

President Masoud Pezeshkian During His Visit to the "Pioneers of Progress" Expo in Tehran, Pledged That His Government Will Work to Eliminate Any Obstacles Hindering the Private Sector in the Country

IRAN NEWS

Iran Received an International Peace Award in India for Its Peaceful Efforts in the Region and Support for Palestinians Amid the Israeli Regime's Genocidal War in the Gaza Strip and Its Ongoing Violence in the Occupied Territories

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DOMESTIC



Power Imbalance to Be Resolved by Next Year

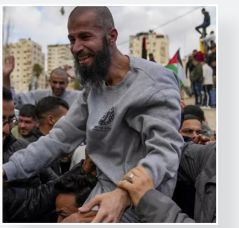
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INTERNATIONAL

Four Israeli Soldiers Swapped for 200 Palestinians

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Establishment of 60 Trade Centers in 35 Countries



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - According to the Iranian Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), the organization has issued permits for the establishment of approximately 60 trade centers in 35 countries. The initiative aims to facilitate foreign trade, provide market consulting, market development, product and service marketing, and offer commercial and economic advisory services in various sectors, as well as assist in signing trade agreements.

Trade centers are considered one of the tools used by the Trade Promotion Organization to assist the private sector in managing and expanding their international trade relations. The organization's support is believed to have enhanced the centers' capabilities in negotiation, networking, and market penetration.

According to Iranian customs statistics, Iraq is among the top five export destinations for Iran, making the activities of trade centers in this country highly significant.

In this regard, Morteza Hedayati, the director of the Iranian trade center in Najaf, Iraq, mentioned that commercial delegations have been sent to Najaf, and the planning of the largest trade forum in Karbala is currently underway. This event, in collaboration with the Iranian consulate in Karbala, is scheduled for March this year. Four Iranian provinces, hosted by the chambers of commerce in Karbala and Najaf, will send trade delegations to Iraq in various sectors, including construction, agriculture, home appliances, decoration, and food products.

Hedayati also stated that preparations for activating the Export Guarantee Fund's brokerage services in Iraq have been completed. Additionally, a contract has been signed for a 10,000-square-meter physical space to establish a permanent Iranian exhibition in Iraq, with legal permits currently being processed. He further emphasized efforts to attract participants for Iran Expo 2025, encouraging Iranian traders and businessmen to take part in the event, which aims to lead to trade agreements.

Iran Starts \$528m Project to Develop Oilfields Near Iraq Border



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has started a major project to develop oilfields at one of the country's old reservoirs that is shared with neighboring Iraq.

At a ceremony on Saturday, the CEO of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) and local officials ordered the start of development projects at three oilfields of Sumar and Saman in Kermanshah province and at Delavaran oilfield in the province of Ilam.

The three oilfields are part of the NIOC's Nafishahr Operation Zone, a reservoir discovered in 1931 that is connected to oilfields in neighboring Iraq. It is located some 72 kilometers from the border city of Qasr-e Shirin and 230 kilometers to the southwest of the provincial capital of Kermanshah.

A report by the official IRNA news agency said that the projects are worth \$528 million and will increase production from the three fields by five times to 20,000 barrels per day (bpd) in the next two years.

NIOC's CEO Hamid Bovard said that the projects will increase the supply of crude oil to Kermanshah Refinery while they will create many jobs for the local youth.

Bovard said that private companies had also contributed to the projects, adding that the investors would be able to earn income from the fields within the next 20 months.

Iran has relied on domestic companies to develop its massive petroleum industry in recent years as the country has been barred from accessing foreign investment and technology because of US sanctions.

Raising Internal Disputes Abroad Weakens National Unity



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Majlis Speaker stated that individuals who are considered representatives of the system must exercise caution in their statements to ensure that messages conveyed to adversaries do not compromise national interests. He emphasized that discussing internal issues and disputes in international settings undermines the unity of the Iranian nation.

Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, in public session of the Parliament, expressed condolences on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Musa Kazim (AS) to the representatives, the Iranian people, and all lovers of Ahlul Bayt (AS). He highlighted the recent military drills conducted by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy in the Persian Gulf and the security and offensive maneuvers by the Army Ground Forces, which showcased Iran's military strength. He praised the relentless efforts of the Armed Forces and prayed for their continued success.

Qalibaf expressed concern over the recent surge in currency prices, which has caused significant worry among the public and economic stakeholders. He stated that the legislation passed by Parliament and the authority granted by the Supreme Economic Coordination Council to the Central Bank places the responsibility on the Ministry of Econom and the Central Bank to curb the uncontrolled rise in currency and gold prices.

The Speaker urged the Parliament's Economic Commission to urgently address this issue and present their findings and recommendations to experts and the public.

He further emphasized that the sharp increase in prices has made it even more essential to provide electronic ration cards for essential goods. Given the positive stance of the President and the readiness of the technical infrastructure, Qalibaf urged the relevant ministers to prioritize the implementation of this measure before the start of Ramadan to alleviate public

concerns and ensure economic stability.

Addressing the recent changes in the U.S. administration and the diverse viewpoints within it, Qalibaf highlighted that while diversity of opinion is a strength of Iran's democratic system, officials should be cautious in their statements to prevent any misinterpretation that could jeopardize national interests.

He stressed that raising internal disputes in international forums weakens national unity and could lead to miscalculations by the new U.S. administration, resulting in increased economic pressures. He recalled that similar actions in the past led to the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the assassination of General Soleimani.

Qalibaf reiterated that Iran's foreign policy is set within the framework outlined by the Supreme Leader and is implemented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which bears the ultimate responsibility for ensuring economic benefits and the lifting of sanctions.

In conclusion, Qalibaf praised Iranian scientists, researchers, and entrepreneurs, acknowledging the achievements displayed at the Pioneers of Progress Exhibition. These included advancements in artificial intelligence, strategic components for steel and petrochemical industries, surgical simulation devices, water pump optimization, and the implementation of the national land management system.

Finally, he pointed out that the lack of synergy and proper utilization of the private sector's vast potential is a major challenge that must be addressed urgently through governance reforms. He assured that Parliament would provide the necessary legal and regulatory support to producers and entrepreneurs in the private sector.

Dozens killed, injured as Israeli Forces Shoot at Civilians in South Lebanon

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Israeli forces have opened fire at the Lebanese people returning to their homes in the country's southern towns, killing at least two civilians and wounding 31 others.

