

Cadets From Eight Countries, Who Are Taking a National Defense Course at the National Defense University Based in Tehran, Have Visited Abu Musa Island and the Strait of Hormuz in Southern Iran

# IRAN NEWS

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## Iran to Invest \$120b to Boost Oil and Gas Production by End of 7th Development Plan



TEHRAN – Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad announced a \$120 billion investment plan to increase oil and gas production by the end of the country's Seventh Development Plan.

During the Deputy Ministers' Council meeting attended by First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref, Paknejad emphasized the pivotal role of the oil ministry in Iran's economy, particularly amid economic sanctions referred to as an economic war.

Paknejad highlighted the need for comprehensive support from all government branches for the oil sector to succeed in leading economic development. He acknowledged the government's effective support since the 14th administration began, enabling significant short-term achievements in the oil industry.

Paknejad identified managing winter fuel supply as the first major challenge. He criticized the term "energy imbalance" as a euphemism for the country's severe energy shortage. Despite initial concerns over liquid fuel reserves, particularly for power plants, efforts by the oil sector have substantially improved the situation.

Paknejad praised the oil industry's performance in the 14th administration, noting a daily increase of 60,000 barrels in crude oil production and an additional 30 million cubic meters in raw gas production. He attributed part of this growth to innovative operational strategies, including recent exploitation of gas wells in the "Di" field in Fars Province, yielding 3-4 million cubic meters of raw gas daily. Similarly, gas production in the "Khangiran" field increased by 1.5-2 million cubic meters per day.

The minister reported a daily increase of 10 million liters in gasoline and 11 million liters in diesel production, reducing the need for costly imports. Efficient gas transmission from southern to northern regions has also prevented power outages, a common issue in previous years.

Paknejad stressed the critical importance of the South Pars Gas Field's pressure-boosting megaproject, requiring an \$18 billion investment. This project is vital to sustaining gas production and should be prioritized by the government.

## Dozens of Iranian Satellites Ready for Launch



TEHRAN - Dr. Hassan Salarieh, the head of the Iranian Space Agency, in an interview answered questions regarding Iran's space industry.

During the interview, topics such as the current status of Iran's satellites in orbit, satellites under construction, the progress of Iran's space industry according to strategic documents, launch-ready satellites, the Chabahar Spaceport, the bio-space project, and plans for human space missions were discussed.

Dr. Salarieh addressed the question, "Which satellites does Iran currently have in orbit, and which are under construction?" He explained that the Shahid Soleimani satellite constellation is a narrowband network designed as one of Iran's key satellite projects to advance the Internet of Things (IoT). Currently, 20 satellites in this series are under construction. Additionally, the Research satellite series—Research 1, 2, 3, and 4—are either in the tendering process or already under development. For example, the construction of Research 1, 2, and 4 has begun. Iran is also developing the Pars 2 and Pars 3 satellites, along with two radar satellites, Radar 1 and Radar 2.

Salarieh highlighted that several research satellites are nearing launch, notably Nahid 2 and Nahid 3, both of which have been completed and are launch-ready. Iran has also planned and designed various telecommunications and sensing satellites set for imminent launches. The Shahid Soleimani constellation is expected to have a test launch in 2024 (Iranian year 1403) to address any orbital issues, with its main deployment scheduled for late 2025 (Iranian year 1404).



## Iranian Army to Take Delivery of 1,000 Drones, New Destroyer

TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian Army commander says the force will take delivery of a new destroyer as well as 1,000 strategic drones in the coming days.

Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, deputy chief of the Iranian Army for Coordination, said on Sunday that the destroyer will join the naval force while the drones will be inducted into the Army's Drone Unit.

"Stealth, long range, pinpoint accuracy and high destructive power are among the features of these drones, which will be added to the Islamic Republic of Iran's Army in the coming days," Sayyari said.

As for the new destroyer, he said, "The addition could significantly bolster the combat capability of the Navy."

Sayyari also said a large number of upgraded vessels and flight units will be added to the Navy in the near future.

Commander of the Iranian Army's Ground Force Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari said earlier that the new military equipment joining the Army has capabilities like maneuverability, precision, and smartness, and is network-based, which will be used to counter any type of threat.

Iran's Armed Forces, including the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) and the country's Army, have been continuously enhancing their military hardware and combat readiness in line with the directives of Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

The forces have vowed to defend the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity in the face of the threats by the Iranian nation's enemies.

Meanwhile the Iranian military has launched new exercises in the country's western and northern air defense zones including Fordow and Khondab which host uranium enrichment and heavy water facilities.

The drills - dubbed Eqtedar or "might" in Farsi - began on Sunday in completely real battlefield environments, with the air defense force of the Army playing a central role under the command of

the country's integrated air defense network, IRNA reported.

It features offensive and defensive missions by missile, radar, electronic warfare, electronic intelligence and reconnaissance units, as well as deception systems of the Iranian Army's Air Defense Force, along with the Air Force's manned and unmanned aircraft.

During the drills, the Air Defense Force will defend critical sites against simulated aerial and missile attacks.

It will also conduct reconnaissance, identification, interception, and engagement operations against mocked enemy and repel offensive assaults.

In the first phase of the exercises, the Air Defense Force destroyed invading unmanned aircraft using Khordad 15 and Talash systems.

It also practiced passive defense scenarios and tactical movement of defense systems, in addition to testing the mobility and fire tactics of missile systems.

Meanwhile, an aerial interception operation took place using the manned aircraft belonging to the Islamic Republic of Iran Air Force.

The exercises aim to evaluate the operational effectiveness and combat readiness of the air defense systems against potential enemy assaults.

They also seek to assess both tactical and technical performance in battlefield conditions, as well as the practice of passive defense for air defense systems.

The drills are part of nationwide exercises, the first phase of which began last week in the air defense zone of the Natanz nuclear facility under the orders of the air defense headquarters commander, national broadcaster IRIB said.

The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) air forces, the report said, were undertaking "an all-out point defense" of the site "against a multitude of air threats in tough electronic warfare conditions".

