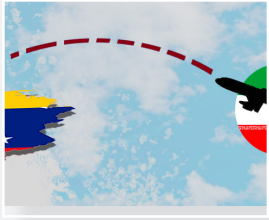


Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref, Heading a Delegation, Is to Visit Kazakhstan to Attend the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Prime Ministers' Meeting as Well as 2025 Almaty Digital Forum

IRAN NEWS

Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Aerospace Force Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh Dismissed the Notion Propagated by the Enemies That Iran Has Been Weakened

2 DOMESTIC



Iran Expands Economic Ties with Venezuela Amid Challenges

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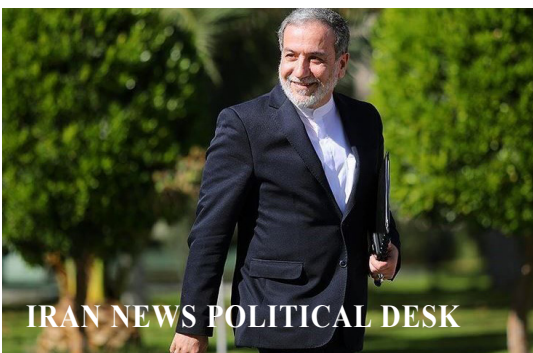
3 INTERNATIONAL

Congo's M23 Rebels Take Control of Goma Airport, Embassies Attacked in Capital



> SEE PAGE 3

No Clear Message from New U.S. Administration



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister, Seyed Abbas Araqchi, stated that no clear message has been exchanged between Iran and the new U.S. administration. Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting, Araqchi dismissed media speculation regarding indirect communication or negotiations between the two nations.

"There has been no specific message sent or received between Iran and the United States. What is being said exists only in media reports," Araqchi emphasized. He reiterated that Iran's position remains unchanged, rooted in past distrust, which can only be resolved through concrete actions rather than mere words.

In an interview with Sky News, Araqchi clarified Iran's stance on negotiations with the U.S., stating that discussions with European countries are ongoing. He added that Iran is waiting to assess the policies of the new U.S. administration before making any decisions. "If a consensus is reached within Iran that negotiations can take place on equal footing, a decision will be made accordingly," he said.

Regarding the possibility of a new agreement, Araqchi underscored that Iran's benchmark remains past experiences. "We had an agreement, Iran fulfilled its commitments, but it was the other side that broke it," he remarked, referring to the U.S. withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal.

He stressed that restoring trust is not a simple matter and cannot be achieved through diplomatic niceties alone. "Rebuilding trust requires concrete actions and well-defined policies. Once we see clear steps, we will assess the situation and make our decision accordingly," Araqchi stated.

Addressing his recent visit to Afghanistan, he described the neighboring country as a vital strategic partner. He highlighted the multiple challenges and national interests shared between the two nations, emphasizing that diplomatic dialogue is essential to resolving issues.

He referred to discussions with Afghan officials, including Amir Khan Muttaqi, who acknowledged Iran's water rights under existing treaties. Araqchi also noted extensive talks on Afghan migrants in Iran, a topic of social significance.

"The Afghan government recognizes the need for undocumented migrants to return. They seek an orderly and dignified repatriation process to avoid further problems," he stated. Both sides agreed to develop a plan to facilitate this process in a structured manner.

Iran's Army Makes Grand Advances in Electronic Warfare, AI



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Army has made grand achievements in acquiring new combat sciences and techniques, developing a substantial advantage in utilizing robotics, artificial intelligence, and electronic warfare.

Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Bagheri made the remarks on Tuesday, as he addressed the Army's Ground Force personnel during the main phase of a military exercise in western Iran.

General Bagheri said the drills demonstrated the armed forces' readiness to counter the enemy in electronic warfare. He said the Iranian military forces will effectively provide security and comfort for the nation.

During the two-phase maneuvers, the Iranian general said, various operations were conducted, including assessing the readiness of helicopter units and performing parachute drops by the 55th Airborne Brigade.

The exercises also included evaluating offensive and defensive flight operations of drones, he said.

"Due to the development and promotion of artificial intelligence and robotics, modern battles have significantly changed from those of the past," General Bagheri stated.

"Accordingly, the ground forces maximized their use of contemporary knowledge and technologies during the current exercise, successfully implementing robotic operations with equipment produced by the Research and Self-Sufficiency Organization of the Army's Ground Force."



Gov't Promises Transparency in Report on Crescent Damages

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In a press briefing following the latest cabinet meeting, government spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani provided updates on key decisions and discussions. She emphasized that the government is committed to transparency and will soon release a comprehensive report on the damages related to the Crescent contract.

The 51st session of the cabinet included reports from various ministers on significant national issues. Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araqchi provided insights from his recent trip to Afghanistan, focusing on migration and water disputes. Additionally, ministries reviewed regulations and obligations related to the Seventh Development Plan.

The Environmental Protection Organization presented findings on land subsidence, while the Ministry of Communications discussed efforts towards digital transformation. Reports were also submitted by the Ministry of Energy and the Ministry of Oil regarding the implementation of the Seventh Development Plan.

Major Decisions and Announcements
Tehran-Van Train Service: The Tehran-Van railway service will resume operations starting from the Persian New Year (Nowruz). The Minister of Roads and Urban Development addressed transportation issues and related challenges.

Mohajerani stated that the executive bodies' responsibilities under the Seventh Development Plan were reviewed during the session, including pending budgetary and non-budgetary obligations.

She also reported that the Minister of Roads and Urban Development provided an update on his recent visit to Turkey, confirming that issues concerning truck drivers have been resolved. As a result, the Tehran-Van train service is set to begin operations this Nowruz.

Mohajerani added that the cabinet also discussed the current state of the currency market during the meeting.

Furthermore, she confirmed that the Governor of Alborz Province has been reappointed, and the cabinet's approval made his position official.

She added the government has officially approved the sale price of urea fertilizer in 50-kg bags, effective from 2024, making its pricing legal.

She noted new automobile trading regulations have been finalized and are set for approval. She went on to say six areas in science and technology have been identified for equipment modernization under a new renovation framework.

She reiterated the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development proposed a key-for-key urban renewal project, which was approved. The Planning Organization will oversee the execution of strategic projects under this initiative.

Mohajerani further said the Ministry of Oil presented a report on increasing oil exports and the development of the Azadegan oil field, along with updates on raw gas production.

Addressing controversial slogans and political unrest, Mohajerani stated that unity is a fundamental principle, and the government does not condone hostility towards individuals who hold differing views.

The spokesperson reaffirmed that Mohammad Javad Zarif continues to serve as the government's Strategic Deputy and is an integral part of cabinet meetings.

When asked about the government's stance on the Crescent case, Mohajerani assured that a full report will be presented, ensuring transparency while considering all necessary factors. She emphasized that there will be no attempts to conceal information from the public.

The government has structured plans to secure the country's strategic reserves and essential goods supply, aligning with the Seventh Development Plan.

