

Iranian Foreign Ministry Dismissed U.S. Media Reports Concerning American Tech Tycoon Elon Musk's Role and Intervention in the Release of an Italian Journalist, Who Had Been in Iran's Custody Over Violating the Country's Law

IRAN NEWS

Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Ground Force Captured 15 More Terrorists in the Course of the Ongoing Counterterrorism Military Exercise in the Southeastern Sistan and Baluchestan Province

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Palestinian Patience, Resistance Forced Israel to Back Down



TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has commended the sacrifices and valor of Palestinians and their resistance in the face of the months-long Israeli aggression that resulted in a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and forced the regime to back down.

Ayatollah Khamenei made the statement in a post on his X social media account on Thursday, hours after a long-awaited truce deal was announced to end 16 months of Israel's brutal onslaught on Gaza.

"Today, the world realized that the Palestinian people's patience and the Palestinian resistance's resilience have forced the Zionist regime to back down," the Leader said.

"It will be written in books that one day, a Zionist group massacred thousands of women and children in the most horrific way and at the end, they were quashed."

The ceasefire, brokered by Qatar and Egypt, was announced by Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani late on Wednesday. It consists of three phases and would come into effect on Sunday over a span of 42 days.

The truce deal, which would potentially bring an end to Israel's devastating genocidal aggression on the territory, stipulates that a large-scale prisoner exchange will occur, including the release of 1,000 prisoners from Gaza and hundreds of detainees serving lengthy sentences.

The first stage involves the release of 33 captives, including "children, women, female soldiers, men above 50, and the wounded and sick," as well as a gradual, partial withdrawal of invading Israeli units.

Meanwhile Iran welcomed a newly-reached ceasefire in the Israeli regime's 15-month-long genocidal war against the besieged Gaza Strip, while calling for the prosecution of Israeli authorities over their appalling crimes in the besieged territory.

In a statement on Thursday, Iran's foreign ministry said the people of the war-ravaged Palestinian territory have suffered "one of the greatest acts of genocide and population displacement in history" since October 2023, when Israel's war machine began unleashing fire and destruction on the territory.

The ceasefire is also the result of "solidarity and unity of the people of Gaza in their honorable resistance and steadfastness against the forced displacement of Palestinians," the statement read, hailing the truce "as a historic victory for the Palestinian nation."

Enemy Dares Not Cast Hostile Glance at Iran



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's top military general has praised the country's naval capabilities, saying the enemy does not dare cast a hostile glance at the Islamic Republic.

"Today, our navy is fully prepared in various aspects, including training, skills, design capabilities, and the implementation of a variety of complex plans and programs, and we take pride in this readiness," Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Bagheri said Thursday.

He made the remarks at the inauguration ceremony of the Second Maritime Zone located in the strategic Jask region, near the Strait of Hormuz in southern Iran.

Bagheri said the second zone of Jask is located in a highly sensitive and strategic area in the Sea of Oman, at the northern edge of the Indian Ocean, with no obstacles to reaching the entire globe.

"This is a blessing that we must value more than ever, ensuring the necessary infrastructure, equipment, and weapons for our country. Using this zone as a foundation, missions are being carried out rapidly, and progress is well underway," he added.

TEHRAN - President of the Islamic Republic of Iran emphasized the crucial, sensitive, and strategic nature of relations between Iran and Russia during a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin at the Kremlin in Moscow.

In his remarks, Masoud Pezeshkian, speaking on Friday afternoon local time, underscored the firm commitment of both countries to strengthening their ties. He stated, "The relationship between Iran and Russia is essential, critical, and strategic, and we stand strong on this path."

Pezeshkian, conveying the greetings of Iran's Supreme Leader to President Putin, reiterated the importance of regional management. He said, "The Supreme Leader's view and recommendation is that the region should be managed by the countries within it, without foreign powers disrupting the area and imposing their own policies."

The Iranian president emphasized that cooperation between Iran and Russia would thwart any attempts by foreign forces to interfere in regional matters. He also highlighted that the relationship between Tehran and Moscow continues to strengthen across all fields, whether bilateral or regional.

In his remarks, Pezeshkian referred to the comprehensive strategic agreement between Iran and Russia and said that the signing of this pact would enhance cooperation in areas like security, culture, and trade. He added that all obstacles to implementing this agreement have been removed, and the two countries are determined to execute it fully.

Russian President Vladimir Putin also emphasized the importance of the comprehensive strategic agreement, stating that it would foster the expansion of bilateral economic cooperation and offer an opportunity to diversify relations across various sectors.

At the beginning of the meeting, Putin welcomed President Pezeshkian's visit to Moscow, noting the significance of the visit, as they would not only discuss bilateral cooperation but also sign the comprehensive strategic agreement. He expressed satisfaction with the completion of the agreement after extensive preparation and emphasized its potential to enhance the diversity of bilateral relations.

Putin also remarked on the notable growth in trade between the two nations, noting that in the first ten months of 2024, trade exchanges had increased by more than 15%. He expressed satisfaction with the pace of this growth and highlighted the positive trajectory of commercial relations.

Putin conveyed his best wishes for Iran's Supreme Leader, noting that the progress in relations between Iran and Russia is conducted with his guidance and oversight.

The Russian president also mentioned joint projects between the two countries, including the development of nuclear power plants, energy cooperation, and the improvement of transportation and communication infrastructure.

Earlier on Friday, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin welcomed Pezeshkian, who is in



Iran-Russia Relations Described as Vital, Sensitive, and Strategic

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emphasizing that the implementation of a free trade agreement between Iran and the five member countries of the union would create the most favorable conditions for reciprocal trade and the execution of joint projects.

Touching on cultural cooperation, Mishustin assured continued collaboration, including cultural days, creative group tours, film weeks, and exhibitions. These initiatives, he noted, allow citizens of both countries to better understand each other's rich culture, history, and spiritual life, ultimately strengthening the friendship and bonds between the two neighboring nations.

For his part, President Pezeshkian remarked that the implementation of the free trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union would also contribute to the development of bilateral relations with Russia. He noted that the comprehensive strategic agreement between Iran and Russia would open a new and lasting chapter in their diplomatic ties.

Putin also highlighted the increase in humanitarian cooperation, with tourism exchanges between Russia and Iran rising by 21%. He expressed optimism for further cultural exchanges between the two nations, particularly through joint events expected to take place in June of this year.

Moscow on an official visit. During their meeting, Mishustin emphasized the historic significance of Pezeshkian's visit.

Mishustin told Dr. Mohammadreza Pourebrahimi, the head of the Iranian delegation, that the visit was of historic importance, highlighting that both Pezeshkian and Putin would sign a comprehensive strategic agreement between Russia and Iran. This agreement, he noted, would lay a strong foundation for long-term cooperation between the two nations.

