's Water Rights From Hirmand River Shared by Afghanistan

# IRAN NEWS

Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Has Dismantled an Espionage Team in the Southwestern Province of Khuzestan as the Members of the Spy Ring Had Been Arrested Following Round-the-Clock Intelligence Operations

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### IRGC Unveils New Subterranean Missile Facility



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) has unveiled one of its new underground missile bases, described as a "missile city", amid the Israeli regime's heightened escalation in the region and threats against the country.

The sprawling missile base, accommodating advanced Iranian projectiles, was unveiled by IRGC Chief Commander Major General Hossein Salami and Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the commander of the IRGC's Aerospace Force, according to a report by Tasnim news agency late on Friday.

Broadcast by the state TV, the report on the footage from the subterranean facility said the base lodges such high-tech missiles as Emad, Qadr and Qiam which run on liquid fuel and that 90 percent of the other sections of the missile city were not shown for security reasons.

The advanced projectiles were used in Iran's stunning missile attacks against Israeli military sites in military operations code-named True Promise 1 and 2 in April and October 2024.

Describing the missile base as a "dormant volcano deep in the heart of mountains," the state TV's report said, "The volcano lying under these mountains can erupt in the shortest time possible."

During the tour of the missile facility, Salami praised the IRGC forces involved in the two anti-Israel attacks and rejected the enemy's mistaken belief that Iran's capability to produce missiles had been harmed.

"Every day, the number of systems and missiles is augmented in the far corners of this land. Maybe the enemy thought that our production power has stagnated, but the growth rate of our missile power is up to date," the IRGC chief said.

### Iran Backs Stable, Independent Lebanon Free From Foreign Occupation



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says the Islamic Republic supports a "stable, secure and independent" Lebanon as the Arab country elected president to end a two-year political deadlock.

Araqchi congratulated Joseph Aoun for his election as Lebanon's new president through a message on his X account.

"Iran supports a stable, secure and independent Lebanon, home to all Lebanese, and free from foreign occupation and threat," the top diplomat wrote in Arabic.

"As in the past, we will cooperate with any government that represents the aspirations of the Lebanese people, ensures their welfare and protects Lebanon's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity," the top Iranian diplomat said.

Aoun secured 99 votes from the 128-seat parliament to win the presidency in a second round of voting on Thursday.

His victory, which saw members of parliament erupting in celebration as he reached the required threshold of 86 votes, came on the legislature's 13th attempt to find a successor for Michel Aoun - not related - whose term ended in October 2022.

Following his election, Aoun who had served as the 14th commander of the Lebanese armed forces since 2017, formally stepped down from his military role. He entered parliament to take the oath of office dressed in civilian attire.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian also felicitated the new Lebanese president, voicing Tehran's readiness to further enhance cooperation in "all fields" with Beirut.



## President Says Current Conditions Are Unworthy of the Iranian People

TEHRAN - The President, speaking to the people of northern Sistan and Baluchestan province, stated that as an Iranian, a Muslim, and a national official, he finds the current situation in Zabol, Sistan and Baluchestan, and the country unacceptable.

Masoud Pezeshkian, during his two-day visit to Sistan and Baluchestan province, met with various groups of people at the Shahid Jamal Zehi hall in Zabol. After listening to the city's governor and Friday prayer leader, he addressed the public in the northern part of the province.

Emphasizing that Zabol's condition has worsened compared to 50 years ago when he last visited, the President said, "This situation is unacceptable. I will not make false promises, but I will do my best to change this situation by any means possible."

He added, "When I first came here, I had a high school diploma and was a member of the Agricultural Corps. Zabol and Sistan and Baluchestan changed my perspective on life. I came from an ordinary family, and after witnessing the hardships here, my life path shifted."

Reflecting on the deteriorating conditions, Pezeshkian said, "It saddens me. Back then, Zabol was the best city in the province. I learned that I needed to live and work differently. I earned a diploma in natural sciences, studied medicine, and standing here today is because of what I experienced in Zabol."

The President emphasized that his transformation in life and career began in Zabol. "As officials, our perspective must change. For me, as an Iranian and the country's leader, accepting this situation is unacceptable. We must work alongside the people, officials, and clergy to improve this situation."

He continued, "I will not make promises I can't keep. I will not lie to you, but I will try my

best to change the current conditions. With God's help and the cooperation of the people, our efforts will bring change. When we decide not to accept this situation, God will show us the way. 'Step onto the path and ask no questions; the path itself will guide you.'"

Pezeshkian assured the audience, "We have set out on this path, and be sure that change will happen. Despite all the problems created, if we have the will, we can overcome every obstacle. Our determination is to solve your problems as much as we can."

Highlighting his commitment to change in the province, he added, "This is my second visit to Sistan and Baluchestan. Maybe it was late, but forming a government, preparing the budget, and passing it took time. This has been my first and third trip to the province, and God will help us. I had no wealthy parents or strong backing—God brought me this far, and with His strength, we will continue."

He concluded, "Rest assured that with your help, we will bring about change, and you will witness this transformation in the near future. We have always cared for you and will continue to do so."

The President arrived at Zabol Airport on Friday, as part of his two-day provincial tour. On the first day, Pezeshkian visited Chabahar in southern Sistan and Baluchestan, delivering speeches, attending the school-building movement meeting, participating in the investment development session, inspecting the Chabahar-Zahedan railway corridor, visiting Shahid Beheshti Port, reviewing southern provincial issues, and touring Tis city.

He also visited Kaloukhi village in northern Sistan and Baluchestan, where he lived during his military service 51 years ago.

## New Details on the Iran-Russia Comprehensive Agreement Unveiled

TEHRAN - The Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Russia announced that the comprehensive cooperation agreement between Iran and Russia, consisting of a preamble and 47 articles, covers all aspects of bilateral relations. The drafting of the agreement emphasized balance, independence, and respect for territorial integrity.

In an exclusive interview with IRNA, Kazem Jalali discussed the drafting and approval process of the agreement. He explained that Iran and Russia had previously signed a comprehensive cooperation agreement in 2001, which was ratified by Iran's Parliament. This agreement was valid for 20 years and expired in 2021.

Jalali added that the agreement included an automatic five-year extension clause, meaning it was extended until 2026 unless either party objected before the expiration date. However, the leaders of both countries concluded that the existing agreement was outdated and could not address the complexities of current relations. Given the significant expansion of bilateral ties over the past 24 years, they decided to update the agreement.

Jalali stated that the foreign ministers of both countries agreed that Iran would draft the new agreement. Iran prepared the draft and shared it with the Russian side. The process took about two and a half to three years, involving numerous revisions and negotiations, ultimately resulting in the finalized agreement.