Efforts to combat fuel smuggling have intensified, with significant breakthroughs in identifying and dismantling smuggling networks in recent weeks. Two major fuel-smuggling pipelines were uncovered in Khuzestan province.

The annual government employee bonus system remains unchanged, with the allocated amount set at approximately 3 million Iranian toman.

The government is drafting new regulations under the Seventh Development Plan to facilitate lawful public gatherings with appropriate permits.

She added Decisions and resolutions are available on the government's official website, ensuring public access to information under the Transparency Law.

Seized Oil Revenues and Blocked Funds: The government is actively pursuing the recovery of confiscated assets, including those related to the Babak Zanjani case. A report on this matter was presented in the latest cabinet session.

Potential Israeli Threats to Nuclear Facilities: The government asserts that it is prepared for all scenarios and warns against any reckless actions by foreign adversaries.

Nuclear Negotiations and Sanctions Relief: The administration remains committed to upholding dignity, wisdom, and expediency in diplomatic talks and continues to seek the removal of economic sanctions.

Policy on Former U.S. President Trump: The government has developed various contingency plans in response to potential changes in U.S. policy.

As the government moves forward with its policies and reforms, Mohajerani reiterated that all decisions will be made with national interests in mind, ensuring both transparency and accountability.

Israeli Regime Disrupting Peace, Endangering Region's Fragile Stability



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the UN Amir Saeid Iravani says that Israel is the main threat to international peace and security, emphasizing that Tel Aviv makes "baseless allegations against Iran" to conceal the regime's "destructive activities".

In a letter to the UN Security Council president, Iravani reacted to comments by Israeli president Isaac Herzog who accused Iran of being a "threat" to the world, particularly the United States and Israel.

Iravani condemned the "unfounded and provocative accusations" by the Israeli president against Iran during the United Nations General Assembly's special session on Monday.

He said that the Islamic Republic of Iran explicitly and firmly rejects such baseless claims, which serve no purpose other than to divert the international community's attention from the horrific crimes committed by this apartheid regime against the people of Palestine in the Gaza Strip.

Iravani pointed out that such groundless accusations are part of a deliberate and ongoing effort to conceal the blatant violations of international law and the destructive activities of the Israeli regime against regional countries.

The letter was addressed to the UN secretary general and the president of the General Assembly.

Iravani also stressed that the Israeli regime "is not only a threat to Iran but also the primary and constant threat to peace and security" both in the region and the world.

The Iranian ambassador said that beyond the genocide and crimes against humanity committed by "this rogue regime against the Palestinian people, Zionism continues its relentless aggression against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Lebanon and Syria."

"These actions constitute clear violations of the UN Charter and relevant Security Council resolutions. Such unlawful acts are flagrant breaches of international law and further endanger the already fragile stability of the region," Iran's UN ambassador further said.

Iran Reports Major Increase in Water Levels at Lake Urmia



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Satellite images released by the Iranian Energy Ministry shows the amount of water in Lake Urmia before and after a restoration program was launched in 2015 to prevent the lake from drying up.

Iran has reported a major increase in water levels at Lake Urmia, nearly a decade after the government kicked off a massive restoration program to prevent the lake from drying up.

A local subsidiary of Iran's Energy Ministry in West Azerbaijan province, where Lake Urmia is located, said on Tuesday that the amount of water in the lake had increased by 0.19 billion cubic meters to 1.24 billion cubic meters in the year to January 24.

It said in a statement that the depth of water in Lake Urmia had increased from 1,270.05 meters to 1,270.13 meters over the same period.

The statement said the increase in water levels had allowed the lake to expand by 160 square kilometers to 930 square kilometers in the year to late January.

It said the increase in water levels in Lake Urmia is a sign that efforts carried out for the restoration of the lake have been successful.

The figures came after a former head of the Iranian Department of Environment criticized the current administrative government for failing to properly manage Lake Urmia and its restoration program.

Issa Kalantari said that water levels in the lake had started to decrease again because of lower water supplies and also because of rising temperatures that speed up evaporation.

Lake Urmia, a salt lake in northwest Iran near the border with Turkey, began to dry nearly two decades ago because of the excessive use of water from rivers feeding the lake as well as the construction of a controversial bridge over the body of water.

Iran has spent more than \$1 billion since 2015 on dams and water transfer projects to restore Lake Urmia.

Iran's Defensive Diplomacy Neutralized Plots of Global Arrogance

TEHRAN - A senior Iranian military commander says the Islamic Republic's "defensive diplomacy" has foiled the global arrogant powers' plots to isolate the country.

Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, the Iranian Army's deputy commander for coordination, made the remarks on Wednesday as he enumerated the Islamic Republic's achievements in the field of defensive diplomacy.

"Our interaction and communication with other countries demonstrate the failure of global arrogance in implementing the policy of isolating Iran," he said.

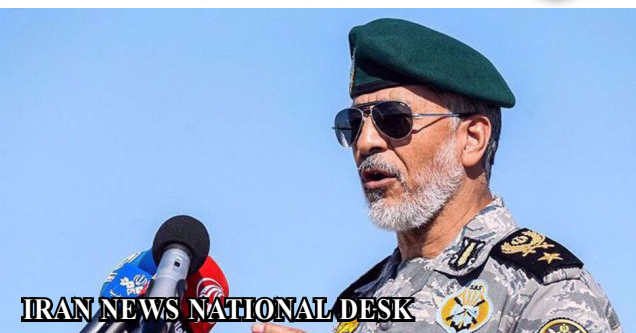
"The enemies are trying to isolate the Islamic Revolution and the country, but they will not succeed," the commander asserted.

Sayyari put the fact down to the Islamic Republic's having taken very valuable steps towards developing interactions with other countries, examples of which could be seen in its annual meetings with foreign military attachés and defense officials.

He cited the example of meetings between the country's officials and foreign military attachés and foreign students studying at the National Defense University and the Army University of Command and Staff as part of the Army's annual diplomatic program.

The official also mentioned the Islamic Republic's having sent and received various military delegations from around the world as another case in point.

Thanks to the blessings of the country's 1979 Islamic Revolution, "we are currently in contact with many countries around the world, and our defensive diplomacy is active." He added, "We have had several joint military exercises with countries around the world in various fields, including land, air, and sea, and we have exchanged scientific and



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

industrial delegations."

The visits that have been paid by different naval groups to the country's ports and its dispatch of naval groups to different countries around the world featured another dimension of the defensive diplomacy, Sayyari reminded.

"We have sent or received over 100 military delegations, had several joint military exercises, and accepted students from various countries, and this demonstrates the high capability of the [Iranian] Armed Forces and the defensive diplomacy of the Islamic Republic of

Iran's Army."

The official considered promotion of diplomacy to be one of the components of power, asserting that the stronger the Islamic Republic's defensive diplomacy is, the more it is indicative of its power to interact and cooperate with other countries around the world.

Sayyari noted that the area of implementation of the country's defensive diplomacy ran the gamut of its land, air, and air defense forces as well as the naval force, where the diplomacy figured at even more extensive and higher levels.

Meanwhile the ground forces of the Iranian Army have held the first phase of an offensive and security exercise in the western part of the country.