The Russian Prime Minister assured that the Russian government would guarantee the precise implementation of all decisions made at the highest level between Russia and Iran.

Mishustin pointed out that the relationship between Russia and Iran, based on principles of friendship, mutual respect, and consideration of each other's interests, is looking toward a promising future. He further mentioned the active cooperation between the two countries in sectors such as transportation, energy, and education.

Regarding transport collaboration, Mishustin highlighted the North-South International Transport Corridor as a key example of their joint projects. He also noted that over 9,000 Iranian students are currently studying in Russia, underscoring the expansion of educational cooperation.

The Prime Minister added that tourism exchanges between the two nations are showing a positive and upward trend. In 2023, both countries began cooperating on the visa-free travel for organized tourist groups. He also mentioned that trade turnover between Russia and Iran had increased by 17% in 2024.

Mishustin expressed support for granting Iran observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union,

Iran Dismisses Claims of Training, Providing Assistance to Yemeni Forces

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's ambassador to the UN has dismissed as "groundless" claims that Tehran has trained or provided assistance for the Yemeni Ansarullah resistance forces, saying such claims lack credible technical evidence and are driven by political agendas.

In identical letters addressed to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the rotating president of the Security Council Amar Bendjama, Amir Saïd Iravani responded to a report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen.

The panel, Iravani said, had cited what it viewed as Ansarullah's limited capabilities to conclude that it was affiliated with "foreign trainers" and that similarities between the group's materials and those linked to Iran indicated technical support from Iran.

After "thoroughly reviewing the alleged evidence, Iranian authorities categorically rejected these claims, including the supposed similarities between confiscated weapons and Iranian productions," Iravani wrote in the letters.

Iran's ambassador and permanent representative to the UN emphasized that weapon similarities alone cannot establish their origin or prove Iranian involvement.

"Such claims are unfounded, as similar weapons can be manufactured worldwide through reverse engineering, and the technology in question is neither advanced nor exclusive to Iran. Moreover, the photos and images presented by the Panel lack credibility and fail to meet the standard of reliable evidence. Regrettably, the Panel has compromised its own credibility by relying on speculative assumptions instead of providing substantiated and verifiable facts."

The senior Iranian diplomat stressed that a significant portion of the report relies on "vague and unreliable" references, including so-called "sources," "confidential sources," and "multiple sources," undermining its credibility with biased and unsubstantiated claims.

He also roundly repudiated the allegations in paragraph 67 of the report regarding "the level of coordination between Ansarullah, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and other resistance groups" concerning Operation True Promise against Israeli assets within the occupied territories.

"This operation was exclusively an Iranian military initiative, undertaken in the exercise of its



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

inherent right to self-defense. It was a direct and proportional response to the Israeli terrorist attack on Iranian diplomatic premises in Damascus on April 1, 2024 - a blatant violation of fundamental principles of international law, particularly the inviolability of diplomatic premises and representatives. Such baseless claims seek to distort the legitimate nature of Iran's response to an unlawful act of aggression," Iravani stated.

Iran's UN ambassador also stated that his country has never had proxy groups nor considers other nations in the region as proxies.

"Ansarullah are a part of the legitimate government in Sana'a and operate with full political independence, making decisions and taking actions based solely on their own interests and priorities. Therefore, their activities and decisions have no connection to the Islamic Republic of Iran," he said.

Iravani noted that the final report of the Panel of Experts on Yemen contains "inaccurate and unsupported political analyses" regarding the root causes of regional instability.

"It disregards the interconnectedness of the Gaza crisis with the Yemenis' faith, religious beliefs, and commitment to Palestine, as evidenced by the flawed analysis in paragraph 7. This omission reflects a deliberate bias that further undermines the report's validity."

"Furthermore, the ongoing military aggressions conducted by the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Yemen and the bombing of Yemen's vital and civilian infrastructure constitute clear violations of the UN Charter, international law, and relevant Security Council resolutions," the Iranian diplomat said.

Iravani added that such unlawful actions not only endanger international peace and security, but also exacerbate Yemen's already dire humanitarian crisis.

He noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran, as a responsible member of the United Nations, fully complies with its obligations under international law and is committed to relevant UN Security Council resolutions on Yemen.

Iran, Tajikistan Presidents Call for Expansion of Bilateral Cooperation



TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian and his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rahmon have called for the expansion of ties between their nations, saying that both countries possess numerous capacities that help them achieve the goal.

The two presidents held a joint press conference on Thursday in Tajikistan's capital Dushanbe, briefing reporters on the negotiations held earlier in the day. The presidents and other officials also signed 23 documents to expand cooperation in various fields.

President Pezeshkian expressed hope that the newly signed agreements will further promote bilateral ties and help the two countries reach the optimal level of cooperation they want.

In addition to issues related to bilateral cooperation, discussions between the Iranian and Tajik sides covered regional developments including the situation in Afghanistan as well as the Gaza war, according to Pezeshkian.

Rahmon, for his part, said that the negotiations put a focus on developing cooperation in mining, pharmaceutical, industrial, transport and agricultural sectors.

Also, capacities provided by the Iranian port cities of Chabahar and Bandar Abbas to expand cooperation in the transport sector was discussed, the Tajik president said. Following the press conference, the Iranian president visited the Avicenna Tajik State Medical University, where he received an honorary professorship and a plaque of honor.

The Iranian president also made a speech at the university, and signed the guestbook of the academic center. During his speech, Pezeshkian said that Iran "hates any war and violence" and has no hostility toward anyone.

Later Pezeshkian underlined that Iran has no limits for expanding relations with Tajikistan, and wherever there is a problem, the Islamic Republic will try to solve it.

He made the remarks in a meeting with Speaker of the House of Representatives of Tajikistan Mohammed Taïr Zakirzadeh in Dushanbe on Thursday.

Ethiopia Presents a Major Opportunity for Iran Economic Development



TEHRAN - Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf highlighted Ethiopia's emerging significance as a key partner in Iran's economic development, particularly in light of current sanctions. Speaking ahead of his departure to Ethiopia on Thursday, Qalibaf emphasized that Ethiopia, a leading African nation with over 120 million people, represents a vital opportunity for economic cooperation through BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa).

Qalibaf noted that Iran and Ethiopia have maintained official diplomatic ties for over 70 years, underscoring the historical relationship between the two nations. Ethiopia, located in the Horn of Africa, is viewed as one of the continent's most rapidly developing countries. With the second-largest population in Africa, Ethiopia is projected to have the fifth-largest economy on the continent.

He also pointed out the strategic geopolitical position of Ethiopia, especially its capital, Addis Ababa, which serves as the diplomatic hub for Africa. The African Union's headquarters are in Addis Ababa, and the city also hosts the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa.