The ambassador explained that the agreement encompasses all dimensions of bilateral relations, including political relations, shared perspectives on power structures, and collaboration in international forums. It also addresses economic cooperation, regional partnerships, project implementation, and both bilateral and multilateral collaborations.

Given that Iran and Russia are major energy producers, the agreement also covers cooperation in international trade and energy sectors. Jalali highlighted that the agreement includes collaboration in advanced technology, information security, and cybersecurity. Other provisions address peaceful nuclear energy cooperation, defense and military collaboration, counter-terrorism, environmental protection, the Caspian Sea, anti-money laundering



measures, and combating organized crime.

When asked whether Russia's agreement with Iran resembled its 2024 security and strategic agreements with Belarus and North Korea, Jalali clarified that Iran's agreement with Russia is fundamentally different. He emphasized Iran's commitment to independence, security, and self-reliance, expressing disinterest in bloc alignments.

He stressed that maintaining national independence is crucial for the Islamic Republic of Iran, a principle upheld for 45 years despite significant sacrifices.

Addressing concerns about maintaining balance in the agreement, Jalali assured that balance was fully considered in the drafting process. He noted that Iran now possesses strong legal expertise and stands as a powerful nation. Unlike past agreements signed under pressure, today's Iran engages from a position of strength. Notably, Iran authored and proposed the initial draft of this agreement.

He added that the agreement is not confidential. Once signed, it will be presented to the Iranian Parliament for approval, just as the 2001 agreement was reviewed and ratified article by article.

Responding to a question about recent Russian officials' remarks regarding Iran's three Persian Gulf islands, Jalali confirmed that Article 3 of the agreement explicitly includes respect for Iran's territorial integrity. He expressed the expectation that partner countries will honor this principle.

In conclusion, Jalali reiterated that the agreement comprises 47 articles and a preamble. The Iranian government will submit it to the Parliament for approval when deemed appropriate. He emphasized that the agreement establishes a framework for balanced, mutual cooperation across multiple sectors and joint efforts on the international stage.

According to the Iranian Embassy in Russia, President Masoud Pezeshkian of Iran will visit Moscow on January 18, to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin and other senior officials to sign the comprehensive strategic cooperation treaty between the two countries.

### Iran to Unveil Pars-2 Satellite During Ten-Day-Dawn Festivities



TEHRAN - The head of the Iranian Space Agency announced that the Pars-3 satellite is currently under construction.

The Pars-2 remote sensing satellite, developed by Iran Electronics Industries (Salran), will be unveiled during the Fajr Decade celebrations. Pars-2 is equipped with a black-and-white imaging capability with a resolution better than 4 meters.

Hassan Salarieh stated that Pars-2 will be officially unveiled on Space Technology Day, coinciding with February 3. He explained that the satellite features a camera capable of capturing color images with a resolution better than 4 meters and black-and-white images with a resolution better than 8 meters.

Salarieh highlighted that Pars-2 is an advanced version of the Pars-1 satellite, offering significantly expanded capabilities. It will be unveiled during the Fajr Decade celebrations on Space Technology Day.

He further noted that the Pars-1, Pars-2, and Payam satellites will collectively form a constellation of remote sensing satellites.

As Deputy Minister of Communications, Salarieh emphasized that Pars-2 can serve as one of the key platforms for Iran's remote sensing satellite operations.

The Iranian Space Agency chief also revealed that Pars-3 is currently in the design phase. This next-generation satellite will feature improved imaging precision, capable of capturing black-and-white images with a resolution better than 2 meters.

He added that these satellites, when operating together, will form a comprehensive satellite constellation designed to capture and transmit high-quality images of targeted areas in a timely manner.

Salarieh concluded that integrating the data collected from this satellite constellation will produce valuable information applicable in industries such as agriculture and environmental monitoring.

In February 2024, Iran launched the domestically developed Pars 1 satellite into the orbit.

### Yemen Strikes U.S. Aircraft Carrier in Red Sea as Israel Hits Yemeni Targets



SANAA (Dispatches) - Yemen's armed forces say they have conducted retaliatory strikes against an American aircraft carrier and several other US warships in response to Washington's support for the Israeli regime's war of genocide against the Gaza Strip and its efforts at stopping Sana'a's anti-Israeli reprisal.

In a statement on Friday, the forces said they had targeted the vessels, including the American aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman, in the northern part of the Red Sea over the previous 48 hours, using cruise missiles and explosive-laden drones.

"The operation succeeded in thwarting a new aerial attack launched against our nation from the carrier," said the statement, adding, "The attack forced the carrier and its accompanying warships to withdraw from the northern Red Sea region."

The statement pointed to Thursday's strikes against the northern side of the city of Yaffa near Tel Aviv, the Israeli regime's economic heart, in the occupied Palestinian territories, using three unmanned aerial vehicles.

The strikes likewise succeeded in hitting their intended targets, it noted.

The Yemeni troops began launching their operations against Israeli targets in October 2023 in support of Gaza and Lebanon, which have respectively come under the genocidal war and escalated deadly assaults by the Israeli regime.

The successful strikes were both preceded and followed by intensified deadly aggression by the regime, the United States, its biggest ally, and the United Kingdom against the Yemeni territory.

The forces have been responding by ramping up their strikes against strategic and sensitive Israeli and American targets, including the US warships and aircraft carriers that are deployed off Yemen's coastline.



# IRAN NEWS



## Iranian, Croatian FMs Stress Expansion of Bilateral Ties

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi and his Croatian counterpart Gordan Grlić Radman in a telephone conversation on Friday night underlined the need to expand bilateral ties between Tehran and Zagreb.

Araqchi referred to friendly relations between Iran and Croatia and said the Islamic Republic is determined to expand its ties with all countries in the western Balkans in all spheres, especially with Croatia.

The Croatian foreign minister, for his part, said his country is willing to expand ties with Iran in different areas. During the telephone conversation, the two top diplomats also discussed the latest regional and international developments.

## Call for Easing Trade Regulations Between Sistan and Baluchestan and Pakistan



TEHRAN - Seyed Mohammad Atabak, Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade, emphasized the need to simplify trade regulations between Sistan and Baluchestan and Pakistan during a meeting on "Examining Issues in Southern Sistan and Baluchestan," held today in Chahabhar with the presence of the President.

Atabak highlighted the province's strategic advantage of sharing a long border with Pakistan. He reported on his visits to Rimdan and Pishin border areas, the Konarak industrial complex, shipbuilding sites, and the cities of Rask and Sarbaz. He noted that border proximity was consistently cited as a major advantage by locals.