The military drill was comprised of a fleet of 100 helicopters which was held in the Naftshahr region of the western Iranian Kermanshah Province's Qasr-e Shirin Country on Monday.

The drill was attended by Commander of the Iranian Army's Ground Force Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari.



President Urges Well-Planned Use of Modern Technologies in Iran

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – President Masoud Pezeshkian called for the employment of modern-day technologies, including artificial intelligence, for the public services in the country after meticulous planning.

“We should identify our current status before taking any decision and measure, and then we should monitor the path taken by developed countries regarding use of modern-day technologies in order to be able to fill the gaps,” the president said.

He made the comments in a meeting with members of the ‘Steering Council of Knowledge-Based Technologies and Products’ in Tehran. The use of modern-day technologies, especially AI, will help reduce the costs and render services to the public at a higher quality and in a faster way, the president said, his official website reported.

Iran-Germany Bilateral Trade Grows 4%



TEHRAN – According to a report, citing data from the German Federal Statistical Office provided by the Iran-Germany Joint Chamber of Commerce, the trade volume between Iran and Germany reached €1.37 billion in the first 11 months of 2024. This represents a 4% increase compared to the same period in the previous year when the trade volume stood at €1.32 billion.

During this period, Germany's exports to Iran amounted to €1.16 billion, reflecting a 6% rise compared to €1.09 billion in 2023. Meanwhile, Iran's exports to Germany totaled €208 million, marking a 6% decrease from €222 million in the same period last year.

In November 2024, the trade volume between the two countries reached €124 million, showing a 2% increase compared to €122 million in November of the previous year. Of this amount, Germany's exports to Iran decreased by 1% to €101 million, while Iran's exports to Germany grew by 17% to €23 million. This level of Iranian exports to Germany has been unprecedented since March 2023, when it reached €32 million.

Iran Expands Economic Ties with Venezuela Amid Challenges



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran and Venezuela continue to strengthen economic ties, particularly in the automotive and technology sectors, despite challenges in private-sector cooperation and economic constraints. According to Amir Mehrpourian, head of the Iran-Venezuela Joint Trade Committee, Iranian state-owned enterprises dominate trade relations, as the Venezuelan government prefers dealing with state-backed entities due to its military-controlled administration.

Mehrpourian highlighted that Iranian private companies have struggled to make significant economic inroads in Venezuela. A key factor is the political landscape, where Venezuela's private sector is often associated with the opposition. However, the Venezuelan government is working to alter this perception and encourage more private-sector engagement.

Despite the challenges, Iranian knowledge-based companies have significant potential in Venezuela. Opportunities exist in IT infrastructure, telecommunications, oil and petrochemicals, and refinery modernization. Additionally, Venezuelans have shown a strong interest in Iranian medical services, particularly in laboratory diagnostics.

Mehrpourian stated that agreements and memorandums of understanding have been signed, ensuring legal frameworks for collaboration. However, the real test lies in execution. Some Iranian private firms have begun independent marketing efforts in Venezuela, targeting exports in fiber optics, mining, and petrochemicals. Yet, financial returns remain modest due to Venezuela's weak economy and low purchasing power.

Trade between Iran and Venezuela faces economic hurdles. Iran does not import Venezuelan goods, as the overall standard of living in Iran is higher. Venezuela mainly relies on raw material exports, such as coffee, cocoa, and timber, with Russia and the UAE being key buyers.

While Venezuela once had substantial gold reserves, these have diminished. The remaining reserves are of lower purity, reducing their value. Due to liquidity issues, the Venezuelan government often pays foreign contractors in gold rather than cash.

Venezuela, with a population of approximately 29 million, has seen an exodus of its wealthy citizens, further weakening its economy. While the country is rich in untapped mineral resources, fertile agricultural land, and water resources, the local population lacks the infrastructure and inclination for large-scale production. Consequently, Iranian investors see potential in the country, but logistical challenges, including high trade costs due to geographical distance, hinder profitability. Proximity to the U.S. and Spain allows American and European products to dominate the Venezuelan market, reducing the competitiveness of Iranian goods.

Iranian investors have explored offshore farming in Venezuela and have secured land for agricultural production. However, implementation remains in the early stages due to inadequate water supply and infrastructure development. No significant agricultural output has yet been realized.

One of the most visible aspects of Iran-Venezuela trade relations is the presence of Iranian automobiles. Since the administration of former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran Khodro and SAIPA have operated assembly plants in Venezuela. These companies continue to function on a CKD (Completely Knocked Down) basis, assembling Iranian car parts locally.

While economic engagement between the two nations is growing, structural and logistical challenges persist, limiting the full potential of trade expansion. Iranian businesses remain cautiously optimistic about future prospects, contingent on overcoming economic and infrastructural barriers.

China to Invest in Renewable Energy in Iran

TEHRAN - In a significant development, a trilateral meeting was held in Tehran, involving key representatives from Iran and China, to discuss investment opportunities in renewable energy.

The meeting featured Arash Najafi, Head of the Energy Commission at Iran's Chamber of Commerce; Ne'matollah Turki, Deputy for Management and Resources at the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI); and Liao Gohui, a representative of China's Hainan Elite Energy company.

During the meeting, the groundwork was laid for a memorandum of understanding (MoU) aimed at facilitating investment in Iran's renewable energy sector. Both parties agreed to finalize the document during the Chinese delegation's stay in Iran, paving the way for enhanced cooperation in this critical sector.

Liao Gohui, representing Hainan Elite Energy, underscored China's interest in Iran's renewable energy ambitions. “Iran is pursuing the development of renewable energy with great seriousness,” Gohui said.

He elaborated on Hainan Elite Energy's capabilities, stating that the semi-state-owned company has been operational since 2017 and has developed a solid understanding of the Iranian market through regular engagements. “The Iranian government's policies in renewable energy are highly promising, and we see a strong opportunity for collaboration,” he added.

The Chinese delegate also highlighted the scope of potential projects, referencing discussions with Iran's Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Organization (SATBA). “SATBA aims to expand renewable energy capacity by 5,000 megawatts. This presents an excellent opportunity for cooperation and investment,” Gohui stated. He noted that initial projects would start on a smaller scale, with plans to scale up in the future.

The proposed collaboration outlines that 70% of the investment will

be undertaken by Hainan Elite Energy, with the remaining 30% covered by Iranian companies. Additionally, the Chinese side expressed its intent to introduce private Chinese companies to further strengthen ties with Iran in the renewable energy sector upon their return to China.

Ne'matollah Turki, Deputy for Management and Resources at the AEOI, reaffirmed Iran's openness to foreign and domestic investments in clean energy. He

emphasized the importance of involving the private sector in renewable energy projects, stating, “Today's meeting between the AEOI and the Energy Commission of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce focused on facilitating private sector entry into clean energy. There are no restrictions on private-sector participation.”

Turki highlighted the AEOI's policy of fostering cooperation with both domestic and international partners, adding that financial models and investment structures will be clearly defined to streamline the process. “We have no limitations on the scale or volume of clean energy production and are ready to sign agreements with our partners,” he said.