## VP Calls for Engaging the 50% Who Didn't Vote

TEHRAN - The First Vice President emphasized the need to engage the 50% of the population who consciously chose not to vote, stating, "Consensus is the slogan of our system, and everyone must understand that the three branches of government stand together. Unity is the key to the victory of the Islamic Revolution."

A joint meeting of the first deputies of the heads of the three branches of government was held on Sunday, attended by Hojjatoleslam Khalili, the First Deputy of the Judiciary, and Hamidreza Haji Babaei, the First Deputy Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, in Mohammad Reza Aref's office.

Aref stressed that holding this meeting carries a significant message: the grand celebration of the Ten-Day Dawn (Dahe-ye Fajr) is so important that the first deputies of the three branches convened at this level. The First Deputy Speaker of Parliament is managing the organizing committee for this major event of the Islamic Revolution.

The First Vice President added, "We have gathered here to explore how to enable greater public participation. However, we must strongly avoid 'governmentalizing' this large public event. Like every year, this commemoration should occur spontaneously with the people's direct involvement. This way, the enemy will further realize that they have misunderstood our people's commitment and affection for the Islamic Republic."

Expressing gratitude for the presence of the deputies, Aref stated, "We must explain to the people that the Islamic system is at the peak of power today. Our current situation is



incomparable to the past. During the early days of the war, we fought with simple weapons, but today we are in the best condition, thanks solely to the people's presence."

Highlighting the importance of public participation in these commemorations, Aref said, "We should consider Imam Ali's (AS) stance on public presence and invite people to participate accordingly. The reality is that in the last election, 50% of the people consciously did not vote. Yet, our people have deep faith and attachment to the Imams, Islam, and the Islamic system. Our strategy and approach must be to attract more segments of society. These days are an excellent opportunity for greater public engagement."

He continued, "Our system's red line is distancing from the people. Increasing public engagement is achievable, and this meeting sends a clear message of unity and consensus."

The First Vice President further stated, "We believe in the slogan of consensus, which is our system's motto. Everyone should know that the three branches are united, and unity is the secret to the Islamic Revolution's victory."

Aref emphasized that the executive aspects of the ceremonies are managed by a committee under the supervision of the First Deputy Speaker of Parliament. He stressed that government officials must coordinate with the committee and not act independently.

## France Hosting Anti-Iran Terrorists' Meeting Shows Support for Terrorism



TEHRAN - The Foreign Ministry strongly deprecates France's recent hosting of a recent meeting of the anti-Iran terrorist Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MKO) as an "example of Paris' clear support for terrorism."

Spokesman Esmail Baghaei described the development as the European state's egregious violation of its international legal commitments towards prevention of and confrontation against terrorism.

He pointed to the terror outfit's dismal history of perpetrating heinous attacks against Iranian civilians and officials that have led to the martyrdom of around 12,000 people since the victory of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, which resulted in the bitter defeat and expulsion of the Western- and Israeli-backed group.

Baghaei also referred to the MKO's collaboration with the regime of Iraq's former dictator Saddam Hussein during the latter's eight-year-long imposed war against the Islamic Republic in the 1980s.

The official, therefore, reiterated that continuation of France's provision of safe haven for the outfit amounted to Paris' contravention of its international legal obligations as per imperative relevant declarations, including the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1373 that was passed in 2001.

The fraternal relations between the European country and the MKO also countered the fundamental principles of friendly ties and cooperation among governments, he asserted.

According to Baghaei, Paris' "compromise and selective approach" concerning terrorism amounts to a "criminal act" that incurs international repercussions for the French state, and is also a "rejected and despicable" attitude in line with global moral criteria.

He further considered permitting a terror group to act freely in a country to be a "clear instance of participation in and incitement to violence, hatemongering, and intervention in Iran's internal affairs."

## Rail Freight Transport from Sarakhs to China



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Ramazan Bahrami, Chairman of the Iran-Turkmenistan Joint Chamber of Commerce, has warned about the potential threat posed by Turkmenistan's transportation system to Iran. In an interview with ILNA, he stated that Iranian traders prefer using Turkmen trucks over Iranian ones for trade with Turkmenistan due to lower costs and higher quality. This advantage stems from Turkmenistan's two-decade-long policy of upgrading its transportation infrastructure, recognizing its strategic position in the transit of goods to CIS countries. Consequently, Turkmenistan has heavily invested in developing its rail, road, and air transport sectors.

Bahrami added that if this trend continues, the growing demand for Turkmen trucks to transport Iranian goods will create significant challenges for Iran's transportation industry in the coming years. Turkmenistan is determined to provide the best transportation quality at the lowest price for regional traders, leveraging its various borders for maximum benefit in the CIS goods transit market.

He also highlighted that the modernity of Turkmenistan's transport fleet attracts Iranian traders, contrasting with Iran's international transport fleet, where vehicles are often three to four decades old. The aging fleet is costly to renew, with even tire replacements imposing significant expenses on truck owners.

Bahrami referred to Turkmenistan as a key transit route for Iranian goods to countries east of the Caspian Sea and even to Afghanistan, despite Iran sharing a direct border with Afghanistan. Additionally, Turkmenistan serves as a transit corridor for rail freight from Sarakhs to China.

The Chairman emphasized the need for the Iranian government to recognize the competitive global landscape and provide support to Iranian transport companies to modernize and keep pace with international counterparts. Freight transfers to Turkmenistan occur through several land borders, including Incheh Borun, Bajiran, Lotfiabad, and Sarakhs, as well as via the Amirabad port for sea routes.



# IRAN NEWS



## VP Condoles With Survivors of California Wildfires

TEHRAN (IRNA) - First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref extended condolences to the families of the victims of widespread wildfires in southern California.

"In today's interconnected world, one person's pain is everyone's pain; we extend our condolences to all those affected by the wildfires in California and pray for a speedy recovery," Aref wrote on his X account on Saturday.

"It is necessary to take urgent measures at the global level to solve and deal with crises, whether it is the genocide and crimes of the occupying regime in Gaza or the crisis caused by climate change like what we are seeing today in the destructive fires in California," he added.

