

Head of the Chiefs of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, Major General Mohammad Bagheri, Extends Congratulations to Commander of Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Major General Hossein Salami in Honor of Islamic Revolution Guard's Day

IRAN NEWS

The UAE city of Dubai Will Host Iran Corridor 2025, a Gathering Aimed at Showcasing the Rapidly Growing Fields of Technology, Innovation, and Connectivity Via Iran as the Event Will Be Held on Monday, February 3

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Iran Warns Attack on Its Nuclear Sites Will Lead to Widespread Regional War



TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has strongly cautioned about the dire consequences of a potential act of aggression, potentially involving the Israeli regime and the United States, against Iran's nuclear facilities.

"My assumption is that in this case (a likely attack against the Islamic Republic's nuclear facilities), we will enter into a widespread war in the region, a catastrophe that no one, neither in the region nor outside the region, wants," the top diplomat said on Friday.

"I doubt that the Americans will make such a major miscalculation," added Araqchi in remarks to Qatar's Al Jazeera Arabic television network during a short stay in the Persian Gulf country, addressing the likelihood of Washington's aiding Tel Aviv in such an act of aggression.

"Unlike previous times, if Iran's nuclear facilities are attacked, Iran's reaction will be immediate and decisive," he noted.

"The Americans and Israelis know what targets we can target," Araqchi stated concerning the aspects of Iran's response to potential aggression against its nuclear facilities.

He, meanwhile, reiterated that "Iran will definitely be able to respond" to such aggression, and strongly advised the US against making "one of the biggest historical mistakes" by contributing to such an attack.

Still addressing the potential of such an attack, the foreign minister declined to consider such a likely act of aggression to be capable of causing much damage to Iran's nuclear sites.

He noted that, far from just being present on the ground, Iran's nuclear might and capabilities lay "in the minds and thoughts of Iranian scientists."

"This capability and program will not be destroyed by bombing or airstrikes."

Secondly, Iran's nuclear facilities were not situated in one or two locations, he went on, adding that the facilities were scattered across many locations and were being guarded by very good and strong defenses.

"These facilities are in places that are very difficult, even impossible, to access even by airstrikes."

And thirdly, he underlined the certitude of the Islamic Republic's "immediate and decisive" reaction to a likely attack.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Araqchi reiterated that "nuclear weapons are not part of Iran's military doctrine," asserting, "Our security is provided through other methods, and nuclear weapons are haram (forbidden) in our view."



TEHRAN - In his address during a ceremony marking the second day of the Ten-Day Dawn festivities, marking the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, President Masoud Pezeshkian emphasized that the key to Iran's success lies in unity and the abandonment of divisions. He further stated that the teachings of the Quran, along with the guidance of all prophets and imams, have consistently advocated for justice, unity, and solidarity.

Addressing government officials and attendees at the event, President Pezeshkian dedicated his speech to a brief reading of Imam Khomeini's will, urging everyone to remember and act upon the profound messages within. "Today, we must recall the significant words of our great Imam and implement them in our actions," he said.

Pezeshkian noted that enemies of the Islamic Republic are continuously attempting to create discord among the people, aiming to divide them. "The survival of the Islamic Revolution depends on strengthening hope and avoiding despair," he emphasized.

He pointed out that one of the central problems facing the country today is the tendency to create obstacles without fully understanding the underlying issues. He referred to Imam Khomeini's emphasis in his will, citing a specific passage on the Hadith of Thaqalayn, which underscores the Quran as a universal guide for humanity. "Some have tried to reduce the Quran to a mere symbol in cemeteries or gatherings of the dead, ignoring its true power to free mankind from oppression," Pezeshkian remarked.

He reaffirmed that the Quran's core message is about the unity of Muslims and humanity, offering the greatest guidance for liberation from tyranny. He also reminded the audience that Imam Khomeini condemned dictatorial and oppressive governments, emphasizing that the Quran and the teachings of the imams call for justice, equality, and unity among people.

"The Quran and its principles are not restricted by time; they are meant for all humanity across history," the president continued. He also pointed to the Nahj al-Balagha, the collection of sermons and letters attributed to Imam Ali, stating that it is second only to the Quran as a liberation guide. "We are proud to have this book, which emphasizes justice and the importance of unity among

people. Imam Ali stresses obedience to God and mutual brotherhood among Muslims."

He urged all citizens and government officials to recognize the value of the people and serve the underprivileged, a point frequently emphasized by Imam Khomeini. "The enemies want to sow discord between the masses, religious leaders, and officials. We must trust in ourselves and our strengths," Pezeshkian stated, adding that Iran should not feel inferior to the West.

Pezeshkian also referred to Imam Khomeini's instructions to the executive branch, highlighting the importance of supporting the underprivileged. He further reminded the audience of Imam Khomeini's warnings against racial discrimination and the importance of solidarity among Muslims across the globe. "We must extend hands of friendship and brotherhood, especially in the face of unjust complaints," he said. Imam Khomeini had always emphasized that problems could not be solved overnight, and instead, the focus should be on cooperation and unity.

Reflecting on the unity called for in Imam Khomeini's will, Pezeshkian noted that the problem lies in treating sacred texts as mere books to read rather than as guides for life. "When I was a university student, our debates were rooted in discussing worldviews and understanding our role in society," he remarked, stressing that human actions should be guided by justice and fairness, values emphasized by both the Quran and Nahj al-Balagha.

In a final reference to Imam Khomeini's will, Pezeshkian reminded the gathering of the necessity for the armed forces to remain apolitical and not get involved in partisan politics, a crucial element of national security. He pointed to the importance of keeping the military neutral to avoid harming the country's stability.

"We must remember that it is the people who have brought us to this point," Pezeshkian concluded, pledging that with collective effort, mutual support, and the guidance of the esteemed leader, the Iranian people will overcome the challenges before them. "By relying on the strength of the people and working together, we will remove the obstacles in our path," he said with optimism.