The meeting concluded with a commitment to finalize the draft MoU and secure signatures from both sides. This will be followed by drafting a more comprehensive cooperation agreement to solidify the partnership.

This collaboration comes at a pivotal moment as Iran seeks to diversify its energy mix and reduce reliance on fossil fuels. With China's substantial investment and expertise in renewable energy, the partnership holds the potential to significantly advance Iran's clean energy infrastructure.

The MoU, once formalized, is expected to mark the beginning of a long-term collaboration, contributing not only to Iran's renewable energy goals but also strengthening economic ties between the two nations.



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

Iran-Saudi Arabia Trade Grows by 9,000% in 2024



TEHRAN - Abdulamir Rabiavi, Director General of the West Asia Office at Iran's Trade Promotion Organization, reported that in the first nine months of 2024, Iran's trade with West Asian countries experienced significant growth. Trade with Iraq increased by 35%, the UAE by 11%, Turkey by 59%, Kuwait by 31%, Syria by 21%, Qatar by 14%, Jordan by 508%, Oman by 15%, Lebanon by 30%, and Saudi Arabia by an astonishing 9,795%.

Rabiavi further stated that Iran's trade with Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Bahrain has seen an upward trend. Trade with Saudi Arabia surged from \$200,000 to \$23 million, with Lebanon from \$18 million to \$23 million, and with Bahrain from \$7 million to \$11 million.

Highlighting Iraq's seasonal import restrictions, Rabiavi explained that Iraqi authorities periodically impose import bans or increase tariffs to support domestic production. Despite these measures, Iran's trade with Iraq grew by 35% in the first nine months of this year, reaching approximately \$9.413 billion compared to \$6.972 billion in the same period last year. He noted that Iran's trade volume with Iraq in the first nine months of this year has already equaled the total trade for the previous year.

Regarding trade with Turkey, Rabiavi reported that it grew from \$3.271 billion last year to approximately \$5.203 billion in the first nine months of this year, marking a significant increase of nearly \$2 billion.

Addressing Iran's trade balance with West Asian countries, Rabiavi confirmed that Iran's trade balance has remained positive. Exports to these countries grew by around 31%, while imports increased by approximately 21%, resulting in a surplus in Iran's trade with the region.

30 Kilometers of Astara Railway Handed Over to Russians



TEHRAN - Amin Taraf, head of the International Affairs Center at the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development, provided updates on Russia's cooperation in constructing the Rasht-Astara railway project. He addressed the delays in finalizing the contract, determining costs, and initiating the disbursement of the Russian loan.

Taraf stated that a financial agreement had been signed with Russia for the construction of the Rasht-Astara railway. However, its implementation requires meeting specific legal, financial, and interdepartmental coordination requirements. He emphasized that there has been no delay in activating the agreement, as these procedures must naturally take their course.

He further explained that technical negotiations between the contractor and the employer were necessary. The Russian-designated contractor, Caspian Service, had to reach an agreement with the project's employer, the Construction and Development of Transportation Infrastructure Company. Given that the Rasht-Astara railway is a major international project, these negotiations were complex and required time to finalize.

Regarding land acquisition for the railway route, Taraf noted that out of the 162-kilometer Rasht-Astara railway, 30 kilometers have been acquired. The remaining land acquisition requires six trillion toman, which is currently being arranged. He assured that the 30 kilometers of acquired land have already been handed over to the contractor, ensuring that the project has not been stalled.

Taraf emphasized that before the Russian loan payments can commence, certain prerequisites must be fulfilled. These include feasibility studies, design planning, site investigations, and setting up construction workshops along the acquired 30-kilometer stretch. Meanwhile, the remaining land acquisition will continue progressively, with ownership transferred to the contractor as it becomes available.

Regarding the loan's usage, he clarified that the Russian loan is designated for construction, not land acquisition. The project has a five-year completion timeline, and the Russian loan will be gradually injected over this period to fund studies, design, and construction phases.

Iran Continues Kiwi Exports to Target Markets



TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Plant Protection Organization announced the uninterrupted continuation of kiwi exports to all target markets, emphasizing that pest management is being conducted in collaboration with neighboring countries.

Maryam Jalili-Moghaddam highlighted the achievements of the recent visit of the Minister of Agriculture to Turkey. During the meeting, it was noted that many plant and animal pests are common between the two countries, rendering geographical and political borders irrelevant in this regard. Emphasis was placed on cooperation between the veterinary and plant protection organizations of both nations to manage pests and diseases effectively.

Jalili-Moghaddam pointed out that Turkey has made significant progress in water management and, like Iran, has recognized the impact of climate change. The country has integrated climate change considerations and water scarcity into its agricultural production and development strategies.

During the visit, representatives from both sides in fields such as fisheries and aquaculture, forestry and natural resources, veterinary services, agriculture, and horticulture participated. An 11-page document was signed to formalize mutual cooperation. It was agreed that joint activities in the plant protection sector would be conducted through webinars and expert visits.

Jalili-Moghaddam noted that agricultural trade between Iran and Turkey is ongoing, with fresh Iranian vegetables being exported to Turkey. Additionally, Turkey serves as a transit route for Iranian agricultural products to Europe, with Mersin Port being a key hub for these exports.

Regarding the potential threat of locust attacks on Iranian farms, Jalili-Moghaddam assured that local locusts appear seasonally and are under control. As for desert locusts, there is no current threat, despite earlier concerns raised by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Given rainfall patterns in North Africa and the Indian Ocean, the likelihood of a locust invasion is very low, almost negligible. Nevertheless, she confirmed that Iran is well-equipped to handle any potential locust crisis.

Speaking on kiwi exports, Jalili-Moghaddam mentioned that in 2022, India raised concerns over the presence of a local pest in some exported kiwi consignments. However, following bilateral cooperation, a work plan and export protocol were established and implemented by Iran's Ministry of Agriculture Jihad and India's Ministry of Agriculture. As a result, kiwi exports to all target countries are now proceeding without issues.

She also dismissed any strict measures regarding the import of agricultural products from Afghanistan, explaining that Iran's agricultural quarantine regulations are applied based on the production region and existing pest risks rather than the nationality of the landowner.

The Plant Protection Organization remains committed to its duty of preventing the entry of plant pests and diseases by enforcing necessary quarantine measures on imported consignments, including those from overseas cultivation projects.

U.S. Judge Blocks Trump Freeze on Federal Aid Spending

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Donald Trump's attempt to freeze hundreds of billions of dollars in federal aid was temporarily blocked in court on Tuesday, even as it sowed chaos throughout the government and stirred fears that it would disrupt programs that serve tens of millions of Americans.

Minutes before it was due to take effect at 5 pm ET (2200 GMT), a federal judge blocked Trump's spending freeze that would have affected thousands of federal grant programs. US District Judge Loren AliKhan granted a temporary halt after an advocacy group argued the freeze would devastate programs ranging from health care to road construction. The court will revisit the issue on Monday. Trump's sweeping directive was the latest step in his dramatic effort to overhaul the federal government, which has already seen the new president halt foreign aid, freeze hiring and shutter diversity programs across dozens of agencies.