Moreover, Qalibaf stressed the importance of Addis Ababa's international connectivity. The city's airport offers direct flights to over 100 destinations across Africa and around the world, with future projections indicating the airport could handle over 100 million passengers annually within the next three years, creating significant opportunities for air travel and trade.

Qalibaf further highlighted Ethiopia's proximity to the Red Sea, offering a vital maritime link for Iran, particularly with the nearby Djibouti. This geographical closeness could facilitate quicker maritime connections between the two nations.

Despite the growing economic activity across Africa, valued at over \$1.2 trillion, Qalibaf lamented that Iran's trade with the continent is currently only \$1.2 billion, a fraction of Africa's total trade potential. He expressed hope that increased cooperation with Ethiopia could help expand Iran's engagement with the rest of Africa, a region with a young and rapidly growing population.

IRAN NEWS



Iranian, Qatari FMs Discuss Regional Developments

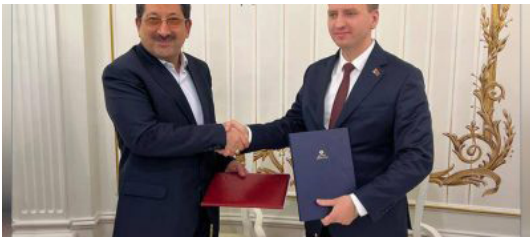
TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iranian and Qatari foreign ministers in a telephone conversation on Thursday night discussed the recent regional developments, the ceasefire agreement in the Gaza Strip in particular.

During the phone talk, Abbas Araqchi and his Qatari counterpart Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani also discussed mutual cooperation.

Araqchi appreciated Qatar's efforts in this regard and emphasized the need for the international community to improve the living conditions of the Palestinian people.

Al Thani, for his part, presented a report on the process of negotiations leading to the ceasefire agreement.

Iran Opens Trade Center in Minsk, Belarus



According to ILNA, during the official visit of Seyed Mohammad Atabak, Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade, to Belarus, Iran's new trade center was inaugurated in Minsk.

The event was also attended by Mohammad Ali Dehghani Dehnavi, Deputy Minister and Head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization.

Additionally, a meeting was held between the Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade and the Head of the Trade Promotion Organization with Iranian business leaders in Belarus.

During the meeting, proposals were presented to facilitate trade between Iran and Belarus.

Meanwhile during the meeting of the Iran-Belarus Joint Cooperation Commission, Atabak emphasized the need to strengthen economic and trade relations between Iran and Belarus. He highlighted that the two nations' longstanding political relations and mutual support in international forums warrant an expansion of their current trade exchanges.

Atabak stated that the primary goal of this partnership is to reinforce multilateralism and promote free political and economic relations among countries. He affirmed that Tehran and Minsk, as two independent nations, are committed to deepening bilateral relations with a focus on national interests and mutual respect.

Discussing Iran's capabilities, Atabak pointed out the country's significant potential in various sectors, including petrochemicals, industrial and mining machinery, agriculture, food industries, healthcare and pharmaceuticals, medical education, and technical and engineering services. He noted the substantial role that services such as technical and engineering, tourism, healthcare, and education play in Iran's economy. Atabak expressed hope that the ongoing negotiations would pave the way for enhanced cooperation in these areas.

Atabak announced Iran's strong desire to deepen and broaden its industrial cooperation with Belarus. He highlighted the recent finalization of a free trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), expressing optimism that this agreement would facilitate increased trade volume between Iran and Belarus.

Call for Removing Barriers to Iranian Agricultural Exports to Russia



IRANNEWS/ECONOMICDESK

TEHRAN - Minister of Agriculture, Gholamreza Nouri, highlighted the importance of removing obstacles to the export of Iranian agricultural products to Russia during a meeting with his Russian counterpart in Moscow.

Nouri, who was visiting Moscow, met with Russian Minister of Agriculture, Oksana Lut, on Thursday, 27th of Dey (January 2025), to discuss key issues in bilateral agricultural cooperation.

During the meeting, Minister Nouri emphasized Iran's agricultural capacity, stating that agriculture and food are among the most significant aspects of economic relations between Iran and Russia.

He identified key areas for cooperation between the two nations, including crop and horticultural farming, fisheries, forest conservation, natural resource management, agricultural research, technology innovation, and livestock breeding.

Nouri also stressed the need to establish a joint agricultural cooperation committee to facilitate the growth of agricultural exports from Iran to Russia, stating that both countries must work together to eliminate the barriers currently hindering exports.

He expressed hopes that Russia would begin sourcing certain agricultural products, which it currently imports from other countries, from Iran. Additionally, Nouri invited Russian companies and economic stakeholders to invest in joint agricultural production projects in Iran.

Oksana Lut, the Russian Minister of Agriculture, praised Iran for its vast land and successful efforts over the years to achieve self-sufficiency in many agricultural and food products.

She noted that Iranian agricultural technology is continually advancing, and expressed Russia's readiness to collaborate on joint projects in areas such as seed and sapling improvement and livestock breeding. She also mentioned the possibility of increasing self-sufficiency in various sectors of the agricultural industry.

Lut further emphasized the potential for expanding cooperation in biotechnology, technology, and knowledge exchange, aiming to attract skilled young professionals into the agricultural sector.



Iran, Tajikistan Sign 13 Cooperation Agreements

IRANNEWS/ECONOMICDESK

TEHRAN - In a significant step toward strengthening trade and economic ties, 13 cooperation agreements were signed between Iranian and Tajik businesses during a recent high-level Iranian business delegation visit to Tajikistan. The agreements were signed following a meeting between the Presidents of Iran and Tajikistan, as well as a business, investment, and tourism forum held in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan.

Samad Hassanzadeh, the President of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines, and Agriculture, remarked that this visit marks an important advancement in the bilateral relationship between Iran and Tajikistan. He emphasized that it demonstrates the commitment of both nations and governments to collaborate and enhance cooperation across various industrial, commercial, and tourism sectors.

The purpose of the Iranian business delegation's visit was to explore trade and investment opportunities between the two countries, with a particular focus on the private sector. Hassanzadeh noted that the delegation, comprising over 100 Iranian entrepreneurs from diverse sectors, traveled to Dushanbe full of optimism, driven by the strong political and social relations between the two countries, as well as the mutual interest of both Presidents in deepening bilateral ties.

Hassanzadeh also highlighted fruitful discussions between Iranian and Tajik businessmen and noted that the visit included positive talks with senior Tajik officials, including the Minister of Economic Development and Trade, the Head of the Investment Committee, and the Head of the Tourism Committee.

Reflecting on the robust political and social ties between Iran and Tajikistan, Hassan-Zadeh stressed that both sides share a strong will to further deepen their cooperation. He mentioned that during meetings, Tajikistan's senior economic officials unanimously expressed their commitment to enhancing Iran's position among the country's trading partners and emphasized the importance of developing a long-term roadmap to foster further relations.