While the situation in Pishin was not dire, Atabak stressed that cross-border suitcase trade and border markets were sluggish, calling for regulatory reforms to boost trade with Pakistan. A meeting with local traders during this visit led to partial resolutions of some issues.

He further stated that revitalizing the Pishin border terminal and market requires focused efforts, with improved road access being a key priority. Atabak also highlighted the importance of modernizing trade infrastructure at the Rimdan border crossing, which connects to Karachi, suggesting that Rimdan could become a primary trade gateway if customs and facilities are upgraded.

In Pishin, he acknowledged public expectations from the 14th government to address pressing issues such as inadequate educational facilities—especially girls' schools—an aging healthcare system, poor rural roads, the need for a bridge linking the cement factory to the main Rask road, and high electricity tariffs. Similar concerns were echoed by residents of Rask and Sarbaz.

Atabak pointed out that Sarbaz city faces flooding risks due to a seasonal river at its entrance, necessitating flood barriers and a bridge to connect two local villages.

He also mentioned widespread public support for the "Razaq" initiative across Sistan and Baluchestan, urging prompt action on the project.

## Decline in Iranian Investments in Azerbaijan



TEHRAN - Hossein Vosoughi Irani, a member of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, has emphasized the need to strengthen political and economic relations between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan. Speaking to ILNA, he highlighted that Iran's trade balance with Azerbaijan has consistently been positive. Azerbaijan not only imports Iranian goods but also plays a strategic role in Iran's exports to the Caucasus region, particularly to the Russian Federation. Due to its significant geographical location in the South Caucasus, a large portion of Iran's exports to Russia passes through Azerbaijan, making it both a consumer market for Iran and a critical transit route to other export destinations. This has also increased its importance for Iran's border provinces.

Vosoughi further explained that Azerbaijan, due to its proximity to Iran, is primarily a consumer-driven economy. It is home to the world's oldest oil wells and has an oil-dependent, single-product economy. Historically one of the oldest oil exporters, Azerbaijan finances its imports through oil sales.

The Vice President of the Ardabil Chamber of Commerce also pointed out that Azerbaijan provides the easiest land transit route for Iranian trucks to reach the Georgian market, even though access through Armenia and Turkey is also possible.

However, Vosoughi acknowledged that economic relations are heavily influenced by political ties. He stressed that policymakers can either facilitate or hinder export development. Despite Azerbaijan's critical role in expanding Iran's trade with the Caucasus and Russia, as previously mentioned, Iran-Azerbaijan relations over the past six years have not progressed as favorably as expected. Historically, Iranians have maintained a strong position in trade with the Caucasus region.

Vosoughi also noted significant Iranian investments in Azerbaijan. Notably, major Iranian companies have established operations there, with Iran Khodro setting up an automobile manufacturing plant in the city of Shamakhi under the brand "AzSamand," producing Rana and Samand vehicles.

In addition to large corporations, small private and construction companies from Iran have also invested in Azerbaijan. However, Vosoughi observed that Iranian investment activities over the past one to two years have not been as robust as in previous years.



## Iran, Turkey Emphasize Joint Investments to Boost Agricultural Trade

TEHRAN - Expanding agricultural trade between Iran and Turkey requires joint investments, according to officials from both countries. In line with this goal, Iran's Minister of Agriculture Jihad, Gholamreza Nouri Ghezleji, along with a delegation of traders, businessmen, and economic activists, traveled to Turkey on January 10.

Nouri Ghezleji, accompanied by Samad Hassanzadeh, President of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture, and other agricultural and food industry leaders, participated in the Iran-Turkey Agricultural Business Forum. During the visit, the Iranian Minister met with Turkish officials to discuss collaboration on Turkey's largest seed gene bank. He also toured Ankara's food control laboratories and engaged in discussions on the latest genetic technologies, food security strategies, and international cooperation under agricultural diplomacy.

On January 11, the Joint Strategic Committee on Agricultural Cooperation and the Iran-Turkey Agricultural Business Forum convened in Ankara. The event was attended by Turkey's Minister of Agriculture and Forestry, Ibrahim Yumakli, Hisarcikioğlu, President of the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey, and entrepreneurs from both countries' agricultural and food sectors.

Minister Nouri Ghezleji emphasized the government's strong commitment to supporting the private sector. He highlighted the need to eliminate barriers that hinder private sector activities, production growth, and exports, particularly in agriculture and food industries.

"The government's efforts, along with the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad and diplomatic bodies, focus on strengthening relations with neighboring countries, especially Turkey. The enthusiastic participation of over 180 economic activists in this trip shows the Iranian private sector's readiness to take firm steps forward," Nouri Ghezleji stated.

He stressed the importance of advancing Iran's agricultural exports, particularly tribal products, by first modernizing the food and agricultural packaging industry and facilitating export terminal permits. He also expressed support for private sector participation in international agricultural and food exhibitions.

Nouri Ghezleji pointed out ongoing efforts to resolve customs challenges faced by Iranian exporters in Turkey. He asserted that the 14th government is committed to upholding legal frameworks and preventing sudden regulatory changes that could harm exporters' credibility. Export policies will be transparently communicated to the private sector.

Highlighting the role of private and cooperative sectors in revitalizing Iran's economy, the Minister stated, "The government and the President fully believe in private sector engagement. While traditional government systems may lack familiarity with productivity, the private sector, valuing investment, inherently seeks and implements efficiency."

He noted that Iran's 32% growth in agricultural exports over the past nine months reflects the private sector's efforts. "All barriers to private sector activities, production growth, and exports must be removed. We remain steadfast in supporting private enterprises."

Nouri Ghezleji acknowledged the mutual determination of Iran and Turkey

for effective bilateral cooperation, particularly in agriculture. He revealed that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs has coordinated to involve agricultural experts in economic negotiations with countries that have significant agricultural ties with Iran.

Samad Hassanzadeh, President of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture, identified reducing management time and transportation costs for food and agricultural products as crucial for increasing trade between Iran and Turkey. He remarked, "Agriculture is a vital sector due to its direct connection with national food security, and every country pursues fundamental strategies in this area. Collaborative discussions and partnerships between Iran and Turkey, both equipped with global expertise and technologies, can yield significant advancements in their food industries."

Hassanzadeh proposed establishing joint research centers to develop agricultural technologies such as modern irrigation methods, advanced cultivation and harvesting techniques, improved seeds, and pest control systems. "Such initiatives can enhance productivity and product quality," he said.

He emphasized that Iran and Turkey should adopt a long-term, strategic approach to agricultural cooperation. Citing Iran's achievements in seed technology, he stressed the importance of expanding scientific and educational collaboration. "Iran and Turkey can be both competitors and partners in agriculture. A strategic and friendly approach will benefit both nations."