## Khuzestan's Solar Power Production Conditions Are Unique



TEHRAN - The Chinese Ambassador to Iran stated that Khuzestan Province has unique conditions in many areas, particularly in solar power production, and can effectively contribute to electricity generation through renewable energy.

Zhong Peiwu, during a meeting with the governor of Khuzestan in Ahvaz, expressed his pleasure at having the opportunity to observe the province's capacities and hoped it would pave the way for greater connections between Khuzestan and China.

He highlighted the cultural, historical, and friendly ties between Iran and China, noting that strong bilateral exchanges have been established between the two countries.

The ambassador emphasized that Khuzestan holds significant potential in both traditional industries and emerging sectors, especially in the green economy and renewable energy, which could foster further cooperation between Iran and China.

He also pointed out that Khuzestan has excellent conditions for agricultural development and expressed confidence that bilateral cooperation in this field has a bright and promising future.

Peiwu identified efficient waste management and the export of high-quality aquatic products as key areas for collaboration between the two nations. He also suggested holding various training courses and establishing scientific exchanges between the two countries.

He expressed hope that with continuous and coordinated efforts from both sides, Iran's cooperation—particularly Khuzestan's—with China would progress to higher levels.

During the meeting, Khuzestan Governor Seyed Mohammadreza Mowlaei Zadeh stressed the importance of attracting investment and new technologies to the province. He stated that enhancing cooperation with China in agriculture, industry, and services is a priority.

Mowlaei Zadeh highlighted Khuzestan's significant capacities across various sectors and expressed the province's readiness for investment.

Referring to a study by a Chinese technical and expert delegation on Khuzestan's investment potential, the governor added, "We are working to create suitable conditions for cooperation through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs."

## MIDEX Exhibition Kicks Off in Tehran



TEHRAN - The Deputy Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade and the Head of the Iran Trade Promotion Organization emphasized the crucial role of exhibitions as a bridge between producers and international markets in the building decoration industry.

According to the Public Relations Department of the Iran Trade Promotion Organization, Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, Deputy Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade and Head of the Iran Trade Promotion Organization, issued a statement ahead of the 15th International MIDEX Exhibition:

"The building decoration industry is one of the significant and thriving sectors with various opportunities and challenges. With the continuous growth of the construction industry, there are numerous opportunities to export building decoration products to other countries. These opportunities include increasing demand for high-quality products, advancements in production technology, and the expansion of international markets.

In this regard, commercial interior architecture is a vital field in designing and implementing business spaces. This sector covers the interior design of government and private offices, shops, restaurants, hotels, exhibitions, and other commercial spaces. In designing these areas, attention to aesthetics, functionality, and customer engagement is highly important.

Exhibitions play a significant role as a bridge connecting producers to international markets in the building decoration industry. These events offer a valuable opportunity for manufacturers and exporters to showcase their products and services, establish new business connections, and explore new markets.

By participating in these exhibitions, companies can effectively promote their exports, interact with international customers, and present their brand in the best possible way. Therefore, attending international exhibitions is considered an effective strategy for expanding exports and enhancing global brand recognition.

The 15th International MIDEX Exhibition aims to showcase the latest achievements and innovations in the architecture and interior design industry. It provides an excellent opportunity for enthusiasts in architecture, interior decoration, and the design of residential and commercial spaces to explore the latest products and services and engage in discussions with industry experts and leading designers.

The MIDEX Exhibition is particularly an ideal platform for designers, architects, engineers, business owners, and the general public to familiarize themselves with the newest and most modern products and global trends in this field."

## Tehran-Berlin Trade Sees 4% Rise

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Shahin Asghari, President of the Iran-Germany Chamber of Commerce and Industries, spoke to ILNA about the latest trade developments between the two countries.

He stated that based on the latest statistics, the trade value between Iran and Germany during the first ten months of 2024 (January to October) reached \$1.24 billion. This figure represents a 4% increase compared to the same period in 2023. During this time, Iran's imports from Germany grew by 7% annually, while Iran's exports to Germany declined by 9% annually. The trade balance favors Germany, with Iran's imports from Germany significantly surpassing its exports.

Asghari noted that although Iran has strong potential to supply raw materials for German industries, it has yet to fully utilize this capacity. Iran predominantly imports industrial machinery and chemicals from Germany, while exporting mainly food products and livestock to Germany.

Reflecting on the trade history between the two countries, Asghari remarked that 50 years ago, when the Iran-Germany Chamber of Commerce was established, Iran was the second-largest market for German exports after the United States. Even after the revolution, Germany maintained its trade relations with Iran, historically leading European trade with Iran. Over the past century, Iran and Germany have shared strong cultural and commercial ties, with Iran being well-known to German industrialists and traders. Iran's industrial sector has developed with German machinery. However, in recent years, bilateral relations have somewhat weakened.

Despite this, Asghari emphasized that trade between Iran and Germany continues. Iran's exports to Germany consist of non-sanctioned goods. German companies willing to continue trading under sanction conditions are typically small and medium-sized enterprises with limited business ties to the U.S.

He added that Iranian carpets and handicrafts once enjoyed significant popularity in Germany, with Iranian carpets regarded as luxury items. German households once took pride in owning them. However, this market

has shrunk, with Indian and Turkish producers now dominating the German carpet market. Similarly, products like pistachios, dates, walnuts, and saffron are common in Germany, yet Iran's market share for these items is declining. For instance, Afghanistan is increasingly capturing the global saffron market from Iran.

Asghari attributed the weakening Iran-Germany trade to various internal and external factors. He explained that this challenge extends beyond Iran-Germany trade. For example, in Iraq—a major destination for Iranian exports—non-Iranian traders sell goods on one-year letters of credit (LC), while Iranian traders must operate on a cash basis. This preference for LC over cash among Iraqi buyers reduces Iranian traders' competitiveness. Additionally, Iranian traders bear extra costs for currency exchange at money changers.