Iran Advocates Regional Cooperation Against Unilateralism in Digital and AI Economy

TEHRAN - Iran's First Vice President, Dr. Mohammad Reza Aref, presented a five-point proposal at the "Almaty Digital 2025" conference in Kazakhstan, emphasizing the necessity of regional cooperation to counter unilateralism in the digital domain and artificial intelligence (AI) economy. He called for Iran and regional countries to unite and build the foundation for a new digital and industrial era.

Addressing the conference, Dr. Aref underscored the rapid evolution of digital economies worldwide. With the ongoing Fourth Industrial Revolution, data has become the new driving force in the global economy, much like oil was during the Industrial Revolution. He warned that nations failing to adapt to these transformations risk being left behind in global competition.

He highlighted Iran's commitment to digital development, citing significant investments in digital infrastructure, government digitalization, and AI applications. According to international and national reports, Iran's digital economy accounts for approximately seven percent of its GDP, with plans to increase this share to ten percent under the country's Seventh Development Plan. The nation has over 450,000 active digital enterprises, including startups and e-commerce platforms, and has invested \$15 billion in its ICT sector as of 2022.

Iran also ranks prominently in AI research and application, with over 3,500 annual graduates in AI-related fields. The country has published a National AI Strategy and boasts a strong presence in AI-driven industries such as content publishing, administrative services, media, and transportation.

Dr. Aref acknowledged the challenges Iran faces, particularly economic sanctions that have restricted access to advanced technologies and global markets. However, he emphasized that these obstacles have also driven Iran to strengthen its domestic digital capabilities, leading to technological advancements and the emergence of competitive local startups.

He argued that digital economy growth should not be confined to national borders but should be pursued through regional and international collaborations. He highlighted the potential of the Eurasian Digital Platform, which integrates advanced technologies like AI, blockchain, and cloud computing to facilitate trade and innovation among Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) member states and partners like Iran.

To harness the collective potential of the region, Dr. Aref proposed the following key initiatives:

Interconnecting Digital Infrastructure - Establishing shared communication networks and advanced digital frameworks among EAEU countries to enhance data flow and digital trade.



Harmonizing Regulations - Aligning legal frameworks to streamline cross-border digital transactions and AI governance, ensuring a cohesive regulatory environment.

Developing Joint Platforms - Creating regional digital platforms for financial services, education, and business networking to boost intra-regional commerce.

Combating Unilateralism in Digital Governance - Promoting decentralized control and collaborative governance in the AI economy to counteract the dominance of major global tech powers.

Co-creating AI and Digital Products - Partnering on digital payment systems and AI-driven commerce solutions to facilitate independent

financial transactions within the region.

Concluding his speech, Dr. Aref expressed hope that the conference would mark the beginning of a new phase of regional digital collaboration. He reiterated that the time has come for Iran and neighboring nations to work together to establish a strong foundation for a digital and industrial renaissance.

"As we step into the future, unity and cooperation will be the keys to shaping an inclusive, competitive, and innovative digital landscape," he said, urging regional leaders to seize this opportunity for mutual growth and prosperity.

Earlier Aref, emphasized Iran's ongoing efforts to be a reliable and effective partner in regional frameworks at the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) summit in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on Friday. Addressing the summit for the first time in the capacity of an observer country, Dr. Aref reaffirmed Iran's commitment to expanding economic cooperation across key sectors, including energy, technology, transit, and communications.

He highlighted Iran's readiness to support trade interactions under the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) framework between Iran and the EAEU. He noted that Iran is prepared to enhance the Iran-EAEU corridor and facilitate trade among the six member states of the Union, particularly by leveraging its southern ports in the Persian Gulf and the Oman Sea to connect landlocked countries to global markets.

The First Vice President also expressed gratitude for the observer status granted to Iran by the EAEU and congratulated Belarus on assuming the presidency of the Union for 2025. This step, he said, was a significant milestone in deepening bilateral relations and enhancing Iran's economic position within regional and multilateral frameworks like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO).

Int'l Consultations to Attract 15m Tourists to Iran



TEHRAN - The Minister of Cultural Heritage has announced that according to the 7th Development Plan, the goal is to attract 15 million tourists to Iran. He emphasized that achieving this target would require proper infrastructure development and attracting investment as top priorities.

In a live appearance on the regional network in Mazandaran Province, Minister Seyed Reza Salehi Amiri, during his visit to the province, conveyed President Raisi's warm regards to the people of Mazandaran, offering his congratulations for the Fajr decade and the months of Sha'ban.

Salehi Amiri highlighted the potential of Mazandaran's handicrafts, tourism, and cultural heritage sectors, stressing that handicrafts represent a largely untapped yet important resource capable of boosting the national economy. He shared that during his field visits across the country, he observed the unique potential of this sector.

The Minister emphasized the importance of boosting handicraft exports, stating that this sector should become a priority, with efforts to remove obstacles. He also noted that President Raisi supports this initiative. With investment and the development of international markets, Iranian handicrafts could initially generate \$1 billion in foreign exchange, with potential for further growth.

Salehi Amiri underscored the significance of Iran's history and civilization, noting that the country's historical sites are symbols of national identity, pride, and vitality. He stressed the need for the younger generation to become familiar with this heritage to foster greater national pride in their cultural roots.

He further stated that the Iranian people consistently honor both their Iranian and Islamic identities, as evidenced by national celebrations like Yalda and Chaharshanbe Suri alongside religious observances such as Muharram and Ramadan. This blend of culture and religion shapes the unique cultural identity of Iranians and signifies a deep connection between history and faith in the country.

Legacy of Qassam Brigades Martyrs Eradicating Cancerous Tumor of Israel



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says the glorious legacy of the martyrs of Qassam Brigades, the military arm of Hamas, in the battle against Israel will lighten the way for the future of Resistance.

In a message on Friday, the IRGC expressed condolences over the martyrdom of the legendary and brave chief of the Qassam Brigades and several of its military council leaders in the battle against the Israeli regime.