Hassanzadeh advocated for creating supply chains and joint investments in specialized agricultural products, which would improve quality, lower costs, and boost exports. He highlighted the potential for both countries to leverage each other's expertise in marketing and exporting agricultural products globally. He also called for the removal of barriers related to joint agricultural standards through ministerial efforts.

To facilitate trade, Hassanzadeh emphasized the need to modernize customs procedures, optimize transportation infrastructure, and enhance coordination among relevant institutions to ease truck traffic across borders. He confirmed the private sector's readiness to invest in infrastructure and improve logistics services.

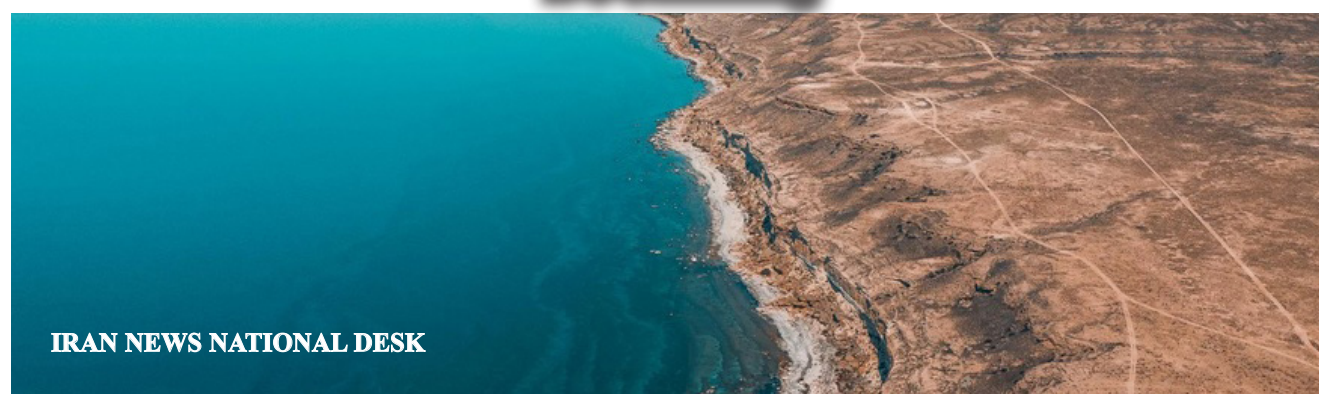
He also addressed recent challenges in fuel supply and confrontational policies affecting the logistics sector, urging authorities to halt such measures to prevent damage to the industry's workforce. "Smooth border operations and reduced costs are essential to supporting this sector."

Calling for collaboration, Hassanzadeh invited Turkish officials and business leaders to work together towards a brighter future in Iran-Turkey economic relations. "With solidarity and joint efforts, we can usher in a new era of economic cooperation, especially in agriculture and food industries."

Mohammad Hassan Habibollahzadeh, Iran's Ambassador to Ankara, praised the scale of economic engagement between the two nations. He highlighted that over 20% of Iran-Turkey trade involves agriculture. In the first nine months of 2024, trade volume between Iran and Turkey exceeded \$14 billion.

This significant economic interaction underscores the importance of joint investments in agricultural development to strengthen bilateral trade relations.

## Water Resources in the Caspian Sea Declining



TEHRAN - Sahar Tajbakhsh, Head of the Meteorological Organization, warned in an interview with ILNA about the serious threat of expanding arid and semi-arid zones in Iran due to drought. She stated, "The current water stress in the country is alarming. We have already lost many wetlands besides Lake Urmia, particularly in southern regions, Fars Province, Sistan and Baluchestan, Kerman Province, and near the Kerman border."

She explained that part of this issue stems from water supply at the source. "When upstream water sources are not maintained, lakes cannot remain permanent and rely solely on rainfall for moisture. It's essential to secure upstream water resources; otherwise, these lakes will dry up."

The Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development added, "For instance, when water from rivers feeding into Lake Urmia is diverted for other uses, the lake doesn't receive the necessary water supply."

Regarding the restoration of Lake Urmia, Tajbakhsh emphasized, "Some solutions are managerial. Agricultural lands surrounding Lake Urmia must be managed properly. Currently, many inflowing water

sources are blocked, and we are relying solely on rainfall, which is inadequate."

She continued, "Apart from occasional exceptions, rainfall has been low in recent years, and Iran has faced consecutive droughts. Therefore, the lake hasn't received the necessary water. Additionally, rising temperatures have worsened the situation."

The Meteorological Organization's head stressed, "If this trend continues without serious recovery efforts—especially in resource management—Lake Urmia's condition will deteriorate further. I can't say it will completely dry up, but the situation will certainly worsen."

Tajbakhsh also addressed the Caspian Sea's status, saying, "Part of the Caspian's water issue is due to supply shortages. We don't have complete data on its water resources, but reports suggest that part of its supply from Russia has been disrupted. Climate change also plays a role. Some water from the Volga River has been cut off, reducing the Caspian Sea's water levels. This issue isn't limited to the Volga; other water sources have also been blocked, significantly impacting the sea's water level."

## Iran's Zero Share in Gas Corridors



TEHRAN - Seyed Mehdi Hosseini discussed whether Iran could enter the European gas market through Turkmenistan's gas swap, given Russia's reduced gas exports to Europe. He asserted that Russia would never allow any country, except major powers like the U.S. with its LNG exports, to enter the European market due to its inability to compete.

Hosseini noted that Iran lacks surplus gas due to extensive domestic gas distribution, resulting in depleted reserves and no capacity for exports. He stressed that Iran should only consider gas exports once domestic needs are fully met and surplus production is available.

The former Deputy Minister of Oil for International Affairs emphasized that even under sanctions, Iran could have attracted investment to extract oil and gas for both domestic use and export, just as it did during peak sanctions when billions of dollars flowed into the country. However, Iran failed to capitalize on this, leaving it dependent on Turkmenistan for gas swaps.

He explained that while Turkmenistan can export gas, it is also willing to supply Iran because Iran pays in dollars—unlike Russia, which trades gas for goods. Meanwhile, several active gas corridors transport Turkmenistan's gas through Russia to Azerbaijan, which then exports its Shah Deniz gas and four other major fields to Europe. These corridors were projects Iran had been working on for 20 years, but U.S. opposition blocked their completion. If implemented, Iran could have been a major player today.

Hosseini stressed that if Iran aims to both produce and export gas, it must adopt a precise strategy with sound economic planning and efficient execution. Currently, Iran struggles with inconsistent gas delivery to Turkey, Iraq, and even its domestic industries and petrochemicals, eroding global trust.