Similar challenges persist in Iran's trade with European countries. Asghari stressed that failure or unwillingness to comply with international trade regulations results in Iran losing its global market share.

He also highlighted domestic issues, particularly regulations concerning foreign exchange commitments, which burden exporters. Unlike other countries, Iran mandates the repatriation of export earnings, even though significant discrepancies exist between official and open market exchange rates.

Asghari pointed out that the establishment of a regulated foreign exchange market could alleviate some trade challenges. He argued that narrowing the gap between open market and official exchange rates is essential. The regulated market aligns with the single exchange rate policy, and multiple exchange rates encourage rent-seeking behaviors among importers who overstate imports.

In conclusion, Asghari stated that it remains to be seen how effectively this market can implement the single exchange rate policy. If the regulated market becomes another version of the NIMA system, it may fail to fulfill its intended purpose.

## Iran and Turkey Lay the Groundwork to Boost Bilateral Trade to \$30b



TEHRAN - The Vice President of Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture announced that Iran and Turkey are actively pursuing the expansion of bilateral trade.

Hossein Pirmoazen stated that the groundwork for increasing trade volume between Iran and Turkey to the targeted \$30 billion was further solidified during meetings held in Ankara as part of a recent Iranian trade delegation's visit.

According to the Iran Chamber of Commerce Online News Agency, Pirmoazen highlighted the annual trade volume of approximately \$11.6 billion between the two countries. He emphasized ongoing close cooperation between the Iran Chamber of Commerce, the Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges of Turkey (TOBB), and Turkey's Foreign Economic Relations Board (DEİK).

Pirmoazen noted that the presidents of both nations have set a goal to enhance cooperation and reach \$30 billion in bilateral trade. He stressed that both countries' chambers of commerce need to coordinate and collaborate to achieve this objective.

During the visit to Ankara by Iran's Minister of Agriculture Jihad and the President of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, effective dialogue was facilitated between agricultural and food industry traders from both nations. Pirmoazen pointed out that the existing preferential trade agreement signed in 2015, which primarily benefits Iran's agricultural sector, offers significant opportunities for Iran to export agricultural products to Turkey. He encouraged Turkish agricultural stakeholders to capitalize on this opportunity.

Highlighting the need for joint ventures and collaborative investments in the agricultural sector to expand exports to the region, Pirmoazen invited Turkish traders and TOBB representatives to send delegations to Iran during the upcoming Iran Agriculture Exhibition.

He also identified the facilitation of truck transit for food and agricultural goods to minimize losses as a key topic discussed during the 180-member Iranian trade delegation's visit to Ankara.

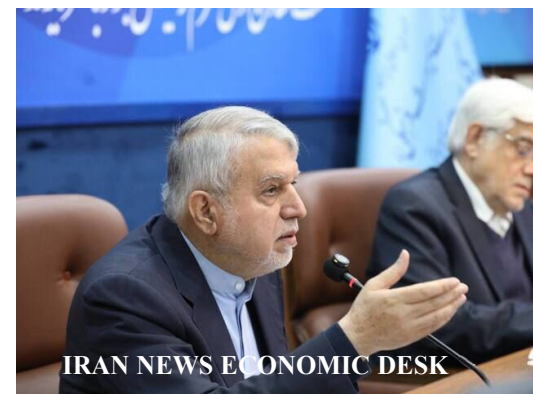
Citing the latest customs data, Pirmoazen revealed that in the Iranian calendar year 1402, Iran's exports to Turkey totaled \$4.2 billion, while Turkey's exports to Iran reached \$7.5 billion. He acknowledged that Turkey currently holds a stronger position in bilateral trade.

Pirmoazen referred to agreements made during the 29th Iran-Turkey Joint Economic Cooperation Commission held in Tehran last month. These agreements include resuming negotiations to revise the preferential trade agreement, boosting exhibition collaborations, expanding rail transport capacity, and enhancing cooperation in free trade zones. He highlighted that Turkey remains Iran's largest export market after China, Iraq, and the UAE, with Iran significantly increasing its exports to Turkey in recent years.

Additionally, Pirmoazen announced that a Memorandum of Understanding to establish the Iran-Turkey Joint Chamber of Commerce and Industries is ready for signing, facilitated by the Iran Chamber of Commerce and TOBB. Once operational, this initiative will enable closer collaboration between the private sectors of both countries to simplify trade processes.

Pirmoazen concluded by expressing gratitude to Iran's ambassador to Turkey and the Minister of Agriculture Jihad and his deputies. He also proposed further expanding economic cooperation, particularly in investment, trade exchanges in industries, and knowledge-based technologies. He emphasized the availability of opportunities for technical knowledge exchange and collaboration across various technological sectors.

## Private Sector: The Pillar of Tourism Development



TEHRAN - The Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts emphasized that the private sector is a key force in strengthening infrastructure and a solid pillar for tourism development. He stressed comprehensive support and financial aid for completing projects that are over 70% finished.

Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri welcomed tourism advocates and those passionate about Iran's progress at a meeting with Mohammad Reza Aref, Vice President, and private sector investors in the tourism industry. The meeting took place on Saturday, January 12, 2025, in the Fajr Hall of the ministry. He highlighted Mr. Aref's strong support for the tourism sector and his emphasis on treating tourism as a critical platform for national development.

Salehi Amiri explained that tourism is deeply connected to three key factors: attractiveness, security, and infrastructure. He elaborated on Iran's cultural heritage and its tourism potential, noting that Iran ranks seventh globally in terms of attractiveness and is regarded as an "archaeological paradise." Every excavation reveals the country's rich history and heritage.

The minister pointed out the global media's campaign to create fear about Iran and present a distorted image of the country. He affirmed that there are serious and strategic programs in place to change global public perception and counter this narrative.

Highlighting the private sector as a cornerstone of tourism infrastructure, Salehi Amiri mentioned 2,700 active projects across the country with a total investment of 570 trillion tomans. He emphasized that facilitating investment and delegating responsibilities to the private sector is the government's main strategy. The government's policy focuses on stepping back from executive roles and prioritizing oversight and support.