It said the martyrs' glorious legacy will be the torch of the path of the faithful and invincible fighters of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement in the quest for the liberation of al-Quds and the eradication of the "cancerous tumor" of Israel.

Chief of al-Qassam Brigades Abu Obeida on Thursday announced the martyrdom of several of the wing's military council leaders in the battle against Israel, including its chief of staff Mohammed Deif.

Mohammad 'Abu Khaled' Deif, known for his elusiveness, had survived at least seven attempts on his life by Israel. He had been a key figure in orchestrating military operations against Israel.

The IRGC further described Mohammed Deif and other martyred commanders of al-Qassam Brigades as "shining stars in the proud galaxy of Palestinian resistance" who created an inspiring and enduring narrative of sacrifice, resistance and relentless struggle against the criminal Israeli regime.

"Their names continue to instill fear and terror in the hearts of the Zionist criminals and their supporters, and those who continue their path will demonstrate that their names are still alive," the statement read.

It emphasized that the martyrdom of Mohammed Deif and other commanders of the military wing will boost the power of the Islamic resistance's fighters and strengthen the Palestinian people's will to continue their resistance until liberation of al-Quds.

Indian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal



TEHRAN (IRNA) - India has asked for Iran's assistance in finding three of its nationals whom New Delhi says have gone missing in the country.

"Three Indian nationals who had gone to Iran for business purposes are missing. We are in touch with their families," Indian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal said on Friday in a weekly briefing.

"We have taken up the matter with the Iranian Embassy in Delhi and with the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tehran," said Jaiswal.

He added that India's Foreign Ministry and its embassy in Tehran remain in touch with Iranian authorities and have requested their assistance in locating the missing nationals and ensuring their safety.

The three missing Indians were identified as Yogesh Panchal, Mohammad Sadeeque, and Sumeet Sud.

According to Indian media outlets, Panchal had recently started an export firm dealing in dry fruit and apple, and took a flight from Mumbai to Tehran on December 5 to explore business opportunities.

Sadeeque had also traveled to Iran in December 2024, while Sud traveled to the country early January.

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Iran Engages Neighboring Countries to Boost Tourism and Infrastructure Development

TEHRAN (ILNA) - Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, emphasized the need for expanding tourism infrastructure while attending a ceremony at Sari International Airport marking the anniversary of Imam Khomeini's return to Iran.

During his visit to Mazandaran Province, a key tourist destination, Salehi Amiri stated that improving tourism requires significant infrastructure development. "Mazandaran, as a major tourist hub, must enhance its facilities to meet growing demands," he said. Highlighting the government's new policies to attract foreign tourists, the minister noted that Iran is focusing on investments from Central Asian and Caucasus nations. "We are in discussions with Tajikistan, Armenia, Uzbekistan, and Georgia to expand tourism within the Nowruz cultural sphere," he added.

Tehran, Madrid Strengthen Trade Relations by Supporting Private Sector Cooperation



TEHRAN - In a meeting between the head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) and the Spanish ambassador to Iran, both sides emphasized the importance of enhancing trade relations between the two countries through private sector collaboration.

Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, the head of Iran's TPO, highlighted the longstanding economic ties between Iran and Spain, stating that positive trade relations have existed so far, and efforts are being made to further expand them.

According to the public relations office of the TPO, Dehnavi described Spain as a long-standing trade and industrial partner and a priority market for Iran in Europe. He stressed that Iran has significant opportunities and capabilities for exporting its products to target markets, including Europe.

He further noted that strengthening connections between business communities in both countries could yield promising results. In this regard, the seventh Iran Expo, scheduled for spring next year, will provide an excellent opportunity for Spanish traders to participate.

"We would like to invite Spanish officials and businesspeople to attend this international trade event. Likewise, we support the participation of Iranian trade delegations in exhibitions held in Spain," Dehnavi added.

Antonio Sánchez-Benedito Gaspar, the Spanish Ambassador to Iran, expressed optimism about the current state of trade relations between the two countries, mentioning that several beneficial agreements have been signed in recent years.

"During my time in Iran, I have become familiar with various Iranian companies and their products, and there is a strong mutual interest among businesspeople from both countries to expand trade exchanges," he said.

Gov't Committed to Facilitating Private Sector Participation in the Economy



TEHRAN - The First Vice President of Iran has emphasized the government's role in facilitating private sector activities and ensuring the security of investments for both domestic investors and Iranians abroad. He reiterated that Iranian embassies are obligated to protect the rights of all Iranians, regardless of their political affiliations, and that the government remains committed to addressing their concerns, especially legal issues.

During his visit to Kazakhstan for the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Intergovernmental Council meeting, Mohammad Reza Aref highlighted the importance of regional economic alliances, stating that Iran has no choice but to actively engage in significant regional unions and agreements. He noted that Iran's efforts in foreign policy and economic diplomacy have led to the country's participation in such organizations.

Aref recalled his initial efforts in securing Iran's presence in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) during the reformist government. He acknowledged that Iran faced challenges in the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) due to competition with certain member states, which prevented the country from fully utilizing its potential in the organization.

However, he pointed out that Iran faced no political obstacles in joining the Eurasian Economic Union and that member states have welcomed Iran's participation. The culmination of these efforts has been a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Iran and the EAEU, an essential milestone that will facilitate trade by eliminating barriers. The agreement has already been approved by the Iranian Parliament and awaits final confirmation by the Guardian Council before implementation.

Aref stressed the necessity of private sector involvement in Iran's economy, stating that the government has recognized that economic goals such as 8% GDP growth and reduced inflation and unemployment cannot be achieved without private sector participation. He clarified that the government's role is not to control the economy but to provide necessary tools, remove obstacles, and facilitate private sector activities, as outlined in Iran's Seventh Development Plan.

Furthermore, he emphasized the importance of providing a secure investment environment for Iranian entrepreneurs, both domestically and abroad, to encourage their active participation in the country's economic landscape. According to Aref, this policy has been well received and is being actively pursued under the current administration.