The shared cultural, social, and historical ties between the two nations, combined with the opportunities in Tajikistan, present a promising outlook for trade and economic exchanges. Tajikistan is increasingly seen as a strategic

destination for Iranian investors and businessmen.

Hassanzadeh further emphasized the role of Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, whose popularity and leadership style resonate with the Tajik people, and the constructive, people-oriented approach of Iranian President Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf. These factors, along with the enthusiasm of both Iranian and Tajik businessmen for expanded cooperation, ensure the success of the long-term vision for the two countries' economic and cultural relations.

This historic visit is expected to significantly boost collaboration, particularly in technical and engineering services, as well as in the export of building materials, agricultural products, pharmaceuticals, and medical equipment.

Hassanzadeh also addressed the signing of commercial agreements between the Iranian delegation and Tajik officials during the trip, highlighting that these agreements pave the way for increased joint investments and the fuller utilization of the two countries' resources for the benefit of both nations.

In terms of practical steps, he stressed the importance of creating the necessary infrastructure for banking and financial cooperation, transport, and standardization, as well as finalizing trade agreements, especially regarding preferential trade and tariff adjustments between the two countries. He emphasized that "providing investment incentives" and "facilitating trade" are key to increasing collaboration, and that these are the minimum expectations of the private sector from both governments.

One of the major concerns of the business community in both countries is improving transport efficiency and reducing transportation costs, an issue that should be given special attention given the proximity of the two countries.

Hassanzadeh also pointed out that another pressing issue for the private sector is tariffs and duties, which should be addressed in negotiations between the two governments to facilitate smoother private-sector relations.

Concluding his remarks, Hassanzadeh called on the chambers of commerce in both countries to focus on nurturing these ties and becoming the primary drivers of cooperation. He concluded that enhanced collaboration would lead to job creation and improved living standards in both countries.

Iran and Russia Set to Boost Trade Ties by 2025

TEHRAN - The Iranian ambassador to Russia has highlighted five key obstacles hindering trade development between Iran and Russia, expressing optimism that 2025 will mark a significant breakthrough in bilateral commerce.

During a live television program on Iran-Russia trade, Kambiz Mirkarimi, Vice President of the Iran-Russia Chamber of Commerce, noted the transformation of the Eurasian Economic Agreement from a preferential to a free trade agreement. With parliamentary approval and pending endorsement by the Guardian Council, customs tariffs will drop to zero, potentially triggering a surge in Iran-Russia trade. The Chamber President will accompany the President of Iran on his upcoming visit to Moscow.

Mirkarimi emphasized that achieving \$30 billion in trade with Russia is attainable. He attributed past setbacks to the reliance of both countries on oil and gas revenues and the neglect of trade infrastructure development. Previous challenges included Iranian ships facing docking restrictions at Russian ports and difficulties in obtaining commercial visas. However, Iranian banks have now opened branches in Russia, numerous ships have been purchased, and further improvements are needed in the eastern Caspian Sea region.

Before 2019, Iran's trade balance with Russia heavily favored Russia three to one, but this trend is shifting in favor of Iranian exports. Iran is now exporting high-value-added products instead of solely raw minerals and crude oil while importing essential goods and machinery from Russia.

Mirkarimi stated that the Eurasian free trade agreement and the move toward a unified exchange rate in the commercial currency market will enhance trade transparency, similar to how free trade eliminates export underreporting.

Iranian-Russian trade has grown from \$600 million in 2019 to \$1 billion in 2021, but this is still marginal in the global trade context. The North-South Corridor agreement, signed 24 years ago, still faces serious challenges, including banking and logistics issues.

Mirkarimi criticized domestic policies that hinder export growth, such as sudden government directives restricting exports when domestic prices rise. He advocated for identifying new markets and supporting industrial producers facing market challenges. A free trade

agreement could prevent abrupt policy changes.

Kazem Jalali, Iran's ambassador to Russia, announced that the primary goal of the President's upcoming visit to Moscow is to sign a 20-year strategic cooperation agreement, prepared over the past three years and set for signing at the Kremlin. Meetings with Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and President Vladimir Putin are scheduled.

Jalali acknowledged that Iran missed opportunities to expand trade during the Ukraine war when Western countries cut economic ties with Russia. He stressed the need for a stronger Iranian private sector presence in Russia, criticizing the limited engagement by Iran's business community.

Mirkarimi noted that high exhibition costs in Russia deter Iranian traders, who are more familiar with Gulf markets. Currently, Iran has only one commercial counselor in Russia, while Russia has a 12-13 member team in Iran.

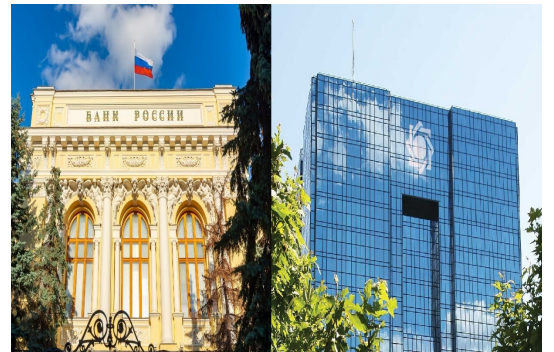
Jalali outlined five main barriers to Iran-Russia economic relations: lack of mutual understanding, transit and logistics issues, customs challenges at the Astara border, unresolved banking and financial problems, and inadequate transportation fleets. Efforts are underway to address these challenges, including banking collaborations and logistics improvements.

Mirkarimi added that Iran's incomplete Rasht-Astara railway connection hampers trade, reflecting a lack of focus on trade-oriented budgeting. He remains optimistic that ongoing infrastructure investments and financial reforms will pave the way for substantial trade growth by 2025.

Jalali concluded that Iran and Russia have significantly shifted towards economic cooperation in recent years. Investments in logistics and banking infrastructure, including secure messaging systems independent of SWIFT and integration of Iran's Shetab and Russia's Mir payment systems, signify a promising outlook for bilateral trade.

Mirkarimi believes resolving industrial liquidity issues will further enable the expansion of industrial goods exports to Russia, reinforcing expectations for a flourishing trade relationship by 2025.

New Details Emerge on Secret SWIFT System Between Iran and Russia



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - In a significant development regarding the financial ties between Iran and Russia, the Iranian Ambassador to Russia announced that the secret SWIFT system between the two countries, which has been operational for nearly two years, has led to the exclusion of SWIFT from their banking exchanges. This announcement comes as part of ongoing efforts to bypass international financial sanctions.

President of Iran, along with several ministers, cabinet members, and a business delegation led by the President of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, arrived in for Moscow from Dushanbe, Tajikistan, this coming Monday. One of the key achievements expected from this trip is the signing of a comprehensive 20-year agreement between the two nations, which will take place at the Kremlin.