Palestinians Return to Gaza City as Mediators Look Ahead to Next Stage



GAZA (Dispatches) - Displaced Palestinians returning to their homes in Gaza City this week found a city in ruins after 15 months of fighting, with many seeking shelter amongst the rubble and searching for relatives lost in the chaotic return march.

Gaza City, in the north of the enclave, is a shell of the bustling urban centre it was before the war, with swathes of buildings destroyed by Israeli bombardments and piles of rubble and torn-up concrete on every side.

"Look at this scene, there is nothing to say," said a man who gave his name as Abu Mohammad as he searched for a place to settle. "People will sleep on the ground. There is nothing left."

Many of those returning, often laden with what personal possessions they still have after months of being moved around as the battlegrounds shifted, had trekked 20 km (12 miles) or more along the coastal highway north.

"I am waiting for my father, mother and brother. We lost them on the way," said Jameel Abed, who walked up from the central area of the Gaza Strip. "We found some lights here and we are waiting for them," he said.

"There is no car, no tuktuk, no donkey cart, no vehicle, nothing that could move on this road."

By late on Monday, Gaza's Hamas authorities said more than 300,000 people, or almost half of those displaced from the north during the war, had crossed into Gaza City and the north edge of the enclave from areas in the south.

Even as those who arrived in Gaza looked around for somewhere to settle down, tens of thousands were still moving north as mediators began preliminary work on the second stage of ceasefire negotiations due to begin next week.

Three more Israeli hostages are due to be handed over on Thursday by Hamas, the militant group still in control of Gaza, with another three expected on Saturday, in exchange for scores of Palestinian prisoners set for release from Israeli jails, some of whom will go into exile.

North Korea's Kim Vows Nuclear Program to Continue



SEOUL (Dispatches) - Kim Jong Un vowed that North Korea's nuclear program would continue "indefinitely", state-run media reported today, days after new U.S. President Donald Trump said he would make renewed diplomatic overtures to the reclusive leader.

After inspecting a nuclear-material production facility, Kim also warned of an "inevitable" confrontation with hostile nations and said 2025 would be a "crucial year" for bolstering North Korea's nuclear forces, the KCNA news agency said.

"It is our firm political and military stand and invariable noble task and duty to develop the state's nuclear counteraction posture indefinitely," Kim said, according to KCNA.

The report, and Kim's nuclear factory visit, follow Pyongyang's test-firing on Saturday of sea-to-surface strategic guided cruise missiles, its first weapons test since Trump returned to the White House on Jan 20.

North Korea says it is seeking nuclear weapons to counter threats from the United States and its allies, including South Korea.

The two Koreas remain technically at war since the 1950-1953 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 United Nations sanctions.

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

Today, KCNA said Kim addressed "the world's most unstable situation in which a long-term confrontation with the most vicious hostile countries is inevitable", and that it was "indispensable for the country to steadily strengthen the nuclear shield".

Congo's M23 Rebels Take Control of Goma Airport, Embassies Attacked in Capital

GOMA (Dispatches) - Rebels seized the airport of east Congo's largest city Goma on Tuesday, potentially cutting off the main route for aid to reach hundreds of thousands of displaced people, after capturing the city in an offensive that left dead bodies lying in the streets.

M23 fighters marched into Goma on Monday in the worst escalation since 2012 of a three-decade conflict rooted in the long fallout from the Rwandan genocide and the struggle for control of Congo's mineral resources.

The United Nations has heard that the rebels control the airport and are inside Goma, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said at a briefing, describing the situation as "tense and fluid."

"There are real risks of breakdown of law and order in the city, given the proliferation of weapons," he warned, adding that U.N. peacekeepers and personnel had been forced to shelter at their bases.

In the Congolese capital Kinshasa, 1,600 km (1,000 miles) west of Goma, protesters attacked a U.N. compound and embassies including those of Rwanda, France and the United States, expressing anger at what they said was foreign interference. Looters ransacked the embassy of Kenya.

The U.S. State Department has ordered embassy staff to leave Congo, two sources said. One of the sources, with knowledge of the events, said they would leave on Wednesday. A third source said only non-essential staff had received the notice.

Congo and the head of U.N. peacekeeping have said Rwandan troops are present in Goma, backing up their M23 allies. Rwanda has said it is defending itself against the threat from Congolese militias, without directly commenting on whether its troops have crossed the border.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke separately on Tuesday with the Congolese and Rwandan presidents and urged Rwanda to protect civilians, Dujarric said.

Goma is a major hub for people displaced by fighting elsewhere in eastern Congo and aid groups seeking to assist them. The fighting has sent thousands of people streaming out of the city including some who had recently sought refuge there from M23's offensive since the start of the year.

Just across the border in Rwanda, trucks were unloading large numbers of people fleeing Goma with their children and bundles of possessions wrapped in pieces of fabric.

Goma residents and U.N. sources said dozens of troops had surrendered, but some soldiers and pro-government militiamen were holding out. People in several neighbourhoods reported small arms fire and some loud explosions on Tuesday morning.

By Tuesday afternoon, several diplomatic and security sources said the M23 rebels had taken full control of the airport,

putting them in charge of a vital link to the outside world.

"It was through the airport that the U.N., the humanitarian groups, the peacekeepers and even the Congolese army were getting supplies in," said Congo researcher Christoph Vogel, adding there was no viable access by road or by boat on Lake Kivu.

Jens Laerke, spokesperson for the U.N. humanitarian office OCHA, told a briefing colleagues had reported "many dead bodies in the streets."

"We have reports of rapes committed by fighters, looting of property ... and humanitarian health facilities being hit," he added. Other international aid officials described hospitals overwhelmed with wounded being treated in hallways.

The city's four main hospitals have treated at least 760 people wounded by the fighting since Sunday, medical and humanitarian sources said, cautioning that they could not estimate an accurate death toll as many people were dying outside the hospitals.

Francois Moreillon, head of the International Committee of the Red Cross in Congo, told Reuters a medicine warehouse had been looted, and he was concerned about a laboratory where dangerous germs including ebola were kept.

"Should it be hit in any way by shells which could affect the integrity of the structure, this could potentially allow germs to escape," he said.

M23 is the latest in a string of ethnic Tutsi-led, Rwandan-backed insurgencies that have brought tumult to Congo since the aftermath of the genocide in Rwanda 30 years ago, when Hutu extremists killed Tutsis and moderate Hutus, and then were toppled by the Tutsi-led forces that still govern Rwanda.

Rwanda says some of the ousted perpetrators have been sheltering in Congo since the genocide, forming militias with alliances with the Congolese government, and pose a threat to Congolese Tutsis and Rwanda itself.

Congo rejects Rwanda's complaints, and says Rwanda has used its proxy militias to control and loot lucrative minerals such as coltan, which is used in smartphones.

The U.N. and global powers fear the conflict could spiral into a regional war, akin to those of 1996-1997 and 1998-2003 that killed millions, mostly from hunger and disease.