Recognizing the impact of economic sanctions, Aref noted that the government is prepared to revise laws and regulations to support private sector involvement. He recalled that during the early years of the Islamic Republic, a state-controlled economy was prioritized, but this approach was eventually

reformed with the introduction of Article 44 of the Constitution, which promoted privatization and reduced state monopolies.

He assured that the government is committed to resolving challenges rather than imposing restrictions on businesses, emphasizing that leveraging private sector capabilities and engaging in regional and international economic agreements are key strategies for countering sanctions.

Addressing concerns raised by Iranian business leaders in Kazakhstan, Aref acknowledged the economic difficulties caused by Western-imposed sanctions. He criticized these sanctions as unjust and politically motivated, stating that Western nations use them as a tool to pressure Iran despite being fully aware of Iran's commitment to non-proliferation, as evidenced by the Supreme Leader's religious decree against nuclear weapons.

He asserted that Iran has never surrendered to external pressure and has continuously found ways to navigate and mitigate the effects of sanctions. One of Iran's primary strategies in this regard has been the development of international trade corridors, which are actively being discussed in government meetings.

Aref underscored the importance of long-term government support for private sector growth, citing examples of countries that have secured strong regional economic positions through sustained support for their businesses. He acknowledged that Iran has previously neglected opportunities in Central Asia and called for renewed efforts to strengthen economic ties with neighboring countries.

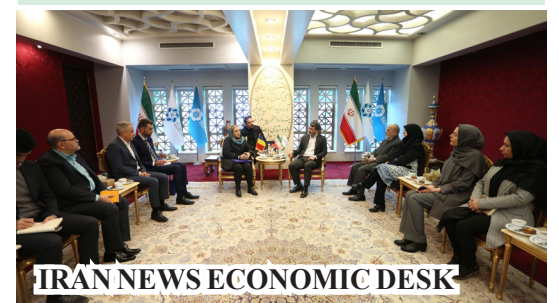
He also stressed the need for improving the quality and packaging of Iranian products to meet international standards and compete effectively in global markets.

Aref highlighted the deep cultural and historical connections between Iran and neighboring nations, noting that many countries in the region share common heritage with Iran. He pointed out that regional cooperation should be built upon these shared cultural and economic foundations, which can foster stronger diplomatic and trade relations.

He recounted his experiences as the President of the University of Tehran, noting that Iran's educational institutions are highly regarded across the region. He emphasized the need to preserve and leverage this intellectual capital to enhance Iran's soft power and economic influence.

During the meeting, Iranian business representatives in Kazakhstan presented their challenges and discussed potential solutions with government officials, demonstrating a strong commitment to fostering economic collaboration and overcoming existing obstacles.

Romanian Ambassador Meets with Isfahan Chamber of Commerce President



TEHRAN - Romanian Ambassador to Iran, Mirela Carmen Greuc, met with the President of the Isfahan Chamber of Commerce and several board members and business leaders to discuss economic cooperation between Isfahan and Romania.

According to the public relations office of the Isfahan Chamber of Commerce, Amir Keshani, President of the Chamber, highlighted Isfahan's significant economic potential. "Isfahan is one of Iran's major provinces with abundant industrial, agricultural, and tourism capacities," he stated. He also emphasized the city's longstanding tradition of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence, earning it the title 'City of Peace in the Middle East'.

Ambassador Mirela Carmen Greuc expressed her admiration for Isfahan, noting its cultural similarities with Romania. "The carpets produced in Isfahan and Romania share many similarities," she said. She emphasized Romania's commitment to expanding trade and cooperation with Iran, particularly Isfahan.

"I am particularly pleased to see the active participation of women in the Isfahan Chamber of Commerce," she added. "As Romania's first female ambassador to Iran, I find this especially significant." Greuc also voiced her interest in strengthening academic and business exchanges between Isfahan and the Romanian city of Iasi, particularly in tourism and commerce.

She further commented on Iran's reality being vastly different from its portrayal in some international media, advocating for greater direct engagement to understand the country better.

Mojan Izadi, member of the Chamber's board and head of the Tourism, Handicrafts, and Carpet Commission, emphasized the Chamber's efforts to connect female entrepreneurs worldwide. She welcomed collaboration with Romanian businesswomen and announced plans to host an event featuring 100 international tour operators in Isfahan, inviting Romanian tourism professionals to participate.

Seyed Vahid Dezfali, head of the Chamber's Agriculture Commission, highlighted the historical trade relations between Iran and Romania, mentioning the popularity of Romanian tractors in Iran. He expressed optimism about expanding agricultural cooperation between the two countries.

With strong interest from both sides, the meeting reinforced a shared commitment to enhancing economic and trade partnerships between Isfahan and Romania.

Negotiations With France Continue Over Flight Cancellation



TEHRAN - In a press briefing during the 46th anniversary ceremony of the Leader of the Revolution's return to Iran, Minister of Roads and Urban Development Farzaneh Sadegh addressed questions regarding the cancellation of the Iran Airtour flight to Paris and France's stance on the matter.

Sadegh clarified that the cancellation was not due to technical issues or lack of coordination but was a unilateral decision made by France. "Unfortunately, the Paris flight did not take place today. We are doing our best to resolve the issue, but it should not be assumed that sanctions have been imposed on private airlines," she stated.

The minister emphasized that Iran's Foreign Ministry and diplomatic bodies are actively following up on the situation. "Negotiations with France are ongoing to resume the flights, and we are confident that the issue will be resolved," she added.

Regarding speculation that a data leak from Iran Air led to the flight cancellation, Sadegh dismissed such claims as rumors. "This issue has no connection to Iran Air. Iran, Iran Airtour, and other airlines are all working towards the country's progress. The claim that a data leak from Iran Air resulted in the flight cancellation is baseless," she asserted.

Sadegh reiterated that the cancellation was a unilateral action by France and assured that efforts to resume flights would continue.

On the topic of planned flights to Austria and Italy, the minister noted that there have been no issues so far. "We have not received any indication of potential problems with these flights, and we hope that no obstacles arise," she stated.