This agreement was expected to include a range of aspects, one of the most crucial being bilateral monetary exchanges. For years, traders and investors have been concerned about the difficulties of conducting financial transactions and the lack of banking agreements between Iran and Russia. However, recent efforts have sought to resolve these issues.

In anticipation of the President's visit, Iranian Central Bank Governor Mohammadreza Farzin traveled to Russia and met with his Russian counterpart. During a press conference, Kazem Jalali, the Iranian Ambassador in Russia, confirmed that SWIFT had been removed from the banking transactions between the two nations. Instead, a new secret communication system has been established for these financial exchanges.

Before leaving Tehran, the Central Bank outlined the main goal of the visit, which is to enhance monetary and banking cooperation. One of the key aspects of this visit is the implementation of a joint banking action plan between Iran and Russia, focusing on efforts to reduce reliance on the US dollar and circumvent international sanctions.

According to the Central Bank of Iran, this joint action plan is based on three key pillars: the use of national currencies in trade between the two countries, the ability to connect their domestic banking systems (SPAM and SPFS), and the potential to integrate their card payment networks.

Iran-Tajikistan Trade Soars by 9.3%, Reaching \$261.2m



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's trade with Tajikistan has surged to \$261.2 million, marking a notable 9.3% increase, according to the spokesperson for Iran's Industry, Mining, and Trade Commission. This growth highlights the strengthening of economic ties between Iran and Central Asia, particularly following President Masoud Pezeshkian's recent diplomatic visit to Dushanbe.

The House of Industry, Mining, and Trade's report revealed that the total trade volume between Iran and Tajikistan for the first nine months of this year was 362,000 tons, valued at \$261.2 million. This represents a significant 44.3% increase in weight and a 9.3% rise in value compared to the same period last year.

Iran's exports to Tajikistan accounted for 336,548 tons, valued at \$202.94 million, while imports from Tajikistan totaled 25,449 tons, valued at \$58.3 million. Iranian exports to Tajikistan saw a 45.4% increase in weight and a 7.3% rise in value, while imports from Tajikistan grew by 30.7% in weight and 17% in value compared to 2022.

Iran's major exports to Tajikistan included: Iron and steel products: \$56.3m; plastic products: \$42.6m; food, livestock, and agricultural products: \$29.3m; butane gas: \$10.8m; tiles and ceramics: \$6.2m; bitumen: \$4.9m; carpets and floor coverings: \$3.9m.

Other notable exports included toys, lighting fixtures, furniture, car parts, tractors, agricultural machinery, home appliances (e.g., refrigerators, washing machines), kitchen hoods, bathroom fittings, medical equipment, and textiles.

Iran's imports from Tajikistan were dominated by raw cotton, totaling 25,221 tons, valued at \$56.48 million. Other significant imports included: Sheep carcasses: 99.2 tons, valued at \$915,731; industrial machinery parts: 75.2 tons, valued at \$760,721; yarn: 1.7 tons, valued at \$135,972.

SpaceX's Starship Explodes in Flight Test

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - A SpaceX Starship rocket broke up in space minutes after launching from Texas on Thursday, forcing airline flights over the Gulf of Mexico to alter course to avoid falling debris and setting back Elon Musk's flagship rocket program. SpaceX mission control lost contact with the newly upgraded Starship, carrying its first test payload of mock satellites but no crew, eight minutes after liftoff from its South Texas rocket facilities at 5:38 p.m. EST (2238 GMT).

Video shot by Reuters showed orange balls of light streaking across the sky over the Haitian capital of Port-au-Prince, leaving trails of smoke behind.

"We did lose all communications with the ship - that is essentially telling us we had an anomaly with the upper stage," SpaceX Communications Manager Dan Huot said, confirming minutes later that the ship was lost.



Macron Visits Lebanon to Push Sovereignty, Reforms



BEIRUT (Dispatches) - French President Emmanuel Macron arrived in Lebanon on Friday to help speed up the formation of a government that can quickly implement reforms and open the door to reconstruction following last year's war between Israel and Hezbollah.

Since a truce brokered by France and the United States in November, Paris has played a key role in helping break Lebanon's political deadlock, along with the United States and Saudi Arabia, that has now led to a new president and prime minister.

Lebanon's caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati received Macron upon arrival at Beirut airport. It was the French leader's first visit since 2020.

As a former French protectorate, Beirut has strong historical ties with Paris, but the relationship has been complicated in recent years.

Macron expended a great deal of political capital in 2020 in a failed effort to convince Lebanese actors to back political and financial reforms after the Beirut port explosion that killed more than 200 people and destroyed entire neighbourhoods.

"In three months, we have helped Lebanon move from escalation to recovery, and to open a new page of hope," French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot, who will be in Lebanon with Macron, said in parliament during a debate on Middle East policy.

"With popular support, a broad internal consensus and international backing, the new Lebanese executive can act decisively to restore state sovereignty and rebuild Lebanon."

A French presidency source briefing reporters ahead of the trip said the objective was to underscore the importance of Lebanon's sovereignty, help it towards structural economic reforms that would restore international confidence, and ensure there is a united government able to push change.

Macron also spoke to Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ahead of the visit. Paris has sought to get Riyadh to re-engage in Lebanon for months and the arrival of Joseph Aoun to the presidency and Nawaf Salam as prime minister has helped that process.

French officials said they were optimistic Saudi Arabia would provide financing and equipment to beef up the Lebanese Armed Forces.



PARIS (Dispatches) - The war in the Gaza Strip between Israel and Hamas, which on Wednesday agreed a ceasefire, has killed tens of thousands of people and created a humanitarian disaster.

The fragile ceasefire deal is due to start on Sunday, but still has to be approved by Israel's cabinet.

The sheer scale of bombardment and violence of the fighting have disfigured the densely populated Palestinian territory's urban landscape.

AFP looks at the material impact of the war.

Gaza is one of the most densely populated places on the planet. Before the war 2.4 million people lived on a 365-square-kilometre strip of land.

By December 1, 2024, nearly 69 per cent of the buildings in Gaza had been destroyed or damaged, according to satellite imagery analysed by the UN's Satellite Centre (UNOSAT). That amounts to 170,812 buildings.

US researchers Corey Scher and Jamon Van Den Hoek, who use satellite imagery with different methodology, counted 172,015 damaged or destroyed buildings in Gaza on January 11, 2025.

Hamas's unprecedented October 7, 2023, attack on Israel resulted in the death of more than 1,200 people on the Israeli side, most of them civilians, according to an AFP tally of Israeli official figures.

That figure includes hostages killed while in captivity in the Gaza Strip.

Since October 7, 2023, at least 46,788 Palestinians, most of them civilians, have been killed in Israel's military campaign in Gaza, according to data provided by the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory.