He highlighted that Iran must build trust in the market by ensuring reliable and committed gas production. A trustworthy supply would encourage even foreign investments.

Hosseini criticized Iran's failure to act when the Russia-Ukraine war disrupted Russian gas flows to Europe. He said Iran should have developed its gas fields with a priority on domestic needs and prepared for exports. However, no concrete export plans have been made even after several years.

As the architect of Iran's oil contracts, Hosseini argued that if Iran can import gas from other countries, it should prioritize exporting to neighboring states. For example, despite a ready pipeline to Pakistan, Iran has not resolved pricing disputes. Some insist on pricing Pakistani exports the same as Turkey, even though Pakistan, transitioning from fuel oil to gas, seeks competitive pricing. This pricing rigidity risks repeating the Crescent contract controversy.

## Direct Shipping Line Between Iran and Oman Essential for Expanding Bilateral Trade



TEHRAN - The President of the Iran-Oman Joint Chamber of Commerce emphasized that establishing a direct shipping line between Iran and Oman is a crucial step for strengthening trade relations between the two nations.

Jamal Razaghi highlighted that Oman has zero tariffs with 61 countries. Based on existing agreements, if Iranian manufacturers complete at least 30% of their production chain in Oman, they can benefit from zero-tariff exports from Oman and market their products as Omani goods.

Speaking during a meeting between the Iran-Oman Joint Chamber of Commerce and the head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization ahead of the Joint Commission meeting in Muscat, Razaghi stressed the significance of commercial exchanges between the two countries. He underscored that a direct shipping line between the Sultanate of Oman and the Islamic Republic of Iran is vital for advancing bilateral trade.

In the meeting, Alireza Peymanpak, the head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization, stated that the organization serves as a hub for traders and is fully prepared to collaborate with Iranian merchants across all commercial sectors.

He also highlighted the importance of stronger cooperation between the private sector and the Trade Promotion Organization, particularly in enhancing trade relations with Oman, a friendly and neighboring country.

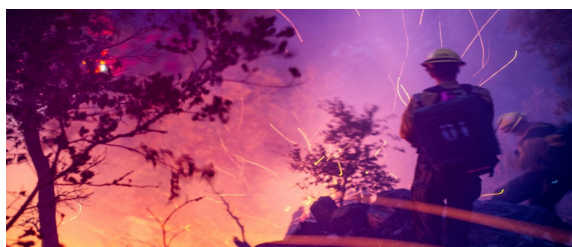


### U.S. House Votes to Sanction International Criminal Court Over Israel

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. House of Representatives voted to sanction the International Criminal Court in protest at its arrest warrants for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former defense minister over Israel's campaign in Gaza. The vote was 243 to 140 in favor of the "Illegitimate Court Counteraction Act," which would sanction any foreigner who investigates, arrests, detains or prosecutes U.S. citizens or those of an allied country, including Israel, who are not members of the court. Forty-five Democrats joined 198 Republicans in backing the bill. No Republican voted against it. "America is passing this law because a kangaroo court is seeking to arrest the prime minister of our great ally, Israel," Representative Brian Mast, Republican chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, said in a House speech before the vote.



### Firefighters Gain Ground in Battling Los Angeles Wildfires as Intense Winds Ease



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - A pause in the fierce winds that super-charged the ring of wildfires that devastated Los Angeles this week helped crews make some progress in controlling the infernos on Friday, but strong gusts returning next week could resuscitate the flames. The fires, which have devastated Los Angeles neighborhoods on the east and west sides of the sprawling metropolis, have so far killed 10 people and destroyed nearly 10,000 structures, with those figures expected to grow. "We are doing everything we can to bring the situation under control, and success has been reported," Los Angeles Mayor Karen Bass said at a news conference. "We know that we're going to have a possible increase in the force of the winds at the beginning of next week, and getting Los Angeles prepared - doing everything we can to save lives - that is our No.1 job." President Joe Biden said federal officials expect the winds to remain a threat at least until early next week. Wind conditions in the Los Angeles area will improve Friday through the weekend to about 20 mph, with gusts between 35 mph and 50 mph, according to the National Weather Service, a far cry from days ago when wind gusts blasted as high as 80 mph. Even with dangerous "red flag" wind conditions expected until Friday afternoon, any periods of easing would allow more crucial support from aircraft dropping water and fire retardant on the flaming hills. "It's not as gusty so that should help firefighters, hopefully," NWS meteorologist Allison Santorelli said, adding that conditions were still critical with low humidity and dry vegetation. "There's a bit of good news, if there can be." Farther south in San Diego, winds will pick up, with sustained winds of 40 mph and gusts up to 70 mph, creating dangerous fire conditions there over the weekend, she added. As of early Friday, at least three major fires were still burning in Los Angeles. In addition to the Palisades and Eaton fires, a blaze broke out on Thursday near Calabasas, a wealthy enclave home to numerous celebrities and gated communities. The so-called Kenneth Fire, which expanded to 960 acres (388 hectares) in a matter of hours, was 35% under control by early Friday, fire officials said.

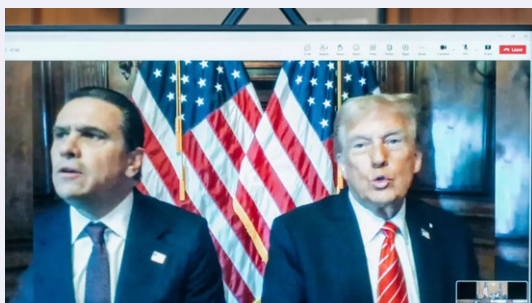
### Gaza Death Toll 40% Higher Than Recorded



GAZA (Dispatches) - Research published in The Lancet medical journal on Friday estimates that the death toll in Gaza during the first nine months of the Israel-Hamas war was around 40 percent higher than recorded by the Palestinian territory's health ministry. The number of dead in Gaza has become a matter of bitter debate since Israel launched its military campaign against Hamas in response to the Palestinian militant group's unprecedented October 7, 2023 attack. Up to June 30 last year, the health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza reported a death toll of 37,877 in the war. However the new peer-reviewed study used data from the ministry, an online survey and social media obituaries to estimate that there were between 55,298 and 78,525 deaths from traumatic injuries in Gaza by that time. The study's best death toll estimate was 64,260, which would mean the health ministry had under-reported the number of deaths to that point by 41 percent. That toll represented 2.9 percent of Gaza's pre-war population, "or approximately one in 35 inhabitants," the study said. The UK-led group of researchers estimated that 59 percent of the deaths were women, children and the elderly. The toll was only for deaths from traumatic injuries, so did not include deaths from a lack of health care or food, or the thousands of missing believed to be buried under rubble. AFP is unable to independently verify the death toll. The estimate does not include indirect deaths from a lack of food, healthcare or sanitation -- which have all stricken Gaza. On Thursday, Gaza's health ministry said that 46,006 people had died over the full 15 months of war. In Israel, the 2023 attack by Hamas resulted in the deaths of 1,208 people, mostly civilians, according to an AFP tally based on official Israeli figures. Israel has repeatedly questioned the credibility of the Gaza health ministry's figures, but the United Nations have said they are reliable.