Lebanon's Public Health Ministry released the figures on Sunday.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's al-Mayadeen television channel reported that Israeli forces had abducted two Lebanese from the border town of Houla.

Other reports said an Israeli drone had targeted residents in the village of Bani Hayyan, causing multiple injuries.

Additionally, an Israeli drone dropped sound bombs on a gathering of Lebanese citizens at the Houla-Majdal Silm-Shaqra triangle in southern Lebanon.

Earlier on Sunday, the 60-day deadline for the complete withdrawal of Israeli soldiers from southern Lebanon ended. The pullout was stipulated in a ceasefire deal between Israel and the Hezbollah resistance movement.

The regime forces, however, did not leave the occupied areas in a blatant violation of the truce agreement and an infringement on Lebanon's sovereignty.

Over the weekend, the Israeli military warned Lebanese people not to return to their hometowns in the country's south and put up barricades in the area.

Hezbollah opened a support front for Palestinians in the Gaza Strip after Israel unleashed a genocidal war on the besieged territory on October 7, 2023, launching numerous retaliatory attacks against targets in the occupied lands.

Israel was forced to accept the ceasefire with Hezbollah on November 27, 2024, after suffering heavy losses on the battleground and failing to achieve its goals despite killing over 4,000 people in Lebanon.

Meanwhile the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas has criticized Israel for delaying the



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

implementation of the Gaza ceasefire deal after Israeli forces killed and injured Palestinians trying to return to the north.

Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem in a statement on Saturday held the Zionist entity responsible for any disruption in the enforcement of the ceasefire deal and its repercussions on other related matters.

"The occupying regime is still delaying the implementation of the terms of the truce deal and prisoner exchange agreement by continuing to block off Rashid Street and preventing

the return of displaced Palestinians from the south to the north," he said.

Qassem also emphasized that Hamas has informed mediators that 29-year-old female Israeli captive Arbel Yehud is alive and expected to be released next Saturday.

"What was done today (Saturday) concerning the Israeli captives reflects our religious and ethical values. The latest developments clearly show that the Resistance is still powerful and dynamic," the Hamas official stated.

He further stated that Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu was under the delusion of winning a victory ever since the regime's military unleashed its bloody onslaught against Gaza on October 7, 2023, and he was constantly speaking of imaginary achievements.

"We involved people in the release of four Israeli soldiers in exchange for 200 Palestinian prisoners, as this triumph belongs to the entire Palestinian society," Qassem pointed out.

The Gaza ceasefire deal went into effect last weekend with the release of three Israeli captives and 90 Palestinian prisoners.

Israeli authorities on Saturday released 200 Palestinian prisoners as part of the second phase of a prisoner exchange deal with Hamas.

Abdullah Zaghari, head of the Palestinian Prisoners' Club advocacy group, said the prisoners were handed over to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

FM Seeks to Strengthen Ties with Afghanistan



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iranian Foreign Minister Seyyed Abbas Araqchi met with Acting Foreign Minister of Afghanistan's ruling government, Mawlawi Amir Khan Muttaqi, during his one-day visit to Afghanistan on Sunday.

According to ISNA, the meeting took place at the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where the two officials discussed various aspects of bilateral relations.

At the start of the meeting, Muttaqi welcomed the Iranian delegation and expressed hope that the discussions would enhance relations between the two neighboring countries. "Iran and Afghanistan are two neighboring Muslim nations that have always shared both joy and sorrow," he stated, emphasizing the deep bond between the two countries. He further hoped that Araqchi's visit would yield positive outcomes.

In response, Araqchi reaffirmed the longstanding friendship and cultural ties between the two nations, describing Iran and Afghanistan as "brotherly and friendly countries with deep historical and cultural connections." He noted that both countries have maintained strong relations over the years and stressed the importance of further expanding economic and trade cooperation.

The Iranian Foreign Minister expressed optimism about strengthening ties in the national interest of both countries and their people. "We hope to expand our relations in all areas, especially in economic and cultural fields, and to see continuous growth in our cooperation," Araqchi stated.

The meeting highlighted the commitment of both sides to fostering closer collaboration and advancing mutual interests.

Upon his arrival in Kabul, Araqchi said that economic relations between Iran and Afghanistan are at an outstanding level, hoping that his visit to Kabul would pave the way for the expansion of the ties.

Araqchi, heading a political and economic delegation, arrived in Afghanistan's capital Kabul on Sunday morning.

IRGC Navy Fires Missiles Guided With Artificial Intelligence During War Games



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The naval forces of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) have fired missiles equipped with artificial intelligence, destroying mock enemy targets successfully.

The IRGC Navy's successful performance comes on the final day of a large-scale exercise -- code-named "Great Prophet Authority 19" -- spanning the southern Iranian provinces of Bushehr and Khuzestan's littoral waters.

The Qaem and Almas missiles equipped with artificial intelligence were fired by advanced Mohajer 6 and Ababil 5 drones.

IRGC Navy Commander Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, who was present in the drill, said the systems and equipment of the elite force have been upgraded.

He added that the navy fired various ballistic and surface-to-surface missiles, including an offensive missile from a strategic Shahid Soleimani warship, and shot down the enemy's flying objectives with Kowsar 222 missiles.

Tangsiri noted that the extensive drills, which went underway across the northern and central part of the strategic Persian Gulf waters, were aimed at improving the coordination and readiness of the IRGC naval forces to combat any act of adventurism by the enemies.

They also conveyed a message of peace and friendship to the neighboring states, the commander said.

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

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

The IRGC Ground Force in January held a large-scale and specialized drill, codenamed Payambar-e-A'azam (Great Prophet) 19, in Iran's western province of Kermanshah, as part of attempts to raise its combat preparedness and get further ready to confront potential security threats against the country.

IRAN NEWS



Khatibzadeh Appointed as Head of Foreign Ministry's IPIS

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has appointed seasoned diplomat Saeed Khatibzadeh as his deputy and president of the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) at the Foreign Ministry. Khatibzadeh has previously served as Iran's ambassador to Croatia, adviser to the foreign minister, deputy foreign minister, and head of the Center for Public Diplomacy, and later as a spokesperson. Founded in 1983, IPIS is a foreign policy think tank based in Tehran and affiliated with Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It is tasked with researching issues relevant to Iran's foreign policy.

Official Stresses Need to Institutionalize AI in Petrochemical Industry



TEHRAN - Hassan Abbaszadeh made the remarks on Saturday during a ceremony to sign a cooperation agreement for the development of an AI assistant for the petrochemical industry.