She also announced that 50,000 residential units would be inaugurated during the celebrations of the Ten-Day Dawn festivities, marking the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. "We will have several inaugurations during this period, and we hope our people will experience the joy of these achievements," she said.

Regarding the Ardabil railway project, Sadegh admitted that it is still incomplete, with track laying, infrastructure work, and station construction yet to be finished. "I won't announce a specific completion date because past experiences have left the people of Ardabil and Mianeh with unfulfilled expectations. However, we are seriously pursuing its inauguration," she concluded.

New Markets for Motor Oil Exports

TEHRAN - In a recent press conference, Vahdat Shahbazi, a key member of the Union of Exporters of Oil, Gas, and Petrochemical Products, announced new initiatives aimed at expanding Iran's lubricant market. Shahbazi revealed that a dedicated sales engineering team, including experts from Tehran and Sharif universities, has been formed to revolutionize the lubricants market in the country.

Iran has one of the largest motor oil markets in the Middle East, with approximately 22 million passenger vehicles and 5 million diesel and industrial vehicles currently in operation. The country produces about 1.2 million new vehicles annually, increasing the demand for lubricants. Currently, Iran consumes around 800 million liters of lubricants per year, of which 350 to 400 million liters are motor oil. The market for automotive additives, including oil supplements, is estimated at \$200 million. However, many available products are of substandard quality, leading to increased friction and reduced engine efficiency.

Despite high demand, many domestic motor oil products struggle to compete with advanced international brands in terms of quality and technology. To address this gap, Shahbazi emphasized the need for higher-quality products, introducing the German brand Autoprofi to the Iranian market. He stated that the company's mission is to improve vehicle performance by offering innovative, high-quality solutions. Autoprofi's lubricants and fuel additives meet the highest global standards, reducing engine wear, fuel consumption, and improving combustion efficiency while complying with Euro 4 and Euro 5 emission standards.

Shahbazi highlighted the issue of counterfeit and recycled motor oils, which pose environmental risks and are often smuggled into local markets. Due to weak regulatory oversight, many fake products are being distributed. He noted that while such products are primarily



manufactured for export, they sometimes end up in the domestic market as well.

Over the past few months, Iranian companies have negotiated with European, Korean, and Japanese firms, but due to the country's current economic situation, these firms have shown interest only in selling their products rather than direct investment. However, Iran has reached an agreement

with a German company to manufacture lubricants under license, ensuring access to cutting-edge technology.

While some lubricants can already be produced domestically, Iran still lacks the technology for certain products, such as automatic transmission fluids, which rely on imported base oils. The country is now working toward self-sufficiency in this area.

Shahbazi emphasized that export expansion is a key strategy. While Iran's motor oil exports remain limited, plans are in place to enter the Indian market and leverage Oman as a hub for exports to African countries. He stressed that resolving the FATF (Financial Action Task Force) issues would dramatically transform the market, not only for lubricants but across all sectors of the economy.

Despite Iran's technological expertise, foreign investment remains scarce due to long-term market uncertainties. The high cost of raw materials makes domestic production expensive, often making imports a more viable option. Shahbazi pointed out that Iranian engineers possess the knowledge and technical capability to produce high-quality lubricants but face financial and logistical barriers.

Looking ahead, industrial motor oils are also being prioritized, as they are critical to various industries. Shahbazi affirmed that Iran will actively expand its presence in this segment to meet growing demand.

Uzbekistan Lifts \$400 Transit Fee for Iranian Fleet



TEHRAN - After two decades, Iran and Uzbekistan have signed an agreement to eliminate the \$400 entry and transit fee for Iranian fleets entering Uzbekistan. This significant step is expected to reduce export and transit costs while strengthening economic cooperation between the two nations.

Javad Hedayati, Director General of the Office of Transit and International Transport, announced the signing of this agreement, emphasizing its potential to support national fleets and lower trade expenses. He highlighted Uzbekistan as a populous nation and the fastest-growing economy in Central Asia, making the agreement crucial for both countries.

Hedayati further noted that Central Asia's five nations, with their vast geography, high population, and continuous economic growth, serve as key export and transit destinations for Iran. He also mentioned similar agreements in 2022, including the removal of a \$1.5 per kilometer transit fee in Turkmenistan and a visa exemption for Iranian drivers in Kazakhstan.

A key aspect of Iran-Uzbekistan relations is their Joint Economic Commission, managed by Iran's Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade and Uzbekistan's Ministry of Investment, Industry, and Trade. During the 15th session of this commission in mid-2022, both countries agreed to increase bilateral trade to \$1 billion by 2025.

Additionally, Iran, Uzbekistan, Oman, and Turkmenistan are part of the Ashgabat Agreement, aimed at establishing an international transport corridor. Iran's strong production capabilities in pharmaceuticals, food, construction materials, and agriculture, along with its expertise in technical and engineering services, have been key factors in trade relations. The establishment of an Iranian trade center in Uzbekistan further strengthens this partnership.

Myanmar Junta Extends State of Emergency

DHAKA (Dispatches) - Myanmar's ruling military has extended a state of emergency for another six months, state media reported on Friday, a day ahead of the four-year anniversary of a coup that plunged the country into chaos after a decade of tentative democracy.

Myanmar has been locked in a civil war triggered by the military's overthrow of the elected civilian government of Nobel Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi.

The junta plans this year to hold an election, which critics have derided as a sham to keep the generals in power through proxies. "There are still more tasks to be done to hold the general election successfully. Especially for a free and fair election, stability and peace is still needed," state-run MRTV said on its Telegram channel in announcing the extension of emergency rule.



U.S. Envoy Calls China's Presence Around Panama Canal a Security Concern



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - China's presence around the Panama Canal is a national security concern that Panama's government has to deal with, Mauricio Claver-Carone, the U.S. special envoy for Latin America, said on Friday, ahead of U.S. top diplomat Marco Rubio's visit to the country.