Those figures are acknowledged as reliable by the UN.

Before the war, Gaza City in the territory's north was home to some 600,000 people. Almost three-quarters of its buildings (74.2 per cent) have been damaged or destroyed.

In Rafah, Gaza's southernmost city along the border with Egypt, the Israeli army launched a ground offensive in early May.

By the end of that month, nearly 48.7 per cent of the buildings in Rafah had been hit, against 33.9 per cent the previous month.

Although relatively spared compared with Gaza City, gutted facades and buildings stand testament to the scars of war.

Rights group Amnesty International said that more than 90 per cent of the buildings along 58 square kilometres of Gaza's border territory with Israel appear to have been "destroyed or severely damaged" between October 2023 and May 2024.

The United Nations has estimated that reconstruction in the territory would take up to 15 years and cost as much as US\$50 billion. During the war, Gaza's hospitals have been repeatedly attacked by Israel, which accused Hamas of using them for military purposes, a charge the militant group denies.

By December 31, just 18 of Gaza's 36 hospitals, or half, were partially functioning, according to the WHO, with a total capacity of 1,800 beds.

Data from UNOSAT and geographic database OpenStreetMap also indicates that more than 83 per cent of Gaza's mosques have been damaged or destroyed.

The territory's largely UN-run schools, where many civilians have sought refuge from the fighting, have also paid a heavy price, with the Israeli military accusing Hamas of using them to conceal fighters.

As of December 1, 2024, Unicef counted 496 schools damaged — nearly 88 per cent of its count of 564 facilities. There have been direct hits on 396 schools.

Meanwhile U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken voiced confidence that the implementation of a ceasefire in Gaza would begin Sunday, as Israel awaited a cabinet vote and accused Hamas of backtracking.

"I am confident, and I fully expect that implementation will begin, as we said, on Sunday," Blinken said at a farewell news conference yesterday.

Blinken said that he and other officials of President Joe Biden's administration, which ends Monday, were on the telephone to try to resolve issues in the ceasefire announced Wednesday through mediator Qatar.

"It's not exactly surprising that in a process, in a negotiation, that has been this challenging and this fraught, you may get a loose end. We're tying up that loose end as we speak," Blinken said.

Blinken's opening remarks were disrupted by two activists who regularly show up at press briefings. Both were asked to leave, with one of them shouting slogans as he waited for State Department security to remove him.

Los Angeles Fire Evacuees Told Not to Return for at Least a Week



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Frustration is mounting among evacuees, who are angry over rules that prevent them from returning -- even to homes that survived the deadly blazes.

"There was a group chat where everyone was complaining, getting mad, saying, 'why do they keep on locking us out of our homes?'" Ronnen Miz told local broadcaster KTLA.

But with 40,000 acres (16,000 hectares) burned in two ferocious fires, the situation is just too dangerous, officials said.

Electricity, gas and sewage lines are wrecked, there is toxic waste everywhere, and there is a growing threat of hazardous mudslides or landslides, officials said at a news conference.

Teams with dogs are scouring the wreckage in the hunt for more victims.

"It's going to be a while," said Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna.

"I'm going to say at minimum, at least another week, and that's an estimate, but I believe it's going to be longer than that."

According to the latest coroner's tally, at least 27 people have died in wind-driven fires that ripped through the upmarket enclave of Pacific Palisades and the more mixed community of Altadena.

Luna said search teams were continuing to comb the rubble looking for victims, with the number of dead expected to rise.

Pakistan's Imran Khan Handed 14 Years Jail Term in Land Graft Case

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - A Pakistani court sentenced former Prime Minister Imran Khan to 14 years imprisonment on Friday in a land corruption case, a setback to nascent talks between his party and the government aimed at cooling political instability in the south Asian nation.

The verdict in the case was delivered by an anti-graft court in a prison in the garrison city of Rawalpindi, where Khan has been jailed since August 2023.

Khan's wife Bushra Bibi was also found guilty and sentenced to 7 years in prison. She was out on bail but was taken into custody after the judgment was pronounced, Geo News reported.

Law Minister Azam Nazeer Tarar told reporters that Khan's party could reach out to higher courts to appeal against the ruling, and that the former cricket star could also file a mercy petition to the president of Pakistan.

Omar Ayub, an aide of Khan, said the party will challenge the verdict in higher courts.

The former premier, 72, had been indicted on charges that he and his wife were gifted land by a real estate developer during his premiership from 2018 to 2022 in exchange for illegal favours.

Khan and Bibi had pleaded not guilty. The case is linked to the Al-Qadir Trust, a non-government welfare body the couple set up when Khan was in office.

Prosecutors say the trust was a front for Khan to illegally receive land from a real estate developer. They said he was given 60 acres (24 hectares) near Islamabad and another large plot close to his hilltop mansion in the capital.

Khan's Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI) party says the land was not for



personal gain and was for the spiritual and educational institution the former prime minister had set up.

"Whilst we wait for detailed decision, it's important to note that the Al Qadir Trust case against Imran Khan and Bushra Bibi lacks any solid foundation and is bound to collapse," PTI's foreign media wing said in a statement.

The announcement of the verdict was delayed three times, most recently on Monday, amid reconciliation talks between PTI and the government. The two sides have been at loggerheads since Khan was ousted from office in 2022.

The verdict is the biggest setback for Khan and his party since a surprisingly good showing in the 2024 general election when PTI's candidates - who were forced to contest as independents - won the most seats, but fell short of the majority needed to form a government.

Jailed since August 2023, Khan has been facing dozens of cases ranging from charges of graft and misuse of power, to inciting violence against the state after being removed from office in a parliamentary vote of confidence in April 2022.

He has either been acquitted or his sentences suspended in most cases, except for this one and another on charges of inciting supporters to rampage through military facilities to protest against his arrest on May 9, 2023.

His supporters have led several violent protest rallies since the May 9 incidents.

Khan's cases have been tried inside prison on security grounds.

UK PM Signs 100-Year Partnership Agreement With Ukraine

KYIV (Dispatches) - U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer signed a 100-year partnership agreement with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, part of a European show of support and promises to keep helping Ukraine endure in its nearly three-year war with Russia.

The announcement came days before Donald Trump is sworn in as U.S. president with skepticism of America's military burden in Europe and what he says is a plan to end the continent's biggest conflict since World War II.

"We are with you not just today or tomorrow, for this year or the next, but for 100 years — long after this terrible war is over and Ukraine is free and thriving once again," Starmer told Zelenskyy during a visit to Kyiv, promising that the U.K. would "play our part" in guaranteeing Ukraine's post-war security.

Starmer said that the landmark century-long agreement commits the two sides to cooperate on defense — especially maritime security against Russian activity in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea and Sea of Azov — and on technology projects including drones, which have become vital weapons for both sides in the war. The treaty also includes a system to help track stolen Ukrainian grain exported by Russia from occupied parts of the country.