U.N. peacekeepers have been caught up in the fighting. South Africa said three of its soldiers were killed in crossfire between government troops and rebels and a fourth had succumbed to wounds from earlier fighting, bringing the number of its fatalities in the past week to 13.

Danish PM Marshals European Support Against Trump's Threats to Greenland

COPENHAGEN (Dispatches) - Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen on Tuesday said she had received support from European leaders as she sought backing to counter US President Donald Trump's threats to take over Greenland.

Frederiksen and NATO chief Rutte agreed that allies need to focus on strengthening defences in the Arctic, a source familiar with the talks told Reuters.

"They agreed that in this effort all allies have a role to play," the source said after the meeting.

After an initial stopover in Berlin, Frederiksen was in Paris by midday for a meeting with French President Emmanuel Macron, after which she told reporters she had received "a great deal of support".

"This is a very, very clear message ... that of course there must be respect for territory and the sovereignty of states," Frederiksen said.

"This is a crucial part of the international community, the international community that we have built together since World War II," she added.

Trump has signalled that he wants the Arctic island - which is believed to hold large untapped mineral and oil reserves - to become part of the United States.

He has talked for years about a possible deal to take control of the Danish autonomous territory.

On Saturday, he told reporters he believed that the United States would "get Greenland", which is located between the United States and Europe in a region of increasing strategic value as the melting of Arctic sea ice opens up new shipping routes.

Trump argues his country needs Greenland for "international security".

But Denmark's Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen on Tuesday retorted that "Trump will not have Greenland."

"Greenland is Greenland. And the Greenlandic people are a people, also in the sense of international law," Lokke told reporters.

Frederiksen met early on Tuesday with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin. After speaking about Russia's war in Ukraine, Scholz stressed that



"borders must not be moved by force" and added the English-language phrase: "To whom it may concern."

The chancellor said "the times we live in are challenging" and require a strong Europe and NATO. He stressed that "Denmark and Germany are strong partners and close friends."

Tuesday's visits followed a weekend Nordic summit where leaders all "shared the gravity of the situation", Frederiksen said.

Denmark on Monday announced that it would spend 14.6 billion kroner (\$2 billion) to bolster security in the Arctic.

It said it would send three new frigates to the region, as well as long-distance drones equipped with advanced imaging capabilities. It would also reinforce its satellite capabilities.

Officials in Greenland, which depends heavily on Denmark for subsidies, have long been pushing for independence but have said they are open to doing

business with the US.

A day after Trump was sworn in as president, Greenland Prime Minister Mute Egede insisted that Greenlanders "don't want to be American".

In mid-January, Frederiksen reportedly spoke to Trump by telephone, stressing that it was up to Greenland to determine its future.

According to European sources cited by the Financial Times, Danish officials described the conversation as "horrendous" and said that Trump's interest in Greenland was "serious, and potentially very dangerous".

The US president, who has not excluded a possible military intervention to annex the island, reportedly threatened Denmark with tariffs over the issue.

The United States is the small Scandinavian country's main export market.

Greenland's trade and justice minister Naaja Nathanielsen on Monday told AFP that the Greenlandic people were living through a "worrying time" and were "concerned" about Trump's statements.

"As a government, our job is not to panic and to figure out what the actual demands are," Nathanielsen said.

"If it is about military presence, the US has been here for 80 years, we are not opposed to that. If it is about the minerals, it is an open market," she said.

But, she warned, "if it is about expansionism, we are a democracy, we are allies and we ask our allies to respect our institutions."

The European Union's top military official on Saturday said that troops from EU countries could be based in Greenland.

"In my view, it would make perfect sense not only to station US forces in Greenland, as is currently the case, but also to consider stationing EU soldiers there," Robert Brieger, chairman of the European Union Military Committee told German newspaper Welt am Sonntag.

France's Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot did not rule out the possibility of European troops in Greenland.

"Why not, since it is a matter of security," Barrot told Sud Radio on Tuesday.

He stressed, however, that "that is not the wish expressed by Denmark, but it is a possibility".

Putin Says Peace Talks With Ukraine Possible, But Not With Zelensky

KYIV (Dispatches) - Russian President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday that his country could hold peace talks with Ukraine, but ruled out speaking directly with President Volodymyr Zelensky, whom he called "illegitimate".

The Ukrainian leader responded by saying that Putin was "afraid" of negotiations and was using "cynical tricks" to prolong the nearly three-year conflict.

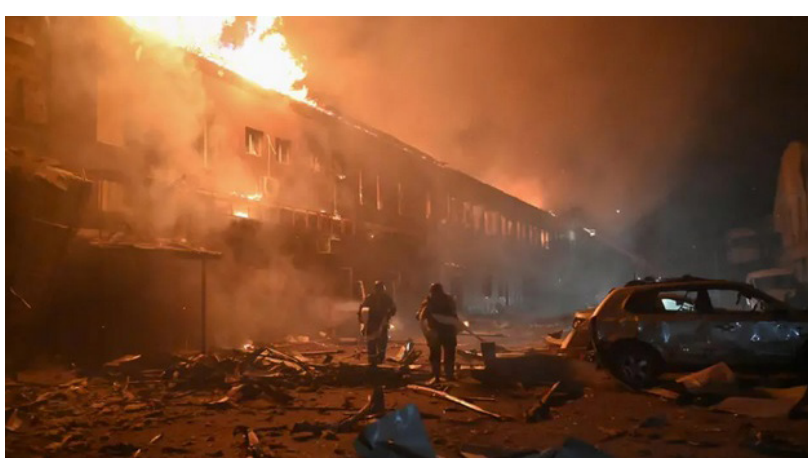
U.S. President Donald Trump has put pressure on both sides to end the fighting since coming into office on January 20, threatening tougher sanctions on Russia while claiming that Zelensky is ready to negotiate a "deal".

"If (Zelensky) wants to participate in the negotiations, I will allocate people to take part," Putin said, calling the Ukrainian leader "illegitimate" because his presidential term expired during martial law.

"If there is a desire to negotiate and find a compromise, let anyone lead the negotiations there... Naturally, we will strive for what suits us, what corresponds to our interests," he added.

Zelensky said that there was a chance to achieve "real peace" but that the Kremlin chief was frustrating efforts to stop the fighting.

"Today, Putin once again confirmed that he is afraid of negotiations, afraid of strong



leaders, and does everything possible to prolong the war," Zelensky wrote on X.

Kyiv has warned against it being excluded from any peace talks between Russia and the US, accusing Putin of wanting to "manipulate" Trump.

Putin also claimed the fighting would end in two months or less if the West cut its support to Kyiv.

"They will not exist for a month if the money and, in a broad sense, the bullets run out. Everything would be over in a month and a half or two," Putin said in comments to a state TV reporter.

The conflict has shown no signs of de-escalating despite Trump's promise to enact a quick ceasefire once in office.

Russia's army said Tuesday that its forces had captured a large village in Ukraine's northeastern Kharkiv region, the latest territorial gain for Moscow's advancing troops.