Rubio will depart on Saturday on his first foreign trip, with a scheduled visit to the canal and a meeting with Panamanian President Jose Raul Mulino, the first talks between the countries since President Donald Trump's threat to take control of the U.S.-built canal.

Rubio will also visit El Salvador, Costa Rica, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic, where the Trump administration's efforts to repatriate migrants from the region and stem migration into the U.S. will be on the agenda, Claver-Carone said in a briefing call with reporters.

Claver-Carone said it was not Mulino's fault that China's presence around the canal "got completely out of hand" under previous Panamanian governments, but added that the Panamanian president now "has to deal with it."

"This increasingly creeping presence of Chinese companies and actors throughout the Canal Zone, in everything from ports and logistics to telecommunications infrastructure and otherwise, which is very concerning, not only frankly to the national security of the United States, but frankly to the national security of Panama and to the entire Western Hemisphere," he said. "So that will be an issue of discussion."

Hong Kong-based CK Hutchison Holdings has for more than two decades operated the ports at the canal's entrances. The company is publicly listed and not financially tied to the Chinese government, though Hong Kong firms are subject to government oversight.

China's economic influence has been growing in Latin America, fueling worries in Washington that the resource-rich region will tilt to Chinese interests rather than those of the U.S.

Hamas, Israel Set for Fourth Gaza Ceasefire Swap



GAZA (Dispatches) - Hamas and Israel will conduct their fourth swap of the Gaza ceasefire, with militants releasing three Israelis including the father of the two youngest hostages, in exchange for 183 Palestinians held in Israeli jails.

Since the truce took effect on Jan 19, Gaza militants have released 15 hostages after holding them in captivity since their attack on Israel on Oct 7, 2023.

The Israeli hostages to be freed are Yarden Bibas, Keith Siegel, who also holds US citizenship, and Ofer Kalderon, who also has French nationality, according to the Hostages and Missing Families Forum campaign group.

In return, Israel will release 183 prisoners, the Palestinian Prisoners' Club advocacy group said, more than double the initially reported figure of 90.

Since the ceasefire began, Israel has freed hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, many of them women and minors.

During their attack on Israel, which ignited the Gaza war, Hamas militants took 251 hostages. Of those, 79 remain in Gaza, including at least 34 the Israeli military says are dead.

Among those taken were the wife and two children of Yarden Bibas. Hamas has declared the three dead, but Israeli officials have not confirmed this.

The two Bibas boys— Kfir, the youngest hostage, whose second birthday fell in January, and his older brother Ariel, who turned five in August — have become symbols of the ordeal endured by hostages in Gaza.

The children were taken along with their mother, Shirri Bibas.

Hamas claims the boys and their mother were killed in an Israeli air strike in November 2023.

"Hamas, where are the Bibas babies?" the Israeli foreign ministry posted.

"483 days have passed. Where are they?"

The Bibas family meanwhile wrote on Instagram: "Our Yarden is supposed to return tomorrow, and we are so excited, but

Shiri and the children still haven't come home."

The hostage handovers have sometimes been chaotic, particularly during the most recent exchange in the southern city of Khan Yunis on Thursday, where scenes of disorder prompted Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to condemn the situation as "shocking".

One hostage, Arbel Yehud, was visibly distressed as masked gunmen struggled to clear a path for her through crowds of spectators eager to witness her release, as seen in television footage.

She was one of eight hostages freed on Thursday.

In protest, Israel briefly delayed its own prisoner release that day, while the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) urged all parties to ensure safer conditions for future exchanges.

Later on Thursday, Israeli authorities released 110 inmates from Ofer prison in the occupied West Bank, including high-profile former militant commander Zakaria Zubeidi, 49, who received a hero's welcome in Ramallah.

Upon seeing her brother among those freed on Thursday, Maha al-Barai, a Palestinian woman from the West Bank, said: "It is an indescribable joy that words cannot capture, and my body trembles with it."

European Union foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said that the 27-member bloc had deployed a monitoring mission at the Rafah crossing.

"It will support Palestinian border personnel and allow the transfer of individuals out of Gaza, including those who need medical care," she wrote on X.

The fragile ceasefire, brokered by Qatar, Egypt and the United States, hinges on the release during the first 42-day phase of a total of 33 hostages, in exchange for approximately 1,900 Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails.

Russia Closes in on Key Ukrainian City



KYIV (Dispatches) - Russian forces are slowly tightening the noose around the eastern Ukrainian city of Pokrovsk, a key logistical hub whose main supply lines are under threat nearly three years after Moscow invaded its neighbor.

While Ukraine is stubbornly defending the city, its encirclement or fall could put Russia in a strong position to mount attacks in several directions in the east and increase pressure on Kyiv at a critical juncture in the war.

Inside Pokrovsk, life is bleak. According to the regional governor, 7,000 residents remain out of a pre-war population of 60,000. The last post office recently closed - mail will now be delivered by armoured truck.

On either side of the city, Russian troops are within artillery and drone range of a crucial highway that runs east to west along the entirety of Ukraine, and most cars now take detours along backroads into Pokrovsk for their safety.

In the past several days, Moscow's forces have reached the main rail line into the city from eastern Ukraine's most important logistical hub, the city of Dnipro.

"The situation is generally difficult, the enemy is constantly attacking on foot," said the deputy commander of Ukraine's 59th assault brigade, which is fighting on the Pokrovsk front.

He asked to be identified by his military call sign, Phoenix, for security reasons.

The officer said the enemy had much greater numbers of infantry, attacked in small groups willing to take extremely high casualties and adeptly exploited the landscape and low-visibility weather conditions to hide themselves from drones.

Germany's Parliament Narrowly Rejects Immigration Law

BERLIN (Dispatches) - The German parliament narrowly rejected on Friday an opposition-sponsored bill calling for tougher rules on migration that risked becoming the first draft legislation to pass thanks to a far-right party and became a focus of a controversy about the attitude of the front-runner in Germany's upcoming election toward the far right.