Salehi Amiri also described diplomatic efforts to attract tourists as part of the government's policy, noting, "We have engaged in discussions with tourism ministers of many countries, stressing that government relations should not hinder connections between nations."

## VP Urges Strong Commitment to Shared Oil Fields Development



TEHRAN - The Vice President of Iran, Mohammad Reza Aref, praised the Ministry of Oil's efforts over the first five months of the current administration, urging the ministry to intensify its focus on the development of shared oil fields and related projects.

In a meeting with the Minister of Oil and his deputies, held at the Ministry's headquarters, Aref expressed his gratitude for the ministry's significant achievements in boosting the production of oil products, gas, gasoline, and diesel, as well as ensuring the delivery of fuel to power plants. Despite numerous challenges during the early months of the administration, he acknowledged the ministry's commendable performance.

Aref highlighted that the "Government of National Unity" sees the roles of deputy ministers as equally important as that of the minister, stressing the collective responsibility in overcoming national challenges. He emphasized the need for a collaborative approach across ministries, particularly in tackling energy imbalances, which have plagued the country in previous administrations. "It is essential that every minister and responsible official perceives themselves as part of the larger solution, not just focused on their specific sector," Aref remarked.

He also drew attention to the crucial role of the Ministry of Oil in addressing energy imbalances, especially in the electricity sector. Aref praised ongoing efforts to implement solar energy solutions and other substantial initiatives aimed at reducing these disparities.

The Vice President called for the development of a comprehensive four-year plan with clear objectives and specific actions. This plan should eliminate bureaucratic barriers and advance development projects, especially in shared oil fields and enhanced oil recovery techniques.

Aref also discussed the importance of utilizing highly skilled and motivated individuals in the oil sector, including leveraging the expertise of those in the Iranian diaspora. He called for the revitalization of the Abadan University of Petroleum to attract talented individuals and reinstate its prestigious reputation.



## Venezuela Condemns New U.S. and European Sanctions

MEXICO CITY (Dispatches) - Venezuela on Saturday condemned new sanctions that the U.S., Britain, and the European Union imposed the previous day, when the country swore in President Nicolas Maduro for a third term after a six-month election dispute.

"The Venezuelan Armed Forces categorically and energetically rejects the new sanctions imposed by the infamous imperial brotherhood," wrote general Domingo Hernandez Larez, head of the Strategic Operational Command of the National Armed Forces of Venezuela in a statement posted on social media.

He called the sanctions a "desperate action, outside the rule of international law."

The condemnation came after outgoing U.S. President Joe Biden's administration increased its reward to \$25 million for information leading to the arrest or conviction of Maduro on drug trafficking charges. The previous reward was \$15 million.



## Los Angeles Fires Spread Into New Areas as Winds Are Forecast to Pick Up



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - The largest of the Los Angeles' fires spread toward previously untouched neighborhoods Saturday, forcing new evacuations and dimming hopes that the disaster was coming under control.

Across the city, at least 11 people have died as multiple fires have ripped through residential areas since Tuesday, razing thousands of homes in destruction that US President Joe Biden likened to a "war scene."

Despite huge firefighting efforts, the Palisades fire's expansion prompted evacuation orders in ritzy neighborhoods along its eastern flank, which include the famous Getty Center art museum.

Winds were forecast to pick up again on Saturday after a brief lull, posing the risk of new fires as embers are blown into dry brush.

Los Angeles residents have increasingly demanded to know who is at fault for the disaster as they grapple with the ruin and local anger rises over officials' preparedness and response.

Residents like Nicole Perri, whose home in the upscale Pacific Palisades burnt down, told AFP that officials "completely let us down."

"I don't think the officials were prepared at all," said James Brown, a 65-year-old retired lawyer across the city in Altadena.

California Governor Gavin Newsom on Friday ordered a "full independent review," describing the lack of water supplies during the initial fires as "deeply troubling."

"We need answers to how that happened," he wrote in an open letter.

As reports of looting grew, a sunset-to-sunrise curfew was imposed in evacuated areas.

Around two dozen arrests have already been made across Los Angeles, where some residents have organized street patrols and kept armed watch over their own houses.

The National Guard has been deployed to bolster law enforcement.

## Dutch Police Use Water Cannons to Disperse Climate Activists



THE HAGUE (Dispatches) - Dutch police detained hundreds of climate activists and used two water cannons to break up a protest that blocked off a main highway into the city for several hours.

The protest by Extinction Rebellion (XR) activists followed several similar protests last year to demonstrate against Dutch fossil fuel subsidies and to highlight the effects of climate change.

"Some 700 activists were detained after the A12 highway was blocked off," The Hague police said on X.

"This led to traffic jams and longer travel times for ambulances and other emergency services," they added.

Police maintained a heavy presence with foot patrols, and on horseback, while a police drone hovered overhead.

Hundreds of protesters gathered around mid-day and walked onto the highway despite police attempts to stop several other activists, an AFP correspondent saw.

The protesters ignored a request from the city and police to remain on the Malieveld open ground in the city centre and not to enter onto the neighbouring arterial road.

Several hundred protesters carried banners and placards saying "We believe in life after oil" while waving XR flags however marched onto the road.

Two protesters also scaled a signboard beam spanning the A12 before unrolling an XR flag.

Several hours later police sprayed protesters with water cannons before detaining activists who were sitting on the main road.

## Ukraine Questioning Two North Korean Soldiers Captured in Kursk



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine said that investigators were questioning two wounded North Korean soldiers after they were captured in Russia's Kursk region, saying they provided "indisputable evidence" that North Koreans were fighting for Moscow.

It is not the first time that Kyiv has claimed the capture of North Korean soldiers during its Kursk incursion but it has not reported being able to question any before.

In December it said it took several captives but they died from serious wounds.

"Our soldiers captured North Korean soldiers in the Kursk region. These are two soldiers who, although wounded, survived and were brought to Kyiv, and are talking to SBU investigators," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote on social media.