The Russian defence ministry said its forces had "liberated" the village of Dvorichna, which had a pre-conflict population of more than 3,000.

The village, located across the strategic Oskil river, was seized by Moscow at the start of its full-scale military offensive in 2022, before being retaken by Kyiv months later in a swift counter-offensive.

Knicks Continue Rugged Homestand Against Struggling Nuggets



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The last lengthy homestand of the season for the New York Knicks is off to a historically good start. The Denver Nuggets' longest road trip of the season isn't going nearly as well. New York hosts Denver tonight in a battle of potential NBA title contenders.

Both teams were off Tuesday after playing Monday, when the Knicks led nearly wire-to-wire in a 143-106 win over the Memphis Grizzlies, while the Nuggets frittered away a 10-point lead they held in the third quarter and fell to the Chicago Bulls, 129-121.

The Knicks completed their most prolific back-to-back stretch in almost 60 years, after rolling to a 143-120 win over the Sacramento Kings on Saturday night to open the five-game homestand.

New York last scored at least 140 points in consecutive games from Dec. 11-14, 1965, when the Knicks beat the Baltimore Bullets 150-127 and edged the San Francisco Warriors 141-137.

Mikal Bridges (28 points) led seven Knicks in double figures Monday night as they trailed just once -- at 2-0 -- and dominated the Grizzlies on both ends of the floor. New York outscored Memphis 83-54 after halftime and finished the game with 20 steals, the second-most by an NBA team in a game this season. The Atlanta Hawks had 22 steals against the Toronto Raptors on Dec. 29.

New York, now 6-6 against teams currently in playoff positions, will close out its homestand by playing four straight teams who are among the top six in the Western Conference. The Los Angeles Lakers are slated to visit Saturday night, followed by the Houston Rockets on Monday night.

"They're a tough matchup -- that's a good test for us," Knicks coach Tom Thibodeau said of the third-place Grizzlies. "And we had to be tied together. I loved our overall activity. I thought our defensive activity was terrific. Big-time, multiple-effort game."

The defensive effort hasn't been stout over the last two games for the Nuggets, who have dropped consecutive contests for the first time since Dec. 25-27. Denver hasn't lost three in a row since Feb. 9-14, 2024.

The Nuggets have given up a combined 262 points to the Bulls and Minnesota Timberwolves -- the most points surrendered by Denver in back-to-back games since it gave up 264 points in consecutive overtime wins over the Toronto Raptors and Brooklyn Nets from Oct. 28-29.

Denver allowed seven Bulls players to score in double figures Monday night and gave up 34 points in the fourth quarter, when Chicago was 13-of-24 from the field (54.2 percent), including 6-of-13 (46.2 percent) from 3-point land.

"We messed with the game," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said. "You let a team hang around and in that third quarter going into the fourth quarter, they literally just drove the ball down our throats and rebounded and went drive-and-kick three, drive-and-kick three, drive-and-kick three. All because we couldn't guard the ball or wouldn't get back."

The defensive struggles squandered another mammoth game by Nikola Jokic. The three-time NBA Most Valuable Player posted another triple-double (33 points, 12 rebounds, 14 assists) while becoming the first player ever to go 10-of-10 from the field in a first half with at least eight assists.

Meanwhile Stephen Curry looks to snap out of a shooting slump against an opponent that has given him trouble in the past when the Golden State Warriors host the Utah Jazz on Tuesday in San Francisco.

Curry missed all eight of his second-half shots, finished 4-for-17 and totaled 13 points when the Warriors were beaten 118-108 by the visiting Los Angeles Lakers on Saturday night.

Although Curry was selected an All-Star for the 11th time last week, he has recorded four consecutive games with 21 or fewer points. His season average is down to 22.3, which is on pace for his lowest in a full campaign since 2011-12.

Curry has shot just 38.1 percent overall and 32.4 percent from 3-point range over the four contests.

After the loss to the Lakers, Golden State's third defeat in its past four games, the U.S. Olympic hero denied that a sore right thumb has been the root of his shooting woes.

"It's not an excuse for anything; you got to play through it," he said. "It's just something that's been lingering to the point it gets hit every once in a while. It's just one of those things that's almost gone, then it gets knocked again. I'll deal with it."

The Warriors have beaten the Jazz six straight times dating back to December 2022, but Curry often hasn't been the driving force. He has been held to 16 or fewer points in three of his last six games against Utah, and managed 20 despite 7-for-20 shooting (4-for-13 on 3-point attempts) in a 127-86 win in Salt Lake City on Oct. 25.

Curry's 23.3 career scoring average against Utah is his fourth lowest among Western Conference opponents. His 41.1 percent accuracy on 3-point shots in 39 games versus the Jazz also ranks fourth against Western foes.

England Win in Rajkot to Stay Alive in T20 Series v India



RAJKOT (Dispatches) - England secured a 26-run victory over India in the third T20 International on Tuesday as some sprightly bowling kept the tourists alive in the five-match series against the world champions.

Put into bat, England posted a modest 171-9 with Ben Duckett (51) and Liam Livingstone (43) providing major contributions.

India spinner Varun Chakravarthy claimed 5-24 but the English bowlers made their own mark and restricted their hosts to 145-9 to deny India an unassailable 3-0 lead in the series.

Beaten comprehensively in Kolkata and narrowly in Chennai, England had to win at the Saurashtra Cricket Association Stadium in what is their first series under Brendon McCullum as their white-ball coach.

India seamer Hardik Pandya dismissed Phil Salt in his first over but Duckett and England captain Jos Buttler (24) propped up England with a 76-run stand.

An in-form Chakravarthy continued to torment the England batters and dismissed Buttler caught behind to trigger a batting collapse.

Buttler was initially adjudged not out but wicketkeeper Sanju Samson convinced India captain Suryakumar Yadav to review the decision, which was overturned after replays confirmed the batter had gloved the ball.

Duckett raced to a 26-ball fifty but fell soon after to Axar Patel's left-arm spin.

Chakravarthy dismissed Jamie Smith and Jamie Overton with successive deliveries but a hat-trick eluded him.

Realising he was running out of partners, Livingstone counter-attacked hitting spinner Ravi Bishnoi for three sixes in an over.

For India, seamer Mohammed Shami conceded 25 runs in his three tidy, though wicketless, overs on his return to international cricket after a year on the sidelines with an ankle injury.

Mertens Cruises in Singapore

SINGAPORE (Dispatches) - No. 2 seed Elise Mertens of Belgium needed just 55 minutes to beat Taylor Townsend 6-1, 6-0 in first-round action at the Singapore Tennis Open.

Mertens faced six break points but saved them all, while converting 5 of 8 opportunities to break Townsend's serve. Mertens moves on to face Germany's Tatjana Maria, who was a 2-6, 6-1, 6-2 winner over Ukrainian foe Yulia Starodubtseva.