He noted that the petrochemical sector has achieved favorable growth due to its existing infrastructure and already utilizes some of the most advanced technologies.

Abbaszadeh highlighted that the foundation of the petrochemical industry lies in the use of technologies, technical expertise, and licenses.

He stressed the need to establish a roadmap for integrating global knowledge and AI into the industry.

"Today, with the use of cutting-edge knowledge and technology, we can move toward sustainable development in all dimensions," the NPC head said.

The deputy minister added that all petrochemical complexes can be interconnected through a comprehensive plan, enabling forward-looking assessments.

"In the first step, data should be collected at a central hub, and necessary analyses should be accelerated to facilitate the best decision-making," he said.

Abbaszadeh explained that in the next phase, the market for petrochemical products could be linked to a central database. "Market analyses can be conducted using recorded data, and holdings seeking market development can utilize this capacity," he said.

He further noted that AI could be used to analyze the need for new units based on national requirements, data, and technology. "For example, this data can inform us about which products in the chain have higher added value," he said.

Abbaszadeh emphasized the importance of fostering collaboration and interaction to facilitate joint efforts. He said the agreement should be pursued by all stakeholders to be formalized into a contract.



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - During his visit to the 20th International Water and Wastewater Exhibition, Minister of Energy, Abbas Aliabadi, emphasized the critical importance of water, stating that there is no commodity more vital than water, as it is the source of life. He noted that Iran is situated in an arid and water-scarce belt, along with other countries facing similar or worse water shortages.

Aliabadi explained that in the past, Iran had an annual water inflow of over 400 billion cubic meters, with around 130 billion cubic meters available as surface water or groundwater. However, the current situation has declined to less than 380 billion cubic meters, and the country owes more than 150 billion cubic meters to aquifers, with an annual deficit increase of 3 to 4 billion cubic meters. This necessitates significant water conservation measures.

He stressed the need for maximizing water efficiency and warned of potential land subsidence due to over-extraction from underground reserves. The minister urged a shift to water-saving lifestyles.

Regarding the electricity sector, Aliabadi stated that the challenges in water management are greater than those in electricity. He mentioned that electricity can be supplied through renewable energy sources, and the Ministry of Energy has 14 ongoing projects to address power shortages. Some of these projects have made significant progress, and public cooperation is crucial to accelerating their completion.

Aliabadi assured that if the current efforts continue, with collaboration between the public and the Ministry of Oil, the power situation will be normalized by next winter. He expressed confidence that if production and consumption plans are successfully implemented, the summer of next year will be better, and by 2026, the country will achieve a stable and standard electricity supply.

The minister acknowledged the issue of excessive electricity consumption by some users and announced measures to regulate and control illegal usage, including cryptocurrency mining. He stated that authorities are preparing to identify and take action against offenders.

Aliabadi also highlighted efforts to increase electricity production, aiming to generate more power from the country's thermal power plants, which currently have a capacity of less than 100,000 megawatts. Despite

delays in maintenance work due to fuel supply dependencies, the ministry is working to complete unfinished power plants and upgrade existing facilities.

On renewable energy, he reported progress in increasing capacity from 1,300 to 1,500 megawatts and expressed hope to surpass 1,800 to 2,000 megawatts by the end of the year. Achieving these goals depends on public support and financial resources.

Aliabadi emphasized the importance of private sector involvement in addressing the Ministry of Energy's challenges. He highlighted the need to create an attractive investment environment by reducing risks and providing managed opportunities for private investors. He noted that over 35,000 megawatts of electricity investment proposals have been received from the private sector.

Discussing the water sector, Aliabadi stated that the ministry has presented financial requests for urgent and priority projects to the government. However, he mentioned that less than half of the allocated budget for water management has been received.

In the agricultural sector, he stressed the importance of shifting to water-efficient crops and greenhouse farming to optimize water use. The Ministry of Energy, in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture, is focusing on protecting groundwater and preventing illegal extraction.

Aliabadi outlined plans to enhance the economy of the water and electricity sectors by establishing markets and encouraging consumers who exceed the standard consumption patterns to purchase additional resources through regulated market prices.

On the issue of water shortages in 43 cities, including Tehran, Hormozgan, Markazi, and Isfahan, Aliabadi acknowledged the challenges posed by low rainfall and outlined temporary measures to address the crisis. He mentioned long-term plans to use desalinated seawater for drinking and recycled water for other purposes.

Regarding Afghanistan's dam construction on shared rivers, Aliabadi emphasized the importance of border waters and stated that Iran is committed to international regulations. He assured that diplomatic efforts are underway to ensure the fair distribution of shared water resources.

Iran Secures 10th Place in Global Steel Production



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Despite energy imbalances and power outages, Iran's steel producers experienced a 0.8% growth in 2024, solidifying their position as the world's 10th largest steel producer.

According to the Iranian Mines and Mining Industries Development and Renovation Organization (IMIDRO), the latest report from the World Steel Association shows that Iran's steel production faced challenges due to energy shortages over the past 12 months. The country's total steel output reached 31 million tons, while in December alone, production fell by 8.2% to 2.6 million tons due to shortages of natural gas and electricity.

The largest production declines in 2024 were recorded by Russia (7.2%), South Korea (4.7%), the United States (2.4%), and China (1.7%). Despite these challenges, Iran maintained its 10th position in global crude steel production rankings according to the World Steel Association.

Among the top 10 steel-producing nations, Turkey recorded the highest growth with a 9.4% increase, followed by India at 6.3%, Brazil at 5.3%, and Germany at 5.2%.

Statistics indicate that the total steel production of the 71 member countries of the World Steel Association amounted to 1.839 billion tons in 2024, reflecting a 0.9% decline compared to 2023. However, December 2024 production showed a 5.6% growth, reaching 144.5 million tons.

China continues to dominate global steel production, with an output of just over 1.005 billion tons, securing the top position. India follows in second place with 149 million tons, while Japan ranks third with 84 million tons.

The United States ranks fourth with over 79 million tons, followed by Russia (70 million), South Korea (63.5 million), Germany (37.2 million), Turkey (36.9 million), and Brazil (33.7 million), rounding out the top nine steel-producing nations.

Iran Lost Gas Exports to the UAE Due to Political Disputes



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Mehran Amir-Moini evaluated the consequences of implementing or not implementing the Crescent contract. He stated that the controversy surrounding the Crescent deal primarily revolved around pricing issues stipulated in the agreement. Opponents believed that the low gas export prices in the Crescent deal did not benefit the country. However, he pointed out that gas contracts typically include a clause allowing price revisions based on market conditions. This meant that after the contract was implemented, Iran could have requested a price review if deemed necessary and reached a new agreement with the buyer.