The SBU security service gave some details of the men's interrogation, saying both described themselves as experienced soldiers and one said he had been sent to Russia for training, not to fight.

But Ukraine has not provided any evidence that the men are North Korean.

In video released by the SBU, two men with Asian features are shown in hospital beds, one with bandaged hands and the other with a bandaged jaw. A doctor at the detention centre says the second man also has a broken leg.

Pyeongyang has deployed thousands of troops to reinforce Russia's military, including in the Kursk border region where Ukraine mounted a shock incursion in August last year.

Zelenskyy had said in late December that Ukraine had captured several seriously wounded North Korean soldiers who later died.

He said Saturday that it was difficult to capture North Koreans fighting because "Russians and other North Korean soldiers finish off their wounded and do everything to prevent evidence of the participation of another state, North Korea, in the war against Ukraine".

He said he would provide media access to the prisoners of war because "the world needs to know what is happening".

He also posted photos of two wounded men with Asian features in bunk beds but did not provide evidence that they were North Korean.

One photo shows a Russian army ID card issued to a 26-year-old man from Russia's Tyva region bordering Mongolia.

Some reports have said Russia is hiding North Korean fighters by giving them fake IDs.

Ukraine's Foreign Minister Andriy Sybiga wrote on X that the "first North Korean prisoners of war are now in Kyiv", calling them "regular DPRK troops, not mercenaries".

"We need maximum pressure against regimes in Moscow and Pyongyang," he wrote.

The men do not speak Russian or Ukrainian and communication is through Korean interpreters, the SBU said, adding that this was "in cooperation" with South Korea's National Intelligence Service.

The SBU video does not show the men speaking Korean. AFP reporters in Seoul have contacted the NIS for comment.

The SBU said the men's capture provided "indisputable evidence of the DPRK's participation in Russia's war against our country". It showed a Russian army ID card issued to a 26-year-old man from Russia's Tyva region bordering Mongolia.

The SBU said that one POW carried this military ID card "issued in the name of another person" while the other had no documents at all.

Some reports have said Russia is hiding North Korean fighters by giving them fake IDs.

The SBU said the man with the Tyvan ID had told them he was given it in Russia in autumn 2024 when some North Korean combat units had "one-week interoperability training" with Russian units.

The man said he believed he was "going for training, not to fight a war against Ukraine", the SBU said.

The man said he was a rifleman born in 2005 and had been in the North Korean army since 2021.

The other man wrote answers because of an injured jaw, saying he was born in 1999, joined the army in 2016 and was a scout sniper, the SBU said.

## Syria's al-Sharaa Meets Lebanese PM in Bid to Improve Long-Fraught Ties

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Syria's de facto leader Ahmed al-Sharaa met Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati in Damascus in a bid to improve long-fraught ties, with the pair focusing on strengthening their shared border.

The trip was the first by a head of government to Syria since Bashar al-Assad was toppled by a sweeping rebel offensive on Dec. 8, and the first visit by a Lebanese premier to neighbouring Syria in 15 years.

Ties between Damascus and Beirut have often been fraught since they became independent states in the 1940s.

The countries agreed to work together to secure their land borders and delineate their shared land and sea borders as a matter of priority, Mikati said following the meeting.

"At the top of the list of priorities is the demarcation of the land and sea borders between Lebanon and Syria" and securing the border to prevent illegal smuggling, he said.

It has also become "urgent" to address the issue of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and have them return home, according to a statement by his office.

Nearly 800,000 Syrians are registered as refugees in Lebanon, but officials estimate the number to be much higher and say they place a massive burden on Lebanese public services.

Al-Sharaa also named the border as his top priority, and said the two leaders had discussed Syrian deposits in Lebanese banks, which have been inaccessible due to a five-year financial crisis in Lebanon.



"We hope that the Lebanese people will abandon the mentality of the previous Syrian relationship in Lebanon and the negative relations that followed," Sharaa added, saying there was now an "opportunity to build a positive relationship."

For much of the Assad family's five decades in power, Syria held significant influence over Lebanon, maintaining a military presence there for 29 years until 2005 in the face of widespread opposition from many Lebanese.

The Lebanese Shi'ite Islamist group Hezbollah played a major part in propping up toppled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad during Syria's civil war, fighting the Sunni Islamist insurgents who toppled him.

In 2014, as war raged in Syria, Syrian Islamist rebels took Lebanese soldiers captive from the porous border area between the two countries, executing some of them.

Mikati was accompanied on his visit by Lebanon's foreign minister Abdullah Bou Habib, the head of Lebanon's general security agency, which is responsible for border management, and the head of Lebanon's military intelligence.

Lebanon's President Joseph Aoun said following his election on Thursday that there was a historic opportunity for "serious and equitable dialogue" with Syria.

Sharaa congratulated Aoun on assuming the presidency.

## Sudanese Army Advances to Retake City of Wad Madani From RSF

CAIRO (Dispatches) - Sudan's army said it had entered the central city of Wad Madani and was pushing out its paramilitary rivals the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a step which if completed successfully would be its biggest gain in nearly two years of war.

The army posted a video appearing to show troops inside the city, which is the capital of El Gezira state, an agricultural and trading hub that has been held by the RSF since December 2023.

Recapture of the state as a whole could mark a turning point in the war that began in April 2023 over disputes on the integration of the two forces, which has created one of the world's largest humanitarian crises with the displacement of more than 12 million people and half the population facing hunger.

"The leadership of the Armed Forces congratulates our people on the entry of our forces into Wad Madani this morning. They are now working to clean up the remaining rebel pockets inside the city," an army statement said.

In a speech shared on Telegram, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, the leader of the RSF - also known as Hemedti - acknowledged defeat but insisted that the battle was not over.

"We lost Wad Madani, but we will reclaim it. People just need to regroup, reorganize and reassess themselves," he added.

Hemedti also attributed the defeat to what he described as the Sudanese army's reliance on Iranian drones and fighters from Ethiopia's Tigray region.