Ukraine's alignment with the West, and potential future membership in NATO, have angered Russian President Vladimir Putin, who still wants to exert influence over the independent nation.

While Starmer was meeting with Zelenskyy at the presidential palace, debris from Russian drones shot down by Ukraine's air defenses fell in at least four districts of Kyiv, according to city administration chief Tymur Tkachenko. One was close to the Baroque



presidential palace where the two men met.

Starmer said that the drones were "a reminder" of what the Ukrainian people are up against and their resolve.

Starmer's unannounced visit is his first trip to Ukraine since he took office in July, though he said that it was his seventh meeting with Zelenskyy.

The Italian defense chief was also in Kyiv on Thursday, two days after Germany's defense minister visited and three days after Zelenskyy talked by phone with French

President Emmanuel Macron.

The flurry of diplomatic activity came in the days leading up to Trump's inauguration on Monday, which is expected to bring a departure from the outgoing U.S. administration's pledge to stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes to defeat Russia. Trump has also indicated that he wants Europe to shoulder more of the burden for helping Ukraine.

Kyiv's allies have rushed to flood Ukraine with as much support as possible before Trump's inauguration, with the aim of putting Ukraine in the strongest position possible for any future negotiations to end the full-scale invasion, which began on Feb. 24, 2022.

Ukrainians worry that Trump's plan will demand unpalatable concessions, such as giving up territory. Zelenskyy has also said that he wants security guarantees to deter Russia from invading again in the future.

"We must look at how this war could end, the practical ways to get a just and lasting peace ... that guarantees your security, your independence and your right to choose your own future," Starmer said at a joint news conference.

Zelenskyy said that the two leaders had discussed an idea floated by Macron for Western troops to monitor a future ceasefire, but said that it's "a bit too early to talk about details."

Starmer left the door open to U.K. participation, telling Ukraine's leader that "we will work with you and all of our allies on steps that would be robust enough to guarantee Ukraine's security."



Medvedev Stunned by Teen Qualifier Tien

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Last year's runner-up Daniil Medvedev was dumped out in the Australian Open second round by 19-year-old qualifier Learner Tien in a massive Melbourne shock at close to 3am. In his debut Australian Open, the American ranked 121 stunned the world number five 6-3, 7-6 (7/4), 6-7 (8/10), 1-6, 7-6 (10/7) in a nailbiter and faces France's Corentin Moutet in the next round. The left-handed Californian Tien soaked up the applause at Margaret Court Arena after the biggest win of his young career following four hours and 48 minutes of seesawing action. "Honestly it hasn't really set in yet," he said. "I'm just pretty happy to be off the court. I don't think I've played a match that long ever, or even spent that much time on a tennis court straight. "Honestly, I'm just glad to be off. Obviously really happy, but I don't think it fully hit me yet." Tien had defeated Argentina's Camilo Ugo Carabelli in five sets in the first round for his maiden victory at a Grand Slam at the fourth attempt. "These are my first two five-setters," said the gifted teenager, a known talent in tennis circles. "It is nice to feel that I can play these more physical matches and get through them." It was a painful exit for Russia's former world number one Medvedev, who has lost three of the last four finals at Melbourne Park including to Jannik Sinner in 2024. The 28-year-old Medvedev needed five sets to beat the 418th-ranked Kasidit Samrej on Tuesday in his first match of the season, smashing his racquet and a net camera in a rage at one point. He started more serenely against Tien but errors crept into his play and Tien shook off any early nerves by clinching the first set in 47 minutes. Tien showed his mettle and his pedigree in the eighth game by prevailing in one gruelling 32-shot rally.

The 2021 US Open champion Medvedev and Tien went to a second-set tie break, where the Russian was left exasperated by a double foot fault on his way to losing the set. The third set again went to a tie break, where Medvedev pulled out an ace under excruciating pressure to save match point and then clinched the set at the third time of asking to come back from the brink. Suddenly it was all Medvedev and he raced through the fourth set to tee up a decider. Meanwhile Carlos Alcaraz dropped a set before muscling his way into the Australian Open last 16 and edge closer to becoming the youngest man in history to complete a career Grand Slam. The 21-year-old third seed was a class above Nuno Borges with the Portuguese world number 33 dumped out of the tournament 6-2, 6-4, 6-7 (3/7), 6-2 on Rod Laver Arena. It was Alcaraz's first time on centre court this year after being shunted to neighbouring Margaret Court Arena for his opening two matches. With the sun shining, he revelled in the atmosphere, rattling off 54 winners and nine aces, dominating from the baseline. "The last time I played here I lost, I really wanted to play here and get another win on Rod Laver," said the Spaniard, a four-time Grand Slam winner who is gunning for a first title in Australia. Meanwhile defending champion Aryna Sabalenka had to battle hard to beat Denmark's Clara Tauson 7-6 (7/5), 6-4 and reach the second week of the Australian Open after suffering another bout of the serving jitters. The world number one remained on track to win her third consecutive Melbourne Park title but only after a rollercoaster scrap that lasted more than two hours on Rod Laver Arena. "That was a great battle," said Sabalenka.

Diallo's 12-Minute Hat-Trick Rescues Man Utd From Southampton Scare



MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Amad Diallo scored a sensational 12-minute hat-trick as Manchester United roared back to beat Premier League basement club Southampton 3-1, narrowly avoiding a humiliating fourth straight home defeat. The Ivory Coast international — United's standout player this season — levelled in the 82nd minute before putting the hosts ahead in the dying seconds of the 90 minutes. He was still not done, capitalising on an error from Taylor Harwood-Bellis to grab a third in stoppage time, giving the scoreline a skewed look. It was cruel luck on a Saints side battling to avoid finishing the season as the worst side in Premier League history, still with just one win to their name. Ivan Juric's men had deservedly taken the lead through a Manuel Ugarte own goal towards the end of the first half and had numerous chances to extend their lead. But Diallo was once again the saviour for misfiring United following his winning goal at Manchester City and his late equaliser against Liverpool in recent weeks. "Today we showed at the end we were the best team," the winger told TNT Sports. "I am so happy for the win today because this team deserves it. "I am ready to play every position where the manager likes to put me." United manager Ruben Amorim praised his forward, underlining his attacking threat. "He pushes the other team into the final third — that is really important," he said. "We didn't have a good game, but at this moment, winning is the most important thing." United secured a morale-boosting FA Cup win at Arsenal on Sunday, which followed a battling 2-2 draw at league leaders Liverpool. But they had a point to prove to their long-suffering home fans after three straight Premier League defeats underlined the huge rebuilding task facing new manager Amorim. The visitors settled quickly and the lively Kamaldeen Sulemana forced Andre Onana into a smart save after surging into the penalty area.