Amir-Moini described the opposition to and termination of the Crescent contract as a pretext by its critics, leading to significant financial penalties amounting to \$2.6 billion for Iran. He revealed that the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) has already lost two of its buildings in Europe due to this issue. Furthermore, had the contract been executed, Iran's relations with the UAE could have been significantly different. Gas exports through pipelines establish stronger political and economic ties, fostering greater unity between the parties. Beyond the financial benefits, the Crescent contract could have strengthened diplomatic relations between Iran and the UAE.

The former CEO of the National Iranian Gas Export Company emphasized that once two countries negotiate and sign a contract, they must adhere to its terms; otherwise, the other party has the right to file legal claims in international courts, which is exactly what happened with Crescent.

He pointed out that, at the time, gas prices were relatively low compared to oil, and the price Iran had set for UAE exports was comparable to that of Qatar. He further explained that while Qatar charged a higher rate, it was because it sold sweet gas and transported it through a 400-kilometer pipeline. In contrast, Iran was exporting sour gas over a much shorter 40-kilometer distance. Comparing Iran's gas export prices to Turkey was misleading, as sour gas had to travel 2,100 kilometers to reach Turkey and required costly processing to convert it into sweet gas. Additionally, Amir-Moini highlighted that natural gas does not have a fixed global price; rather, pricing varies based on regional factors.

According to the Crescent contract, Iran was set to export 500 million cubic feet of sour gas daily at a rate of 70 cents per unit. He noted that this price was subject to change over time.

Iran-Oman Shipping Line to Be Activated



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Jamal Razaghi Jahromi, the head of the Iran-Oman Joint Chamber of Commerce, spoke to ILNA about the outcomes of the recent visit by the Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade to Muscat. He stated that despite a strong political relationship between Iran and Oman over the past 70 years, trade between the two countries has not developed in parallel with political ties. Although trade value has grown by 42% to 60% annually over the past three years, the initial trade volume was minimal. The goal of reaching \$5 billion in trade with Oman by 2024, as envisioned by the joint chamber, has not been achieved. It is now optimistically estimated that trade between the two countries will reach between \$3 billion and \$3.5 billion by the end of the year.

Razaghi emphasized that the trade volume between Iran and Oman should reach at least \$20 billion annually. Without achieving this figure, the close political relations would not yield tangible benefits. Therefore, during the recent meeting between Iranian and Omani ministers, the establishment of a joint committee was proposed to address obstacles hindering the realization of the trade goals.

One of the major barriers to trade was tariff issues, which were resolved during the recent visit. It was agreed that preferential trade agreements would be implemented, effectively reducing tariffs to zero.

Razaghi further announced efforts to facilitate the transportation of goods between the two countries, highlighting the challenge of establishing a direct and regular shipping line between Iran and Oman. Oman has agreed to cooperate by covering 50% of the required

subsidy for six months to a year, while the Iranian Trade Promotion Organization will cover the remaining 50%.

He added that if Iran and Oman establish a shipping line with daily trips, the current trade volume is insufficient to fill the shipping capacity. This subsidy will be used to compensate for underutilized capacity until trade volume increases.

Razaghi Jahromi pointed out that Iranian manufacturers have been advised over the past two years to shift the final 30% of their production processes to Oman. This strategy would allow them to export finished products to other countries via Oman, leveraging Oman's zero-tariff agreements with 16 countries, including the U.S.

He also noted that one of the main obstacles for Iranian investors in Oman was the inability to open bank accounts. While some of these issues have been resolved, others are still under review. Currently, economic actors investing in Oman can open accounts for both themselves and their companies. The implementation of preferential trade agreements, along with these improvements, is expected to boost Iranian exports via Oman.

The Iran-Oman Chamber of Commerce president highlighted that last year, Oman, with a population of 5 million, attracted over 40 billion Omani rials (approximately \$140 billion) in foreign investment.

Finally, he stressed that while Iran and Oman have the potential to collaborate across various industries, overcoming sanctions and resolving issues related to Iran's non-membership in the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) are crucial for realizing this potential.

2.8m Tons of Commodities Traded on IME



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran Mercantile Exchange (IME) last week witnessed trade of 2,851,675 tons of commodities with a total trading value of more than \$572m on its physical market.

According to a report by the IME's International Affairs and PR, the exchange saw on its metals and minerals trading floor trade of 2,416,346 tons of commodities worth more than \$346m.

On this floor the IME sold 1,174,434 tons of cement, 914,000 tons of iron ore, 258,227 tons of steel, 52,000 tons of sponge iron, 9,130 tons of copper, 6,760 tons of aluminum, 1,475 tons of zinc, 300 tons of molybdenum concentrate, 20 tons of precious metals concentrate and 215 vehicles.

In addition to that, the IME witnessed on both domestic and export rings of its oil and petrochemical trading floor 429,169 tons of commodities worth almost \$211m.

Commodities traded on this floor included 180,329 tons of bitumen, 105,000 tons of vacuum bottom, 92,546 tons of polymeric products, 37,371 tons of chemicals, 6,920 tons of sulfur, 4,254 tons of oil, 2,522 tons of petroleum products and 220 tons of feedstocks.

The IME also traded within the same week 6,166 tons of goods on its side market.

Trump Says First Int'l Trip Could Be to Saudi Arabia or Britain

ABOARD AIR FORCE ONE (Dispatches) - U.S. President Donald Trump said that his first international trip could be to Saudi Arabia.

Speaking to reporters on Air Force One, Trump said on Saturday that his first foreign destination "could be Saudi Arabia" even though traditionally U.S. presidents visit Britain.

Trump said that the last time he traveled to Saudi Arabia it was because the Arab kingdom agreed to buy billions of dollars worth of U.S. merchandise.

"If that offer were right, I'd do that again," he said.



Zelensky Insists EU and U.S. Must Include Kyiv in Any Negotiations With Russia



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky hopes Europe and the United States will be involved in any talks about ending his country's war with Russia, he told reporters.

At a joint press conference with President Maia Sandu of neighbouring Moldova, Zelensky said Ukraine also needed to be involved in any discussions on ending the war for such negotiations to have any meaningful impact.

"As for what the set-up of the talks will be: Ukraine, I really hope Ukraine will be there, America, Europe and the Russians," Zelensky said, later clarifying that no framework was yet established.