Opposition leader Friedrich Merz has put demands for a more restrictive approach to migration at the center of his campaign for the Feb. 23 election since a deadly knife attack last week by a rejected asylum-seeker.

The way he has done so prompted opponents to accuse him of breaking a taboo and endangering mainstream parties' "firewall" against the far-right Alternative for Germany. He insists his position is unchanged and that he didn't and won't work with the party.

On Wednesday, Merz put a nonbinding motion to parliament calling for Germany to turn back many more migrants at its borders, insisting decisions are needed now regardless of who supports them. The measure squeaked through thanks to support from the far-right party, a first that drew a rare public rebuke from ex-Chancellor Angela Merkel, a former leader of Merz's party.

On Friday, months-old legislation proposed by Merz's center-right Union bloc that called for an end to family reunions for migrants with a protection status that falls short of full asylum went to a vote. It also would have given federal police increased powers to carry out deportations. The center-left governing parties said they would reject the so-called "influx limitation bill," while a combination of opposition parties including Alternative for Germany, or AfD, said they would back it.

After an unusually heated debate delayed by long and unsuccessful negotiations on a compromise between mainstream parties, it was rejected by 350 votes to 338, with five abstentions. Some lawmakers cheered and



clapped as the result was announced.

This week's maneuvering has amplified a divide between Merz's bloc, Chancellor Olaf Scholz's center-left Social Democrats and their remaining coalition partners, the environmentalist Greens — parties he may need to form a governing coalition after the election.

Polls show the Union leading with around 30% support, while AfD is second with about 20%, and the Social Democrats and Greens are further back.

Merz appears to hope that he will gain support by making the Union look decisive in forcing a tougher approach to migration, while blunting the appeal of the anti-immigration AfD and making the governing parties — which say they already have done much to tackle the issue — look out of touch with Germans' concerns. It's uncertain whether that will succeed.

"You don't have to tear down a firewall with a wrecking ball to set your own house on fire. It's enough to keep drilling holes," Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, a Green, said in Friday's debate. "First a motion on Wednesday, then a bill today — what's coming next?"

Merz said: "You can't seriously believe that we are reaching out our hand to a party that wants to destroy us?" He said he will "do everything in the coming weeks, months and if necessary years so that this party doesn't continue to grow and becomes a peripheral phenomenon again as soon as possible."

"People out there ... don't want us to argue with each other about AfD," he said. "They want us to reach solutions to the questions with which people concern themselves in their everyday lives, and above all we want to reach solutions so that people in our country can feel safe again."

The 12-year-old AfD first entered the national parliament in 2017, benefiting from Merkel's decision two years earlier to allow large numbers of migrants into the country. Scholz has suggested that Merz can no longer be trusted not to form a government with

AfD, an accusation that Merz has angrily rejected.

Merz insisted that he has sought majorities in the political center. The center-left parties pointed the finger back at him, noting that he said there could be no compromises on his proposals.

AfD chief whip Bernd Baumann taunted Merz's party, saying that "once again these are our demands; the Union only copied them and so we are voting for them again." He said the conservatives are "thoroughly untrustworthy" and won't implement their promises.

Thousands of protesters gathered on Thursday outside the headquarters in Berlin of Merz's Christian Democratic Union. Other demonstrations were held elsewhere in Germany.

The election is being held earlier than originally scheduled after Scholz's three-party governing coalition collapsed in November in a dispute over how to revitalize the German economy. That left Scholz running a government that lacks a parliamentary majority.

Germany's Parliament Narrowly Rejects Immigration Law

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Donald Trump implemented tariffs as of Saturday on the three largest U.S. trading partners -- Canada, Mexico and China -- the White House said, sparking alarm for global trade.

Trump has reiterated his plans for 25 percent tariffs on neighbors Canada and Mexico, saying they have failed to crack down on illegal migrants crossing the U.S. border and the flow of fentanyl.

He also threatened a 10 percent duty for Chinese goods on the same day, similarly over the drug.

"The February 1st deadline that President Trump put into place at a statement several weeks ago continues," White House spokeswoman Karoline Leavitt told reporters Friday.

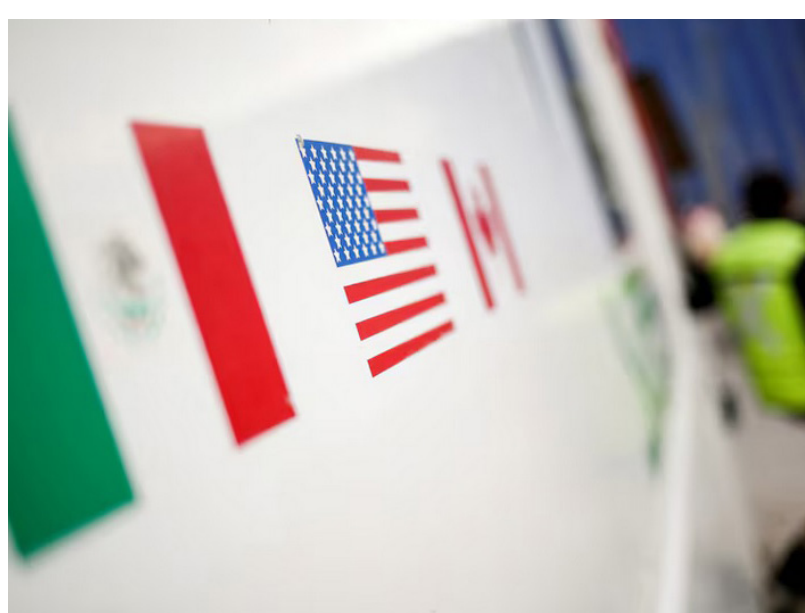
"Both Canada and Mexico have allowed an unprecedented invasion of illegal fentanyl that is killing American citizens, and also immigrants into our country," she added.

She did not commit to exemptions on sectors, and rejected warnings that this would spark a trade war.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau vowed earlier Friday an "immediate response" if Trump acted, and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said her government was in close contact with Trump's administration.