Endrick Shines With Double as Real Madrid Edge Out Celta

MADRID (Dispatches) - Real Madrid threw away a two-goal lead but eventually triumphed 5-2 after extra time against Celta Vigo to reach the Copa del Rey quarter-finals, with youngster Endrick netting twice. On the back of a humiliating 5-2 Clasico defeat of their own by Barcelona in the Spanish Super Cup last weekend, Madrid seemed to be heading for a relatively serene triumph before two late Celta goals forced extra-time. Madrid players and coach Carlo Ancelotti faced whistles when they walked out after the defeat in Saudi Arabia and it was harder than expected for them to book a place in Monday's draw for the last eight. Kylian Mbappe scored a brilliant opener before the break, although Celta complained vigorously over what seemed a sure penalty in Madrid's area moments beforehand. Vinicius netted early in the second half to help Madrid take control, but Jonathan Bamba's late goal gave Celta hope in the final stages. Marcos Alonso stroked home from the penalty spot after Bamba was fouled in stoppage time to force extra-time. Teenager Endrick put Madrid ahead again, Fede Valverde powered



home their fourth and Endrick struck once more with a clever backheel to wrap up the win, which was entertaining but did little to ease concerns over their defensive frailties. "This is Madrid, you fight until the end to win," said Endrick. One of the few positives Madrid took from the Super Cup defeat

was Mbappe's goal and performance in Jeddah. The former Paris Saint-Germain star looked back to his best and again impressed for Madrid after a shaky start to life in the Spanish capital. Mbappe took the opening goal brilliantly, although it was mired in controversy after Madrid goalkeeper Andriy Lunin appeared to bring down Williot Swedberg in the area. The referee gave nothing and Madrid countered, with Mbappe zipping past a defender and finishing with aplomb. Celta hoped VAR would instruct the referee to view the penalty claim again but no such instruction followed and Mbappe's goal stood. Vinicius added Madrid's second goal early in the second half with a cool finish after Mbappe and then Brahim Diaz combined to set him up. Celta opened up in search of a way back in and Madrid created several more clear chances. Mbappe headed over from close range from Diaz's cross as Los Blancos found their flow, without being able to add to their lead. Carl Starfelt cleared off the line for Celta after Vinicius lobbed goalkeeper Ivan Villar in search of the third.

Neymar Claims Mbappe's Ego, Jealousy Destroyed PSG's Dream Team



SAO PAULO (Dispatches) - Brazilian striker Neymar said that former Paris Saint-Germain teammate Kylian Mbappe became "jealous" of his relationship with Lionel Messi when the Argentine superstar joined the club in 2021. Speaking on a podcast hosted by former Brazil striker Romario, Neymar blamed a clash of egos for the failure of the three stars to gel during their spell together at the French club. The 32-year-old Neymar, who left PSG for Saudi club Al-Hilal in 2023, said he initially got on well with Mbappe when the France international joined him at PSG in 2017. "I had my issues with him, we had a little fight, but he was a boy who at the beginning, when he arrived, was fundamental," Neymar said of Mbappe. "I always told him, I joked with him, that he was going to be one of the best, I always helped him, I talked to him. "He came to my house, we went out to dinner together." But Neymar said Mbappe's behaviour changed when Messi arrived from Barcelona in 2021. Neymar already had a relationship with Messi from their successful stint as teammates at Barcelona between 2013 and 2017. "We spent some good years together, but then, when Messi arrived, I think he got a little jealous," Neymar said. "He didn't want to share me with anyone and then the fights began, the change of behaviour," he added. Neymar added that a lack of teamwork lay behind the failure of PSG's superstar trio to fully realise their potential. "You have to realise that you don't play alone. You have to have the others on your side: 'I'm the best, OK', but who's going to give you the ball? You have to have good people who give you the ball," Neymar said. "It was everyone's ego... so it couldn't work. Nowadays, if nobody runs, if nobody helps each other, it's impossible to win," he added. Meanwhile, Neymar declined to give clues about his future amid recent speculation he may seek a move back to Brazil or Major League Soccer. Neymar has struggled with injuries in Saudi Arabia and played only a handful of games in 16 months. Neymar said although he remained happy in Saudi Arabia, "in six months, everything can change."

Thunder Clobber Cavs in Battle of NBA's Best

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 40 points to lead the Oklahoma City Thunder to a 134-114 home win over the Cleveland Cavaliers in a matchup between the two teams with the NBA's best records. The Cavs came in as the No. 1 offensive team in the league, while Oklahoma City ranked atop the NBA in defensive rating. The Thunder dominated, reeling off a 22-2 run over the final six minutes of the first quarter, then extending the run to 30-2 in the second quarter. Luguentz Dort scored a season-high 22 points for the Thunder, going 6 of 9 from beyond the 3-point arc. Dort also helped lock down Cleveland's Donovan Mitchell, helping the Thunder hold Mitchell to just eight points on 3-of-15 shooting. Darius Garland led the Cavs with 20 points while Jarrett Allen scored 13 on 6-of-6 shooting. Kings 132, Rockets 127: DeMar DeRozan gave Sacramento the lead for good with 2:20 remaining, De'Aaron Fox made five free throws amid two controversial calls in the final 33 seconds, and the host Kings hung on to defeat Houston. DeRozan finished with 33 points and Domantas Sabonis had 20 points, 14 rebounds and seven assists before fouling out as the Kings improved to 5-0 at home under interim coach Doug Christie. Monk capped a 28-point, nine-assist performance with two clinching free throws, giving the Kings their eighth win in their last nine games. Fox chipped in 19 points, seven assists and four steals, while Keegan



Murray had 18 points and 11 rebounds. Jalen Green scored 28 points for the Rockets, who saw a five-game winning streak come to an end. Alperen Sengun had 21 points, 10 rebounds and four steals, and Amen Thompson supplied 20 points, 10 rebounds and five assists. Clippers 118, Trail Blazers 89: Norman Powell scored 23 points to help Los Angeles complete a perfect back-to-back set with a convincing win at Portland. James Harden added 19 points and six assists for the Clippers before being rested for the entire fourth quarter for the second game in a row. On Wednesday, Los Angeles registered a franchise-record 59-point win over the Brooklyn Nets. Dalano Banton had 23 points in 25 minutes off the bench for the Blazers, who took their fourth loss in a row. Scoot Henderson compiled 16 points and six assists. Suns 130, Wizards 123: Devin Booker scored 37 points and Washington, D.C., native Kevin Durant added 23, fueling visiting Phoenix in a wire-to-wire victory over Washington. Booker scored at least 30 points for the fourth straight game after sinking four 3-pointers and 13 of 15 free throws. Grayson Allen scored 21 points off the bench and rookie Ryan Dunn collected career highs in points (18) and rebounds (11) for the Suns, who posted their fourth win in five games.