"Yes, I would really want that Europe would take part, because we will be members of the European Union."

Zelensky said he believed new US President Donald Trump could end the war, but he could only do so if he involved Ukraine in the talks.

"Otherwise it will not work. Because Russia does not want to end the war, while Ukraine wants to end it," he said.

Trump promised during his campaign he would end the war within 24 hours of taking office, but his aides have since said a deal could take months.

The US president has expressed willingness to speak to Russian President Vladimir Putin about ending the war.

On Friday, Putin said he would like to meet Trump to talk about Ukraine. He cited a 2022 decree from Zelensky barring talks with Putin as a barrier to negotiations.

At the press conference, Zelensky said he introduced this prohibition to stop Putin forming other channels of communication with interlocutors in Ukraine. Zelensky said Russia was actively trying to do this before he signed the order.

Zelensky said Ukraine was ready to offer coal to Moldova, which is in the midst of an energy crisis after flows of Russian gas through Ukraine stopped at the beginning of this year.

Slovak PM Fico Rejects Calls to Quit Amid Growing Protests



BRATISLAVA (Dispatches) - Slovak Prime Minister Robert Fico rejected protesters' calls for his resignation after tens of thousands demonstrated against his government's policy shift closer to Russia.

Around 60,000 protested in the capital Bratislava on Friday, organizers estimated, and media said in total around 100,000 had turned out for rallies in cities across the country, the biggest demonstrations since Fico returned to power in 2023.

The protests come after Fico privately travelled to Moscow in December to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin, a rare encounter for a European Union leader since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.

"The government can only be changed if there are elections," Fico said in interview with the public broadcaster on Saturday when asked about the protests.

Fico's leftist-nationalist administration accused progressive opponents this week of planning to escalate protests to try to overthrow the government illegally. Opposition parties and civic groups organising protests reject the accusations.

Citing information from intelligence services, Fico has alleged, without showing evidence, there was a group of unidentified experts in Slovakia that had helped in protests against a pro-Russian leader in Ukraine in 2014 and Georgia last year.

He said on Saturday a list of people to be expelled was under preparation, without giving more details.

Protests were nearing levels seen in 2018 when the murder of an investigative journalist caused mass demonstrations and forced Fico's resignation during an earlier stint in office.



Four Israeli Soldiers Swapped for 200 Palestinians

CAIRO (Dispatches) - Hamas freed four female Israeli soldiers in exchange for 200 Palestinian prisoners, but a delay in freeing another hostage prompted Israel to block hundreds of thousands of Gazans from returning to the enclave's bombed-out north.

The four Israelis freed in the second swap of the week-old Gaza truce were led onto a podium in Gaza City amid a large crowd of Palestinians and surrounded by dozens of armed Hamas men. The hostages waved and smiled before being led off, entering Red Cross vehicles to be transported to Israeli forces.

Soon after, buses carrying released Palestinian prisoners were seen departing from the Israeli Ofer military prison in the occupied West Bank. Israel's Prison Service said all 200 had been released.

The releases on either side were greeted by cheering crowds, including Israelis gathered in Tel Aviv and Palestinians assembled in Ramallah.

But the failure of Hamas to release another hostage, a female Israeli civilian, led Israel to announce it was halting plans to let Palestinians return to northern parts of Gaza, the area worst hit in the war.

Hamas, which considers the return of Gazans to their homes to be one of the principal elements of the ceasefire, said it would free the hostage next week, and called the halt to the reopening of the north a violation of the truce.

The truce calls for Hamas to release 33 women, children, elderly, sick and wounded hostages over a six-week first phase, with Israel freeing 30 prisoners for each civilian and 50 for each soldier.

The four Israeli soldiers freed on Saturday - Karina Ariev, Daniella Gilboa, Naama Levy and Liri Albag - had all been stationed at an observation post on the edge of Gaza when Hamas fighters overran their base and abducted them during the Oct. 7, 2023 attack on Israel that precipitated the war.

Their parents clapped and cried out in joy when they saw them on screen, watching the handover live from a nearby military base across the border. In Tel Aviv, hundreds of Israelis gathered at a rallying point now widely referred to as Hostages Square, crying, embracing and cheering as the release was aired on a giant screen.

The women were reunited with their families and then flown aboard helicopters to a hospital in central Israel. Video released by the Israeli military showed them embracing tightly with their parents, in smiles and tears.

The 200 Palestinians freed on Saturday include militants, some serving life sentences for involvement in attacks that killed dozens of people, according to a list published by Hamas.

Israel says those convicted of killing Israelis will not be permitted to return home. Around 70 will be deported to Egypt, Palestinian officials said, and from there to another country, possibly Turkey, Qatar or Algeria.

Another 16 were sent to Gaza and the rest were released to the Israeli-occupied West Bank, where cheering crowds waving Palestinian flags gathered in Ramallah to greet them.

Joy in Israel over Saturday's release was clouded by disappointment after it emerged that Arbel Yehud, 29, who had been abducted with her boyfriend from their home in Kibbutz Nir Oz, was not among those released on Saturday.

An Israeli military spokesman called it a breach of the truce, while Hamas said it was a technical issue. A Hamas official said the group had informed mediators that she was alive and would be freed next Saturday.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Palestinians in Gaza would not be allowed to cross back to the northern part of the territory until the issue was resolved.

Palestinian officials said as many as 650,000 displaced people were waiting to return to the north beginning on Sunday under the ceasefire.

Israeli troops opened fire near crowds who gathered on a road hoping to go north, causing a stampede, witnesses said.

Medics said one person in the crowd was killed and two others injured by suspected Israeli fire. The Israeli military said troops had fired warning shots near gatherings of people that posed a threat, and it was unaware anyone was hurt.

Thousands of people were massed with their belongings along the coastal road, where they said an Israeli tank continued to block the road to the north.

Tens of Thousands Protest Germany's Far Right as Musk Backs AfD

HALLE (Dispatches) - Tens of thousands of Germans rallied against the far right ahead of next month's legislative elections, as US tech billionaire Elon Musk again endorsed the anti-immigrant AfD party.

Musk, speaking by video link, told thousands of AfD supporters gathered in the eastern city of Halle that their party was "the best hope for the future of Germany".

AfD supporters at the rally shouted their approval as party co-leader Alice Weidel looked on smiling.

Meanwhile, protesters against the AfD turned out in cities across Germany.