No. 5 seed Polina Kudermetova of Russia also played a quick match, but she came out on the losing end as Australian Kimberly Birrell prevailed 6-3, 6-2 in 61 minutes. No. 4 seed Xinyu Wang of China defeated Canadian Rebecca Marino 6-4, 5-7, 7-5, while Olivia Gadecki of Australia upset Japanese eighth seed Moyuka Uchijima 6-1, 6-7 (1), 6-2.

Other winners on Tuesday included American Hailey Baptiste, Russian Maria Timofeeva and Switzerland's Jil Teichmann.

Earlier Cristina Bucsa of Spain rallied to eliminate No. 7 seed Emma Raducanu of Great Britain 5-7, 7-5, 7-5 in a three-hour-plus marathon during the first round of the Singapore Tennis Open.

Raducanu, the 2021 U.S. Open champ, hit seven aces but also committed seven double faults. Bucsa broke Raducanu's serve three times in the second set and four times in the third, and by match's end she had won exactly one point more than Raducanu (119-118).

No. 1 seed Anna Kalinskaya of Russia needed to go the distance to defeat American challenger Caroline Dolehide 6-4, 4-6, 6-2. No. 6 seed Camila Osorio of Colombia outlasted



American Bernarda Pera 6-1, 6-7 (0), 6-3.

Other first-round winners included Simona Waltert of Switzerland, Dominika Salkova of the Czech Republic, Mananchaya Sawangkaew of Thailand, Australia's Maya Joint and American Ann Li.

Meanwhile Russian sixth seed Anastasia Potapova made quick work of Austrian Julia Grabher, 6-2, 6-2 in 67 minutes during first-round action in Linz, Austria.

Ukrainian fifth seed Dayana Yastremska had a tougher time advancing, but she got past Italy's

Lucia Bronzetti 7-6 (6), 7-5, going 6-for-8 in break points saved and 3-for-3 in break points converted along the way. The only other seeded player in action was Denmark's Clara Tauson, the eighth seed, who beat Ukraine's Anhelina Kalinina 6-3, 6-3.

Also moving on were Russia's Aliaksandra Sasnovich, Slovakian Rebecca Sramkova, Spaniard Sara Sorribes Tormo and Croatians Petra Martic and Antonia Ruzic.

Scholes Slams Rashford, says Striker Should Be Banished

LONDON (Dispatches) - Former Manchester United midfielder Paul Scholes says out-of-favour Marcus Rashford has let his teammates down and should be "banished" from the dressing room.

The England forward has not played for United since December 12, with manager Ruben Amorim leaving him out of the squad for every game since apart from one, in which he was an unused substitute.

Amorim suggested on Sunday that he would rather have 63-year-old goalkeeping coach Jorge Vital in his squad than the 27-year-old forward, citing a perceived lack of effort.

Scholes, who won 11 Premier League titles with United, expressed strong views about Rashford on The Overlap Fan Debate.

"I think Marcus has let a lot of people down really, with his attitude, and I think that's what the manager is trying to say," he said.

"You think of the young players coming through the team, think of (Alejandro) Garnacho, they're looking up to people like Marcus now—he's 27 years of age, and he's clearly not training properly.

"I remember years ago when I told the manager (Alex Ferguson) I didn't want to play in that Arsenal game... he said to me 'The worst thing you did is let your team-mates down', and that really stuck with me because I wasn't really thinking about that—and now I think Marcus Rashford, he's doing exactly the same.



"OK, he's not refusing to play, but in the way he's behaving and the way he's training, in a way he is saying I don't want to be involved with these.

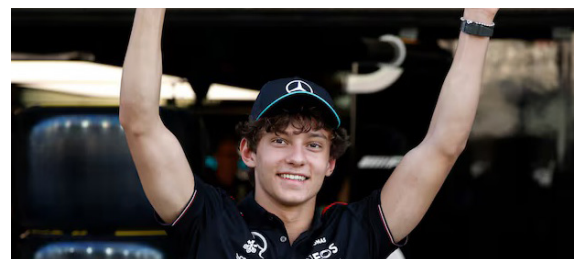
"So I think the fact of letting your team-mates down in that dressing room—he should be banished from the dressing room really. If he's in and around that and young people are seeing that as an example, the sooner he's gone the better."

Scholes' comments follow similarly strong remarks from former United defender Rio Ferdinand, who said on the Rio Ferdinand Presents podcast that there was "no way back" for Rashford following Amorim's comments.

Rashford said in December he was ready for a "new challenge", two days after being left out of the squad to face Manchester City.

Barcelona, Borussia Dortmund and AC Milan have been linked with a move for the player, who has scored 138 goals in 426 appearances for United, during the January transfer window.

But any move is complicated by Rashford's reported £300,000-a-week (\$374,000) salary on a deal that runs until 2028.



LONDON (Dispatches) - Italian Kimi Antonelli, the 18-year-old rookie replacing seven times Formula One world champion Lewis Hamilton at Mercedes this season, has passed his driving test.

"Mission completed," Mercedes posted on their Instagram account, with ticks for both super licence and driving licence, above a photo of Antonelli giving a thumbs up in a driving school car.

The Italian turned 18, the minimum age to drive on public roads in Italy, last August. He has already had extensive tests in Formula One machinery.

Hamilton, the most successful driver of all time with 105 grand prix wins and 104 pole positions, has moved to Ferrari with Antonelli stepping up alongside George Russell at Mercedes.

The season starts in Australia on March 16 with Antonelli one of several rookies moving up from Formula Two. Mercedes are due to launch their 2025 car on Feb. 24, two days before the start of testing in Bahrain.

Meanwhile a sleek, long-nosed Mercedes raced by Stirling Moss and five-times Formula One world champion Juan Manuel Fangio in 1955 could become the most expensive grand prix car of all time at an auction in Stuttgart on Saturday.

The W196 R Stromlinienwagen ("Streamline car"), one of only four complete examples in existence, is being sold by RM Sotheby's on behalf of the Indianapolis Motor Speedway (IMS) at a target price of more than 50 million euros (\$52 million).

If it meets the estimate, it would also be the second costliest car ever sold at auction after a 1955 Mercedes 300SLR Uhlenhaut Coupe sports car that changed hands for 135 million euros in May 2022. The most expensive grand prix car sold at auction to date was another ex-Fangio 1954 Mercedes W196 that fetched \$29.6 million at Goodwood in 2013.

The IMS car is the first streamline-bodied W196 R to become available for private ownership and, in its open-wheel form, was driven to victory by Fangio at the non-championship Buenos Aires Grand Prix in 1955.

Moss raced it with the streamline body at the Italian Grand Prix at Monza, retiring after setting the fastest lap at an average speed of 215.7 kph.

Mercedes withdrew from factory-sponsored motorsport in 1955 after a Le Mans 24 Hours disaster that killed 84 people, returning to Formula One as an engine maker in 1994.

The car is presented in its Monza livery with full documentation. "Without any doubt, it's the most beautiful race car in the world and ever. Nothing can compare. It's simply a masterpiece of style and design," Marcus Breitschwerdt, head of Mercedes-Benz heritage, told Reuters Television.

"It is very fast. The top speed is actually above and beyond 300 kph.