Meanwhile, a Reuters report found that dozens of planes had flown from the United Arab Emirates to Chad, likely to resupply the RSF in Chad. The UAE denies the accusations, though a U.N. panel of experts deemed them credible.

El Gezira state, located in the center of the country and south of the capital Khartoum has seen some of the RSF's bloodiest attacks on civilians, as well as the burning of fields, looting of hospitals and markets, and flooding of irrigation ditches.

Despite a long history as an agricultural trade hub, Madani has been marked by experts as an area at risk of famine due to the blockades imposed as part of the conflict.

The army had stepped up its campaign to retake El Gezira in recent months, after retaking Sennar state in the south, including by increasing airstrikes that have often hit civilians.

The RSF's top commander in the state defected to the army in October, and his troops took part in Saturday's operations, though the RSF responded at the time with a series of attacks.

The army also on Saturday continued its operations on the city of Bahri, part of the greater capital, where it has also made advances in recent months.

The RSF controls most of the west of the country, where it is fighting the army for al-Fashir, its last stronghold in the Darfur region. The two forces are also actively fighting over White Nile state in the south of the country.





## Manchester City Hit Salford for Eight in FA Cup

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Manchester City dashed the dreams of Salford's former Manchester United star owners with an 8-0 FA Cup rout, while Liverpool cruised into the fourth round with a 4-0 victory over Accrington Stanley.

Chelsea were among the other big winners with a 5-0 demolition of Morecambe. Brentford were the only Premier League side to fall to lower-league opposition as Plymouth, who sit bottom of the Championship, stunned the Bees 1-0 thanks to Morgan Whittaker's late winner.

League Two Salford have risen through the non-league ranks since investment from David Beckham, Gary and Phil Neville, Paul Scholes, Ryan Giggs and Nicky Butt began in 2014.

Scholes, Butt and director of football Giggs were in attendance at the Etihad but were denied a night to rival their best during glorious playing careers at Old Trafford.

Pep Guardiola made wholesale changes as Erling Haaland was afforded a rest.

Jeremy Doku opened the scoring after just eight minutes before youngsters Divin Mubama and Nico O'Reilly made it 3-0 before half-time.

Jack Grealish scored his first City goal for over a year from the penalty spot, while Doku also netted from the spot.

But James McAtee, who had only scored once for City previously, earned man-of-the-match honours with a 20-minute second half hat-trick.

"I've been here since I was 10 and it's a special moment for me. Something I'll remember forever," said McAtee.

There was never any hint of an upset at Anfield either despite Arne Slot making eight changes for Liverpool.

Trent Alexander-Arnold was named captain in the absence of Virgil van Dijk and led by example after being criticised for his display in a 2-2 draw against Manchester United last weekend.

Slot had warned the Premier League leaders that a trip to Anfield would be Accrington's "Champions League final".

A mammoth 86 league positions behind Liverpool in the 92-team English league system, Stanley held out for nearly half an hour before Diogo Jota was left with a simple task to tap in from Darwin Nunez's low cross.

Alexander-Arnold then stepped forward to double the lead with a sumptuous hit into the top corner from outside the box.

"I could talk for hours about that (goal), unbelievable," said Slot.

"The biggest compliment Trent could get was the reaction of everyone after the Manchester United game. Every player around the world, maybe except for a few, has a bad game and that is completely normal, but the moment Trent has one, everyone has an opinion about it."

Jayden Danns made it 3-0 before Federico Chiesa netted his first Liverpool goal after an injury-hit start to his time in England.

Joao Felix was the star of the show for Chelsea as he got a rare chance to deputise for Cole Palmer.

The Portuguese international and Tosin Adarabioyo both scored twice, while Christopher Nkunku made up for missing an early penalty by netting his 13th goal of the season.

Only Liverpool have taken more points at home than Brentford in the Premier League this season, while Plymouth had not won away from home all campaign.

Yet against the odds Argyle, who sacked former England captain Wayne Rooney 12 days ago, held out and hit Thomas Frank's men with a sucker punch when Whittaker blasted in from outside the area nine minutes from time.

"I have pride in everybody, and I'm pleased for the supporters. It's a big day for us," said caretaker Plymouth boss Kevin Nancekivell.

## Gael Monfils Posts Historic Win in Auckland



AUCKLAND (Dispatches) - Gael Monfils became the oldest man in nearly five decades to win an ATP Tour-level title with his 6-3, 6-4 defeat of Zizou Bergs at the ASB Classic in Auckland, New Zealand.

Ken Rosewall, an Australian great, was 43 when he won the Hong Kong trophy in 1977. Monfils, who won his 13th tour title, is 38.

But against Bergs, Monfils seemed ageless, winning 88 percent of points on his first serve and saving six break chances in the 97-minute contest. Bergs, a 25-year-old Belgian, converted only 71 percent of his first serves into points.

Monfils and Bergs now move on to the Australian Open. Monfils drew fellow Frenchman Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard as his first-round opponent, while Bergs will face Facundo Diaz Acosta of Argentina.

No. 5 Felix Auger-Aliassime of Canada won his sixth career title with a 6-3, 3-6, 6-1 defeat of No. 2 seed Sebastian Korda in Australia.

Auger-Aliassime used 10 aces in his win over Korda, who made his first tournament appearance since undergoing elbow surgery last October. In the final set, the Canadian won 93 percent (13 of 14) points on his first serve to close out the one-hour, 49-minute match. He won 17 of the final 21 points to win the first set.

Auger-Aliassime moved to 3-1 in his career against Korda. His next opponent will be Jan-Lennard Struff of Germany in the first round of the Australian Open on Monday. Auger-Aliassime is the No. 29 seed in the major.

## Penalty King Kane Sends Bayern Past Gladbach



BERLIN (Dispatches) - A second-half penalty from Harry Kane gave Bayern Munich a 1-0 win at Borussia Muenchengladbach yesterday, restoring their four-point lead at the top of the Bundesliga table.

Defending champions Bayer Leverkusen's 3-2 win at Borussia Dortmund on Friday drew them within a point of league leaders Bayern, who went into yesterday's clash without the ill Jamal Musiala.