The largest gatherings took place in Berlin and Cologne, police revising their turnout figures upwards to 35,000 and 40,000 respectively. Organisers in Berlin claimed that 100,000 people attended the protests in the capital.

The protesters there used their mobile phones to form "a sea of light for democracy" in front of the Brandenburg Gate, brandishing letters forming the word "Resistance".

AfD is polling at around 20 percent ahead of Germany's Feb 23 elections, a record for a party that has already shattered a decades-old taboo in post-war Germany against supporting the far right.

The mainstream conservative CDU/CSU alliance leads on about 30 percent, with CDU leader Friedrich Merz the favourite to become chancellor after the elections.

Musk, a close associate of US President Donald Trump, told the AfD rally: "I think this election coming up in Germany is incredibly important.

"I think it could decide the entire fate of Europe, maybe the fate of the world."

Musk has rattled European politicians in recent weeks with comments on his social platform X supporting AfD and far-right politicians in other countries, including Britain.

He also drew attention this week for making a public gesture some observers interpreted as a straight-armed Nazi salute, a claim he himself dismissed as a smear.



Like Trump, the AfD opposes immigration, denies climate change, rails against gender politics and has declared war on a political establishment and mainstream media it claims limit free speech.

The anti-AfD rallies took place in some 60 towns following calls from a variety of organisations, attracting more people than the police had initially expected.

The protests passed off peacefully, with banners saying "Nazis out" or "AfD is not an alternative", a reference to the far-right party's full name "Alternative for Germany".

The CDU's Merz also came in for criticism. Many protestors fear he is tempted to break his party's policy of refusing to enter into coalition talks with the AfD.

There was also a protest in the southern city of Aschaffenburg, where a deadly knife attack this week by an Afghan migrant further inflamed the debate over immigration.

Several thousand also turned out in the eastern city of Halle, where the AfD rally was addressed by Musk, leading to a few incidents.

Halle police said they had opened criminal investigations for offences including assault, insults and disrupting traffic. They said they would also be taking action against 21 people who tried to force a barrier.

Musk told the AfD rally that "the German people are really an ancient nation which goes back thousands of years".

"I even read Julius Caesar was very impressed by the German tribes," he said, urging the supporters to "fight, fight, fight" for their country's future.

He said the AfD wanted "more self-determination for Germany and for the countries in Europe and less from Brussels", a reference to what he sees as heavy handedness from European Union regulators.

Weidel told her rally that migrants in Germany had to be sent home. "We need re-migration to live safely in Germany," she said.

North Korea Test-Fires Sea-to-Surface Strategic Cruise Missile

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea has test-fired sea-to-surface strategic guided cruise missiles, state news agency reported today, adding that the weapons "precisely" hit their targets.

"The war deterrence means of the armed forces of the DPRK are being perfected more thoroughly", North Korean leader Kim Jong Un said as he oversaw yesterday's test, the agency reported.

The missiles hit their marks after travelling along the 1,500-kilometre (930-mile) elliptical and figure-eight orbits, the report said, adding that there was "no negative impact on the security of neighbouring countries".

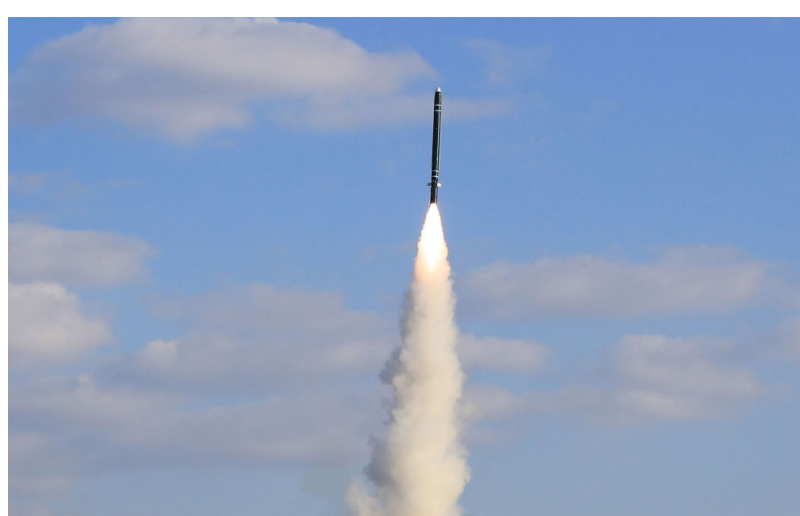
KCNA did not say where the test took place.

The weapons test by Pyongyang was the first since US President Donald Trump returned to the White House on Monday. Shortly before his inauguration, North Korea fired several short-range ballistic missiles into the sea.

Trump, who had a rare series of meetings with Kim during his first term in office, said in an interview aired Thursday that he would reach out to Kim again, calling the North Korean leader a "smart guy".

The two Koreas remain technically at war since the 1950 to 1953 conflict ended in an armistice, not a peace treaty.

Relations between Pyongyang and Seoul have been at one of their lowest points in



years, with the North launching a flurry of ballistic missiles last year in violation of UN sanctions.

Today, KCNA carried a statement from North Korea's foreign ministry criticising Washington and Seoul for carrying out joint military drills in recent days.

"The reality stresses that the DPRK should counter the US with the toughest counteraction from A to Z as long as it refuses the sovereignty and security interests of the DPRK," the statement said, referring to North Korea by its official acronym.

"This is the best option for dealing with the US."

Such joint military exercises regularly infuriate the nuclear-armed North, which decries them as rehearsals for invasion.

In late October, North Korea test-fired what it said was its most advanced and powerful solid-fuel intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). It then fired a salvo of short-range ballistic missiles days later.

US and South Korean intelligence also believe that North Korea started in October to send thousands of troops to fight against Ukraine and has since suffered hundreds of casualties.

Neither North Korea nor Russia has officially confirmed that Pyongyang's forces are fighting for Moscow.



76ers Win Again, Top Turnover-Prone Bulls

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Tyrese Maxey had 31 points and nine assists while Kelly Oubre Jr. notched a double-double of 22 points and 12 rebounds to lift the visiting Philadelphia 76ers to a 109-97 win against the slumping Chicago Bulls on Saturday.

The 76ers have won two games in as many nights on the heels of a seven-game losing streak. Chicago has lost seven of eight.

The Bulls committed 20 turnovers.

Chicago led 83-80 after three quarters, finding its best offensive rhythm with 30 points in the period before sputtering down the stretch.