The researchers used a statistical method called "capture-recapture" that has previously been used to estimate the death toll in conflicts around the world. The analysis used data from three different lists, the first provided by the Gaza health ministry of the bodies identified in hospitals or morgues. The second list was from an online survey launched by the health ministry in which Palestinians reported the deaths of relatives. The third was sourced from obituaries posted on social media platforms such as X, Instagram, Facebook and Whatsapp, when the identity of the deceased could be verified. The estimated death toll represented 2.9 percent of Gaza's pre-war population. "We only kept in the analysis those who were confirmed dead by their relatives or confirmed dead by the morgues and the hospital," lead study author Zeina Jamaluddin, an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, told AFP. The researchers scoured the lists, searching for duplicates. "Then we looked at the overlaps between the three lists, and based on the overlaps, you can come up with a total estimation of the population that was killed," Jamaluddin said. Patrick Ball, a statistician at the US-based Human Rights Data Analysis Group not involved in the research, has used capture-recapture methods to estimate death tolls for conflicts in Guatemala, Kosovo, Peru and Colombia. Ball told AFP the well-tested technique has been used for centuries and that the researchers had reached "a good estimate" for Gaza. Kevin McConway, a professor of applied statistics at Britain's Open University, told AFP there was "inevitably a lot of uncertainty" when making estimates from incomplete data. But he said it was "admirable" that the researchers had used three other statistical analysis approaches to check their estimates.

### Trump Sentenced in Hush Money Case But Avoids Jail Time or Fines



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - President-elect Donald Trump was sentenced Friday in his hush money case, but the judge declined to impose any punishment, an outcome that cements his conviction while freeing him to return to the White House unencumbered by the threat of a jail term or a fine. The punishment-free judgment marks a quiet end to an extraordinary case that for the first time put a former president and major presidential candidate in a courtroom as a criminal defendant. The case was the only one of four criminal indictments that has gone to trial and possibly the only one that ever will. Manhattan Judge Juan M. Merchan could have sentenced the 78-year-old Republican to up to four years in prison. Instead, he chose a sentence that sidestepped thorny constitutional issues by effectively ending the case but assured that Trump will become the first person convicted of a felony to assume the presidency. Unlike his trial last year, when Trump brought allies to the courthouse and addressed waiting reporters outside, the former president did not appear in person Friday, instead making a brief virtual appearance from his home in Palm Beach, Florida.

### Western Powers Reportedly Warn Syria Over Foreign Jihadists in Army

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - U.S., French and German envoys have warned Syria's new Islamist rulers that their appointment of foreign jihadists to senior military posts is a security concern and bad for their image as they try to forge ties with foreign states, two sources familiar with the matter said. The warning from the U.S., part of Western efforts to get Syria's new leaders to reconsider the move, was delivered in a meeting between U.S. envoy Daniel Rubinstein and Syria's de facto ruler Ahmed al-Sharaa on Wednesday at the presidential palace overlooking Damascus, a U.S. official said. "These appointments will not help them with their reputation in the U.S.," the official said. The foreign ministers of France and Germany, Jean-Noel Barrot and Annalena Baerbock, also broached the issue of foreign fighters drafted into the army during their meeting with Sharaa on Jan. 3, an official aware of the talks said. Reuters reported the appointments on Dec. 30. The envoys' comments on the appointments have not previously been reported. Sharaa's armed group, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, led an offensive that ousted former president Bashar al-Assad on Dec. 8 and has since installed a government and disbanded the Assad-era army. It is now making efforts to reconstitute the armed forces. Late last year, it made nearly 50 appointments including at least six foreign fighters, among them Chinese and central Asian Uyghurs, a Turkish citizen, an Egyptian and a Jordanian, Reuters reported at the time. Three were given the rank of brigadier-general and at least three others the rank of colonel, a Syrian military source said. HTS and allied groups have hundreds of foreign fighters in their ranks who came to Syria during the country's 13-year civil war, many of them



followers of hardline interpretations of Islam. Foreign capitals generally view foreign fighters as a key security threat as they suspect that some may seek to carry out attacks in their home countries after gaining experience abroad. Officials of the new Syrian administration have said foreign fighters made sacrifices to help overthrow Assad and would have a place in Syria, adding they could be granted citizenship. The Syrian defense ministry did not respond to a request for comment. The German foreign ministry did not comment. A State Department spokesperson said Washington is in a continuing dialogue with the interim authorities in Damascus. "Discussions have been constructive and have covered a wide range of domestic and international issues," the spokesperson said, adding there has

been "tangible progress on counter-terrorism priorities, including ISIS." During the war, some foreign fighters in Syria formed their own armed groups, while others joined established formations such as the ultra hardline Islamic State as it rampaged across Iraq and Syria before being beaten back. Other groups of foreign jihadists joined HTS, which disavowed previous links to al-Qaeda and Islamic State and fought bloody battles against them before going on to spearhead the lightning advance that toppled Assad. The U.S., European and Arab Persian Gulf States are engaging with the new administration to try to push it towards an inclusive political transition and also to seek cooperation on counter-terrorism and limiting Iranian influence in the region. But they remain wary of how the rebels-turned rulers will manage the country and have questions over how they will bring together disparate groups with varying views on the direction the new Syria should take. The U.S. official and a Western source said that Damascus explained the appointments of foreign fighters by saying they could not simply be sent back home or abroad where they may face persecution, and it was better to keep them in Syria. The U.S. official said authorities also explained that these people had helped rid Syria of Assad and some had been in the country for more than 10 years and so were part of society. Diplomats said the U.S., European and Arab countries, particularly Egypt and Jordan, opposed the appointments because they suspected the moves could send encouraging signals to transnational jihadists. Those appointed to the post of brigadier-general include Jordanian citizen Abdul Rahman Hussein al-Khatib and Chinese Uyghur militant Abdulaziz Dawood Khudaberdi, also known as Zahid.