Musiala's replacement, veteran Thomas Mueller, had an early chance midway through the first half but blasted at Gladbach goalkeeper Moritz Nicolas from point-blank range.

Gladbach were toothless in attack but frustrated Bayern, who were unable to turn their dominance into clear goalscoring chances.

With just over 20 minutes remaining, Michael Olise was felled in the box by Gladbach's Lukas Ullrich, bringing Kane to the spot.

The England captain, who had been largely anonymous for much of the night, sent the ball low to the right and into the net.

Kane has now converted 26 successive penalties for club and country since his miss against France in the quarter-finals of the 2022 World Cup.

"We had many, many good chances," Bayern's Joshua Kimmich told Sky Germany.

"But we made it a bit too exciting at the end as we could've decided things earlier."

Bayern coach Vincent Kompany said: "We're happy with the 1-0 even if we could've scored a goal or two more."

A first-half goal from Omar Marmoush took Eintracht Frankfurt to a 1-0 win at St Pauli amid growing speculation that the Egypt star is on the brink of a move to Manchester City.

Before the game, Frankfurt sporting director Markus Kroesche confirmed "a club had got in contact" about Marmoush, with Sky Germany saying the forward had already agreed personal terms with the English champions.

Marmoush was on target in the 32nd minute against his former club, calmly turning inside the box before firing a shot into the top corner.

The goal was Marmoush's 14th in 16 Bundesliga games this season, one behind Kane. The 25-year-old also has eight league assists.

"We did plenty to keep a clean sheet today," said Frankfurt captain Kevin Trapp as his team stayed in third place.

Elsewhere, Freiburg leapfrogged Borussia Dortmund into sixth with a 3-2 home win over Holstein Kiel highlighted by a stunning free-kick from captain Christian Guenter.

## Lakers' Coach Redick in Shock After Losing Home to LA Wildfires

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Lakers head coach JJ Redick got emotional while describing losing his family's home in the Pacific Palisades to a ferocious wildfire that turned much of the Los Angeles community to ash.

Redick's wife and two sons were away from the home when it burned down on Tuesday and he said he was stunned when he witnessed the aftermath of the blaze early Wednesday morning.

"I was not prepared for what I saw. It's complete devastation and destruction," he told reporters after practice.

"I went through most of the village and it's all gone. I don't think you can ever prepare yourself for something like that."

Redick, who played 15 seasons in the NBA, moved to Los Angeles from Brooklyn after he was hired to be the Lakers head coach last offseason.

He was renting the home while he and his wife determined where they wanted to live long term and said they felt a deep connection to the community and vowed to help them rebuild.

"Everything we own that was of any importance to us after 20 years together as a couple and 10 years of parenting was in that house. There are certain things that you can't replace," he said.



"But the material stuff is whatever... the Palisades community has been so good to us. The part that we're really struggling with is the loss of community.

"I recognize people make up community and we're going to rebuild and we want to help lead on that. But all the churches, the schools, the library, it's all gone."

Los Angeles County this week has been devastated by two major wildfires that have been fueled by strong winds and dry conditions.

They have killed at least 11 people as of Friday and destroyed or badly damaged more than 10,000 structures, authorities said, making them among the worst natural disasters in California history.

"I don't want people to feel sorry for me and my family," Redick said.

Meanwhile the Denver Nuggets established a little history against the Brooklyn Nets, but more importantly, they got their sixth win in eight games.

The Nuggets will try for their seventh win in nine games at the Dallas Mavericks.

In the 124-105 win over Brooklyn on Friday night, the Nuggets had two players rack up triple-doubles for the second time this season. Nikola Jokic and Russell Westbrook have done it twice in the past

two weeks, and it's the first time in NBA history teammates have had triple-doubles in the same regular-season game multiple times in a single season.

"Wow," Denver coach Michael Malone said after hearing the factoid. "That's pretty crazy. We're watching history, folks."

## Milan Flop on Conceicao's San Siro Debut, Juve Draw Again

MILAN (Dispatches) - Sergio Conceicao's AC Milan flopped on the new coach's San Siro debut after the seven-time European champions could only draw 1-1 with struggling Cagliari in Serie A, while Juventus's spiky derby with Torino ended 1-1.

Portuguese Conceicao immediately got fans onside by beating Inter Milan in a thrilling Italian Super Cup final in Saudi Arabia, but the pre-match cheers at the trophy soon turned into more familiar boos and groans for an insipid display.

"I've been a coach for 13 years, and given the quality of the players I have the first half today might have been the worst I've ever seen," said Conceicao to Sky.

"The second half was better, even if we messed up 25 times in front of goal... Drawing today is like losing because we've lost two points."

An unusual error from Mike Maignan gave Cagliari a point, the France goalkeeper allowing Nadir Zortea's weak, speculative shot to escape his grasp nine minutes after half-time.

Zortea's soft leveller sucked away all the enthusiasm generated moments before when Alvaro Morata bundled home after Christian Pulisic was denied by Cagliari goalkeeper Elia Caprile and the base of the post.

Milan stay eighth and eight points behind fourth-placed Lazio



who sit in the final Champions League spot, although Conceicao's team play one of their two games in hand at Como on Tuesday.

The hosts were as poor as they often were under Conceicao's sacked predecessor Paulo Fonseca but would have come away with the points had it not been for slack finishing and excellent goalkeeping from Caprile who stopped Pulisic and Tammy Abraham netting when clean through on goal.

Torino's Croatian Nikola Vlasic celebrates after scoring the team's first goal during the Italian Serie A football match between Torino and Juventus at the Olympic Grande Torino stadium in Turin. — AFP

Torino's Croatian Nikola Vlasic celebrates after scoring the team's first goal during the Italian Serie A football match between Torino and Juventus at the Olympic Grande Torino stadium in Turin. — AFP

Nikola Vlasic earned a point for Torino, who haven't beaten their local rivals for a decade, with a superb strike which crashed in off the post in stoppage time at the end of a first half that started with Juve going ahead through Kenan Yildiz in the eighth minute.