The 76ers regained the lead for good at 89-88 on Reggie Jackson's pullup trey with 8:03 remaining. Philadelphia led by as many as 13 points in the game, gaining control by capitalizing on a Bulls scoring drought of 3:27 during one sequence in the fourth.

Zach LaVine had 25 points and eight rebounds for Chicago. Nikola Vucevic added 22 points and 12 rebounds.

Josh Giddey registered his third straight double-double for the Bulls, contributing 10 points and 10 rebounds to go with seven assists.

Eric Gordon (13 points) and Jackson (12) also scored in double figures for the 76ers. Paul George scored nine first-half points in 13 minutes for Philadelphia but didn't play after halftime after injuring his left pinky finger.

Maxey boosted Philadelphia to an early advantage behind a hot hand. He scored 15 points in the opening quarter, including 13 straight for the 76ers during one stretch, on 6-for-8 shooting.

By halftime, he had 20 points behind a 7-for-12 effort from the floor.

The 76ers led 60-53 at intermission, shooting 46.8 percent. LaVine (12 points) and Vucevic (10) were in double figures for the Bulls. Both teams settled in after a sluggish start, as George delivered the first points

for either side with a step-back jumper at the 9:51 mark of the first quarter.

Philadelphia center Joel Embiid missed his 11th consecutive game with a knee injury. Chicago's Coby White (ankle) missed his third game in a row.

The 76ers have won three straight against the Bulls and clinched at least a split of the season series.

Meanwhile Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 28 points and Zach Edey added 19 points, seven rebounds and four blocks as the host Memphis Grizzlies beat the Utah Jazz 125-103 for their sixth straight win to tie a season-best streak.

Utah, which lost its fifth straight and for the eighth time in nine games, was led by Collin Sexton with 20 points and Svi Mykhailiuk with 16.

The Grizzlies completed a 4-0 homestand while improving to 8-2 in their last 10 and improving to 19-5 at home.

Memphis guard Ja Morant returned after missing Friday's game against the Pelicans and had 11 points and seven assists. Desmond Bane contributed 17 points, nine rebounds and six assists, Jaylen Wells scored 16, and GG Jackson had 15 points and six rebounds.

Despite his all-around numbers, Bane did see his streak of seven straight 20-point games end.

Ahead by 65-57 at the half, the Grizzlies pulled away early in the third quarter behind Morant, who buried consecutive 3-pointers during a 25-second span for a 15-point lead at 75-60. The Memphis advantage reached 27 points by the end of the quarter, one in which the Grizzlies outscored the Jazz 36-17.

The first half also saw several minor skirmishes and a player ejection. Utah's Drew Eubanks was tossed out with 9:10 to go in the second quarter after being assessed a flagrant 2 foul for aggressively pushing Edey in the back. The ejection came less than a minute after Morant and Utah's Keyonte George were each given technical fouls for getting into a slight shoving match following a change of possession.

Mbappe Treble Extends Liga Leaders Real Madrid's Edge on Atletico



MADRID (Dispatches) - Kylian Mbappe continued his rich vein of form with a hat-trick to power Real Madrid to a 3-0 win over Valladolid and a four-point lead at the top of La Liga.

Second-place Atletico Madrid drew 1-1 at home earlier against Villarreal, while Barcelona, third, trail Los Blancos by 10 points before hosting Valencia.

Mbappe has hit his devastating best in recent weeks after struggling for consistency following his summer switch from Paris Saint-Germain.

The French superstar climbed to 15 league goals for the season, trailing only Barcelona's Robert Lewandowski, on 16.

Mbappe's first Madrid treble helped his team, playing without suspended Brazil international Vinicius Junior, ease to a simple away victory against bottom side Valladolid.

"I'm happy with the hat-trick but more happy with the win, I feel like I say that every week but it's the truth," Mbappe told Real Madrid TV.

"It was very important to win today after Atletico's result... so we're happy and go back to Madrid with the victory."

The hosts made early inroads, with Madrid stopper Thibaut Courtois saving from David Torres' header, but that was about as good as it got for Valladolid.

Madrid started to chip away at their opponents and made the breakthrough in the 30th minute when Jude Bellingham nudged a deflected pass through to Mbappe, who curled into the top corner.

Gakpo Stars as Liverpool Rout Ipswich

LONDON (Dispatches) - Cody Gakpo struck twice as Premier League leaders Liverpool thrashed Ipswich 4-1 to maintain their six-point lead over Arsenal, who survived Myles Lewis-Skelly's controversial red card to snatch a 1-0 win at Wolves in the Premier League.

Troubled champions Manchester City recovered from Abdulkodir Khusanov's debut disaster to move into fourth place with a vital 3-1 win against top four rivals Chelsea.

At Anfield, Liverpool cruised to their second successive league victory thanks to a first half goal-spree.

Dominik Szoboszlai's 11th-minute opener fizzed past Ipswich goalkeeper Christian Walton from Ibrahim Konate's assist.

Mohamed Salah doubled Liverpool's advantage in the 35th minute with a fierce strike for his 23rd goal in all competitions this term.

It was also the Egypt forward's 100th Premier League goal at Anfield.

Gakpo killed off Ipswich before half-time when he bundled home after Walton parried Szoboszlai's shot in the 44th minute.

The Dutch forward netted again in the 66th minute, heading past Walton from Trent Alexander-Arnold's cross.

Jacob Greaves' stoppage-time diving header was little consolation for third-bottom Ipswich.



Liverpool's 16th win from 22 league games this season keeps them on course for a first English title since 2020.

"I think about how can I make sure these players play in a style I would love them to play. And they have done that from the start. It's a joy to watch," Liverpool boss Arne Slot said.

The quadruple-chasing Reds have a game in hand on second-placed Arsenal, who left it late before keeping the pressure on the leaders.

Arsenal had Lewis-Skelly contentiously sent off for tripping Matt Doherty to stop a Wolves counter-attack in the 43rd minute.

Arsenal were furious, protesting that the 18-year-old defender's tackle was too far from goal to warrant a red card.

But Wolves were also reduced to 10 men in the 70th minute when Joao Gomes earned a second booking for a foul on Jurrien Timber.

And Italy defender Riccardo Calafiori won it for Arsenal in the 74th minute with a half-volley that went in off the far post.

"It's obvious that it was very difficult to accept. I leave it to you guys because it's that obvious. You don't need my words. It was so obvious," Arteta told reporters of Lewis-Skelly's dismissal.