### Venezuela's Maduro Sworn In for Third Presidential Term

CARACAS (Dispatches) - Venezuela's President Nicolas Maduro was sworn in Friday for a third six-year term, shunned internationally over claims of election fraud and repression but bolstered by a loyal military. Maduro took the oath before parliament, vowing his next term would be a "period of peace", a day after thousands took to the streets to protest his alleged power grab. Opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, who came out of hiding to lead a demonstration in Caracas Thursday, was briefly detained after the rally according to her team - reigniting international condemnation of Maduro's alleged vote steal and cowering of critics. The government denied arresting her. US President-elect Donald Trump on Thursday branded Machado and Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia - the man who took her place on the ballot and is widely accepted to have beaten Maduro in elections on July 28 - as "freedom fighters". Venezuelan opposition leader Maria Corina Machado was briefly detained after leading a protest in Caracas, her team said. They "should not be harmed, and MUST stay SAFE and ALIVE", he wrote on his Truth Social network. During his first term in office, Trump tightened punitive measures against the Maduro government for anti-democratic actions. The sanctions were partly lifted, then reimposed, by his successor Joe Biden and may well be hardened in Trump's next term. Ecuador denounced what it called the Maduro "dictatorship", while Spain expressed "total condemnation" of Machado's detention, albeit brief. Venezuelan opposition leader Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia has been on an international



tour seeking to pile pressure on the president to relinquish power. Colombia, whose leftist President Gustavo Petro is historically an ally of Maduro, also condemned the "systematic harassment" of Machado, 57. Citing "an international conspiracy to disturb Venezuelans' peace", Freddy Bernal, governor of the frontier state of Tachira, said the border with Colombia was closed on Friday and will reopen Monday. Machado's team reported on X that she had been "violently intercepted" as she was leaving Thursday's protest, and claimed shots had been fired in the vicinity of her motorcycle convoy. She was then detained and forced to record a number of videos before being let go, it said. Machado earlier made a defiant speech to thousands of supporters in central Caracas, sending a message to the government that: "We are not afraid." There was also a protest in Paris attended by Machado's daughter Ana Corina Sosa and dozens of supporters. Government opponents have reported a new wave of repression ahead of Maduro's swearing-in, including the arrest of another opposition presidential candidate, the head of a press freedom NGO, and Gonzalez Urrutia's son-in-law. The United Nations voiced alarm this week at reports of arbitrary detention and intimidation. More than 2,400 people were arrested, 28 killed and about 200 injured in protests that met Maduro's claim of election victory last year.





## LaVine Goes Off Again as Bulls Blast Wizards

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Zach LaVine scored 33 points and Nikola Vucevic added 23 points with 13 rebounds as the Chicago Bulls extended their home winning streak to four games with a 138-105 victory Friday over the Washington Wizards.

Coby White and Jalen Smith each scored 15 points and Josh Giddey added 12 points with 13 rebounds and seven assists for Chicago. Lonzo Ball and Talen Horton-Tucker also had 12 points each as the Bulls won for the fifth time in the past seven games overall and avenged a 125-107 loss at Washington on New Year's Day.

Chicago shot 55.8 percent from the floor and went 23-of-49 (46.9 percent) from 3-point range, while LaVine reached 30 points for a career-high fifth consecutive game and for the 11th time this season. It was LaVine's ninth 30-point game since the start of December.

Jordan Poole scored 22 points for the Wizards and went 6-of-9 from 3-point range after missing the past three games and five of the last seven contests with a left hip contusion.

Jared Butler scored 18 points, Kyshawn George added 12 and Alexandre Sarr had 11 points with 11 rebounds for the Wizards, who lost their fifth consecutive game.

The Bulls dictated the game early, taking their first double-digit lead at 31-21 with 1:17 remaining in the first quarter and going up 36-26 through one period. The Wizards fought back and were within 43-41 with 7:40 remaining in the first half.

Chicago went on a 15-4 run to take a 58-45 lead with just over three minutes remaining in the half and led 68-58 at the break. LaVine scored 18 points during the first half and Poole had 17 for Washington.

The Bulls took complete control in the third quarter, outscoring the Wizards 41-24 by shooting 55.6 percent in the period and getting 13 points from Vucevic. Chicago pushed its lead to 31 at 121-90 with 7:48 remaining on a 3-pointer from LaVine and cruised to its largest margin of victory this season.

The Bulls were without Torrey Craig (leg) and Ayo Dosunmu (calf). Marvin Bagley III (knee) was out for the Wizards along with Malcolm Brogdon (foot).

Meanwhile Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 39 points and Isaiah Joe had a season-high 31 points off the bench Friday night for the visiting Oklahoma City Thunder, who routed the New York Knicks 126-101.

The Western Conference-leading Thunder, whose franchise-record 15-game winning streak was snapped in a 129-122 loss to the Eastern Conference-leading Cleveland Cavaliers on Wednesday, led by as many as 30 points in the second half as they completed a season sweep of the Knicks. Oklahoma City earned a 117-107 home win over New York on Jan. 3.

Gilgeous-Alexander scored at least 30 points for the 22nd time this season. Joe finished two points shy of his career high and logged the most points by a Thunder reserve since Dennis Schroder had 31 points against the Orlando Magic on Jan. 22, 2020.

Jalen Williams added 19 points for the Thunder.

Karl-Anthony Towns (23 points, 10 rebounds) and Josh Hart (16 points, 13 rebounds) each had a double-double for the Knicks, who have lost four of five since a nine-game winning streak. Jalen Brunson scored 27 points while going 12-of-12 from the free-throw line, and Cameron Payne added 11 points.

The teams got off to an ice-cold start by combining to miss 14 of their first 15 shots while scoring two points apiece over the first 4 1/2 minutes. The teams then scored 32 points combined over a five-minute span before the Thunder began taking control by scoring 12 unanswered points in the final 2:07 to expand their lead to 31-17.

Gilgeous-Alexander and Joe combined for nine points in the surge.

Williams opened the second with a floater for the Thunder, who went ahead by 20 points for the first time at 44-24 on Joe's three-point play. Joe's 3-pointer with 1:47 remaining gave Oklahoma City its biggest first-half lead at 65-37 before the visitors entered the locker room with a 70-43 lead.

The Knicks got no closer than 22 in the second half. The Thunder opened a 28-point lead seven times in the third before leading by 30 twice in the fourth.

## Finals Set in Adelaide, Auckland



SYDNEY (Dispatches) - No. 2 seed Sebastian Korda and No. 5 Felix Auger-Aliassime of Canada will meet in the final at the Adelaide International in Australia.

Korda defeated Serbia's Miomir Kecmanovic 6-3, 7-6 (4) and Auger-Aliassime upended top-seeded Tommy Paul 7-6 (3), 3-6, 6-4 in Friday's semifinals. Auger-Aliassime has won two of three previous matches against Korda.

While Korda did not face a break point in his 79-minute triumph, Auger-Aliassime saved eight of 12 - three in the deciding set - during a match that lasted 2 hours and 45 minutes. Paul saved three match points in the final game before succumbing.

At age 38, unseeded Frenchman Gael Monfils made history by becoming the second-oldest player to reach an ATP Tour Final since 1990. Croatia's Ivo Karlovic was 39 when he reached the final at Pune (India) in 2019.

Monfils held off 19-year-old Nishesh Basavareddy 7-6 (5), 6-4 in the semifinals in Auckland, New Zealand, and will meet Belgian qualifier Zizou Bergs in Saturday's championship match. Monfils tallied seven aces and saved all five break points against the unseeded American.

Bergs outlasted No. 7 seed Nuno Borges of Portugal for a 6-2, 3-6, 7-5 victory in 2 hours, 16 minutes. Bergs struck six aces and converted six of 13 break chances. The players exchanged five service breaks in the last seven games of the match.

## Sinner's CAS Hearing to Start on April 16

PARIS (Dispatches) - World number one Jannik Sinner's doping hearing will start on April 16, the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) said.

Italian Sinner failed two drug tests in March for low levels of the anabolic androgenic steroid clostebol but was cleared by an independent tribunal in August after it accepted his explanation of unintentional contamination.

However, the World Anti-Doping Agency appealed that decision at CAS in September, leaving the Italian still facing the possibility of being banned for up to two years.

"No parties requested a public hearing and it will be conducted behind closed doors," CAS said in a statement about the two-day hearing.

Tennis was rocked last year when men's world number one Jannik Sinner tested positive for banned substance clostebol but escaped a ban after an independent tribunal hearing found that he bore no fault or negligence.

Sinner's explanation that he had been inadvertently contaminated with the substance by his physiotherapist during a massage was accepted, although the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) has appealed against the decision.

Earlier on Friday, Sinner said he was still in the dark about the proceedings as he is preparing for his Australian Open



title defence in Melbourne.

Meanwhile fear of ingesting a contaminated substance led Britain's Emma Raducanu to turn down treatment for an insect bite ahead of the Australian Open which starts this weekend.

Speaking ahead of her opening round match against Russian 26th seed Ekaterina Alexandrova, the former U.S. Open champion said recent high-profile doping cases had made her wary.

"I got really badly bitten by I don't know what, like ants, mosquitoes, something. I'm allergic, I guess," Raducanu said at her pre-tournament media conference.

"They flared up and swelled up really a lot. Someone was giving me this antiseptic spray, natural, to try to ease the bites. I didn't want to take it. I didn't want to spray it."

"I was just left there with my swollen ankle and hand. I was like: 'I'm just going to tough it out because I don't want to risk it.' It's obviously a concern on our mind."

## Leverkusen Stun Hosts Dortmund 3-2 to Close on Leaders Bayern



DORTMUND (Dispatches) - Champions Bayer Leverkusen battled past hosts Borussia Dortmund 3-2 with two goals from Patrik Schick on Friday to move within a point of leaders Bayern Munich with a sixth straight league win.

In a frenetic opening the visitors struck three times in the first 19 minutes as they enjoyed a perfect start to the year with the league resuming following a three-week winter break.

Dortmund, who twice cut the deficit, had fielded a largely makeshift team due to flu and injuries in what was their first home loss of the season.

A last-minute backline had to be cobbled together after defenders Waldemar Anton, Emre Can, Ramy Bensebaini and Nico Schlotterbeck were all ruled out along with long-time injured Niklas Suele.

It showed instantly with Leverkusen winning possession after some high pressing and Nathan Tella completing the move to give the visitors the lead after 25 seconds.

Dortmund had no time to regroup with Leverkusen scoring again in the eighth minute and striker Schick sliding in to complete a textbook counter-attack.

The hosts briefly recovered and pulled a goal back through Jamie Gittens four minutes later but Schick restored Leverkusen's two-goal cushion in the 19th with a fine finish at the far post after yet another quick break.

The Czech international, who had also scored four times in the last game of the year against Freiburg on Dec. 21, has now bagged 11 league goals this season.

The hosts hardly had any chances in the second half but were thrown a lifeline when Serhou Guirassy converted a 79th minute penalty.

Leverkusen survived late Dortmund pressure thanks mainly to some superb defending by Edmond Tapsoba and Piero Hincapie, to hold on and move up to 35 points, one behind leaders Bayern, who travel to Borussia Muenchengladbach.

Dortmund's first home loss of the campaign kept them anchored in sixth on 25 points.

## Villa Rally to Beat Potter's West Ham in FA Cup Third Round

BIRMINGHAM (Dispatches) - Aston Villa came from behind to defeat West Ham United 2-1 in the FA Cup third round on Friday after a controversial goal from Amadou Onana and a strike from Morgan Rogers denied Graham Potter a victory in his first game as the visitors' manager.

A day after Potter was unveiled as Julen Lopetegui's replacement, Lucas Paqueta got West Ham on the scoresheet in the ninth minute when Crysensio Summerville played a square ball across the box that the Brazilian slotted into the net.

But Villa grew into the game and Onana equalised in the 71st from a disputed corner, with Lukasz Fabianski saving Ian Maatsen's shot before the midfielder hammered home.

West Ham argued the corner should not have been given and television replays showed they had a case, with Onana firing the ball over the goal line with no visiting players near it.

"We're surprised it was a corner. But the referee has given it. There's nothing we can do now," Potter told the BBC.

Rogers popped up with the winner for the hosts five minutes later, slotting Ollie Watkins' square pass into the corner.

"It shows a lot of belief in the changing room that we know we can come back against anyone," Rogers told ITV.

Villa were knocked out by Chelsea in the fourth round last year but have now reached that stage in consecutive campaigns for the first



time since 2014-15 and 2015-16.

"I am very happy because we played a very good match," said Villa boss Unai Emery. "We're getting stronger and more imposing. We finished strong. To win is very important for the confidence."

Injuries were the story of a mostly dull first half, with West Ham losing forward Niclas Fullkrug to a hamstring issue after 16 minutes before Villa's Ross Barkley limped off with an apparent ankle problem seven minutes later.

The Hammers did deservedly go in 1-0 ahead at the interval but Villa stepped it up after the break to take the lead and Jacob Ramsey was also unlucky to hit the post late on.

West Ham striker Danny Ings did have two terrific chances in added time but his first shot was blocked by Rogers and he could not sort his feet out for the second, swiping the ball high and wide while falling as Potter buried his head in his hands.

"The players have had a big week, a difficult week," said the former Chelsea boss. "We need to recover and refresh."

In the night's other tie, League One (third-tier) Wycombe progressed with a 2-0 home win over Championship side Portsmouth with first-half goals from Brandon Hanlan and Sonny Bradley.