At the Etihad Stadium, Uzbekistan defender Khusanov, signed from Lens as part of struggling City's January overhaul, made a woeful start when his miscued header allowed Noni Madueke

to give Chelsea a second minute lead.

But City, who also gave a debut to Egypt forward Omar Marmoush after his move from Eintracht Frankfurt, hit back to equalise with Josko Gvardiol's 42nd minute strike.

Erling Haaland chipped out of position Chelsea keeper Robert Sanchez to put City ahead in the 68th minute.

Phil Foden sprinted clear to score his sixth goal in his last four league games in the 87th minute as Pep Guardiola's side climbed one point above sixth-placed Chelsea.

Varma Carries India to 2-0 Lead Against England



CHENNAI (Dispatches) - Tilak Varma's brilliant 72 not out guided India to a thrilling two-wicket victory over England, handing the hosts a 2-0 lead in the five-match Twenty20 International series.

India successfully chased down 166 with four balls to spare after the visitors set a competitive total of 165-9.

Varma single-handedly guided India to 166-8 after they were reduced to 78-5. He hit five sixes and four fours, while Abhishek Sharma (12) and Washington Sundar (26) provided brief resistance. Suryakumar Yadav added some quick boundaries before falling for 12 in the sixth over.

Brydon Carse took three wickets, dismissing Dhruv Jurel, Yadav and Sundar, while Jofra Archer's costly spell, in which he conceded 60 runs from four overs, did not help England's cause.

Openers Sanju Samson and Sharma were dismissed cheaply within the first three overs. Sharma was trapped lbw for 12, while Samson was caught by Carse at deep square leg for five after being sent back by Archer.

Varma combined with Sundar to add 38 before Sundar was bowled by Carse. When Liam Livingstone dismissed Axar Patel to leave India on 126-7 at the close of the 15th over, it raised England's hopes of snatching victory. Arshdeep Singh then carelessly lost his wicket to Adil Rashid.

Ravi Bishnoi's boundary brought India close in the penultimate over and with six needed from the final over, Varma sealed the win with a drive through the covers, leaving England frustrated.

Batting first England managed 165-9, struggling to build strong partnerships after India won the toss and opted to bowl.

Left-arm seamer Arshdeep struck in the first over dismissing opener Phil Salt for four and off-spinner Sundar dismissed Ben Duckett for just three in the only over he bowled.

Jos Buttler fell to Patel after racing to 45 off 30 balls. The England skipper misjudged a pull shot, sending the ball straight to Varma at deep mid-wicket and leaving England reeling at 77-4 at the halfway stage of their innings.

Jamie Smith impressed with 22 off 12 balls on his debut before being dismissed by Sharma. Carse countered by hitting three sixes in a quickfire 31 off 17 balls, but his efforts were undone by a run-out in the 17th over.

Rashid and Archer combined to add 20 runs to drag England to 165 before Rashid was dismissed in the 19th over for 10, caught behind off Hardik Pandya for the ninth wicket, while Archer (12) remained not out.

Keys Stuns Tennis Top Seed Sabalenka to Win First Grand Slam Title

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Underdog Madison Keys upset Aryna Sabalenka 6-3, 2-6, 7-5 in the Australian Open final to win her first Grand Slam crown at the age of 29.

The American ended world number one Sabalenka's dream of becoming the first woman for 26 years to win a third successive Melbourne Park singles title.

Keys yelled in delight and wiped away tears on securing the title after withstanding a fierce fightback from the Belarusian two-time defending champion.

Sabalenka, the 2023 and 2024 champion, buried her head in a towel after her 20-match win streak at Melbourne Park was ended.

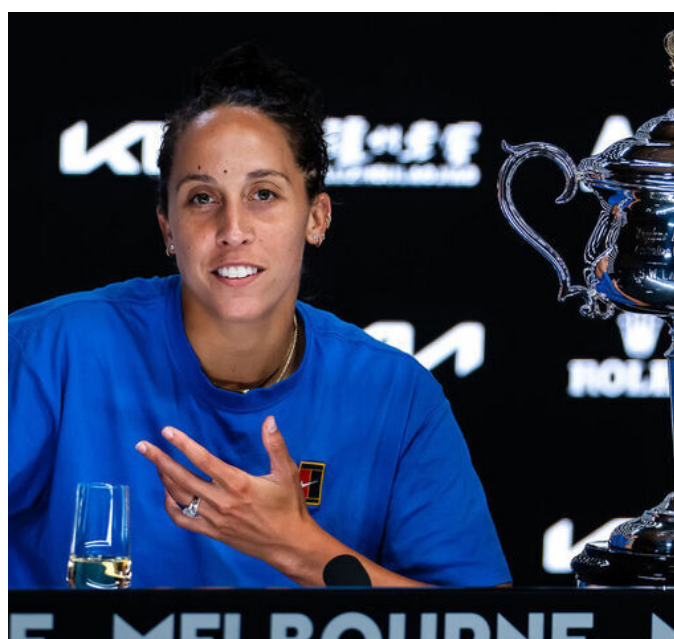
For 19th-seeded Keys it was the culmination of a 15-year journey from teenage prodigy to major winner.

"I have wanted this for so long and I have been in one other Grand Slam final and it did not go my way," said an emotional Keys, whose coach Bjorn Fratangelo is also her husband.

"I didn't know if I was ever going to get back to this position to try to win a trophy again."

The American had been tipped as a future world number one after winning her maiden WTA Tour match at the age of 14.

She made her first major semi-final at Melbourne Park 10 years ago as a 19-year-old, but a decade on she can finally call herself a Grand Slam champion.



"I made my very first Grand Slam semi-final here in Melbourne," said Keys, the runner-up at the US Open in 2017.

"So to now have won my first Grand Slam in the same place means the absolute world to me.

"My team believed in me every step of the way. So thank you so much," added Keys, who will now equal her career-high seventh in the world ranking she attained nine years ago.

"They believed in me when I didn't believe in myself, and helped me every step of the way. Last year was so tough, with some really bad injuries, I didn't know if I was gonna be able to do it again."

Keys becomes the fourth oldest first-time winner of a major since the Open Era began in 1968.

Sabalenka was gracious after a first Melbourne defeat since 2022.

"First of all, Madison, what a tournament. You have been fighting really hard to get this trophy," Sabalenka said.

"I really feel like it's home when I'm here and I'll come back stronger and do my best next year."

It was Keys who came out of the blocks playing exemplary tennis to put Sabalenka under pressure and race to the first set in 35 minutes on Rod Laver Arena.