While Trump has not specified tools he would use, analysts have suggested he could tap emergency economic powers, which allow the president to regulate imports during a national emergency. But this could be hindered by lawsuits.

Fentanyl has been responsible for tens of thousands of overdose deaths a year.



Beijing has rebuffed claims of its complicity in the trade, while close US ally Canada has countered that below one percent of undocumented migrants and fentanyl entering the United States comes through its northern border.

Some analysts believe tariff threats are a bargaining chip to accelerate the renegotiation of the existing trade deal known as USMCA between the United States, Mexico and Canada.

"However, potentially dismantling a decades-long free-trade area could be a significant shock," said a recent JPMorgan note.

Tariffs are paid by US businesses to the government on purchases from abroad and the economic weight can fall on importers, foreign suppliers or consumers.

Assistant professor Wendong Zhang of Cornell University said Canada and Mexico would suffer the most under 25 percent US tariffs and with retaliations.

"Canada and Mexico stand to lose 3.6 percent and two percent of real GDP respectively, while the US would suffer a 0.3 percent real GDP loss," he added.

Oxford Economics analysts warned that blanket tariffs and pushback could tip Canada and Mexico into recessions, adding the United States also risks a shallow downturn.

Mexico's biggest export sectors -- food and beverages, transport equipment and electronics -- account for the bulk of its manufacturing activity, said Joan Domene, chief Latin America economist at Oxford Economics.

Canada exported nearly 80 percent of its goods to the United States in 2023, and accounts for nearly 60 percent of US crude oil imports, noted the Congressional Research Service (CRS).



White Puts Up 25 as Bulls Halt Raptors' Win Streak

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Coby White had 25 points and six assists and the visiting Chicago Bulls ended the Toronto Raptors' five-game winning streak by romping to a 122-106 win.

The Bulls, who won for just the second time in five games overall, also prevailed 122-121 in Toronto on Dec. 16.

Bulls center Nikola Vucevic had 12 points and seven rebounds in the first quarter and finished with 21 and 12, respectively. Josh Giddey added 15 points, seven rebounds and six assists.

Chicago got good production from the bench with Jalen Smith contributing 17 points, Matas Buzelis scoring 12, Patrick Williams chipping in with 11 points and nine rebounds and Dalen Terry putting up 10 points.

Scottie Barnes had 20 points and 10 rebounds for the Raptors, and RJ Barrett added 19 points and nine boards. Immanuel Quickley returned from injury to score 13 of his 14 points in the first half. Jacob Poeltl had eight points, nine rebounds and five blocked shots. Reserve Ja'Kobe Walter scored 14 points, and Grady Dick logged 13.

The Bulls used the pick-and-roll effectively to take a 30-27 lead after one quarter. Toronto had four blocked shots in the quarter, three by Poeltl.

Chicago had its seven-point lead reduced to one with 6:16 to play in the second quarter on consecutive 3-pointers by Walter and Davion Mitchell. The Bulls recovered to lead by seven again before taking a 55-50 edge into halftime.

Toronto moved within one point with 7:37 left in the third quarter when Dick was set up for a cutting dunk by a nifty pass from Barnes, and the hosts took the lead on a layup by Barrett. White answered with his fourth 3-pointer of the game, starting an 18-4 run that helped the Bulls take an 88-74 lead into the fourth quarter.

Some of the early-game energy had left the Raptors when Williams made an emphatic dunk against Poeltl with 8:01 left in the fourth. Ayo Dosunmu followed with a 3-pointer, White made a layup, and Chicago led by 19.

The Raptors last produced a winning streak of longer than five games when they won eight in a row Jan. 29-Feb. 10, 2022.

Meanwhile Jaylen Brown scored 28 points and Jayson Tatum added 27, including a tie-breaking jumper with 0.2 seconds left, as the visiting Boston Celtics held off the New Orleans Pelicans 118-116.

Tatum added 10 assists, Kristaps Porzingis and Derrick White scored 16 points each and Luke Kornet had 11 off the bench for the Celtics.

Trey Murphy III scored a season-high 40 points, Jose Alvarado added 20, CJ McCollum had 17 and Brandon Boston Jr. 10 for New Orleans, which lost its fifth straight game. Pelicans starting point guard Dejounte Murray had to be helped to the locker room after injuring his lower right leg in the first quarter. He did not return.

New Orleans trailed by five after three quarters, but Alvarado hit a 3-pointer to open scoring in the fourth. The Pelicans got within two points four more times, with the Celtics answering on the first three. On the fourth occasion, Murphy made a short jumper to finally pull New Orleans even at 114 with 1:37 left.

Brown and McCollum exchanged baskets before Tatum dribbled down the clock and swished the game-winner from 21 feet.

Four Celtics scored during a 9-6 run to start the third quarter, increasing the Celtics' lead to 68-59. Murphy made two 3-pointers, and Alvarado and Karlo Matkovic made one each as the Pelicans took a 77-75 lead. Brown scored eight points and White and Payton Pritchard scored three each as Boston took a 91-86 lead going into the fourth.

Murphy scored 16 points to help New Orleans take a 34-31 lead at the end of the first quarter.

New Orleans led by five twice early in the second quarter, but Kornet made consecutive baskets to complete a 6-0 run and put Boston ahead by one point. The Pelicans regained the lead briefly, but Tatum made consecutive 3-pointers to start an 8-0 run that gave the Celtics a 47-42 lead.

New Orleans closed within one point twice, but White and Tatum each made a 3-pointer to help Boston extend the lead to nine. Murphy's 3-pointer trimmed New Orleans' deficit to 59-53 at halftime.

India Clinch T20 Series v England Amid Substitute Drama



PUNE (Dispatches) - Harshit Rana claimed three wickets in his debatable appearance as a concussion substitute to help India to a series-clinching 15-run victory against England in the fourth T20 International.

Put into bat, India overcame Saqib Mahmood's three-wicket burst to post a competitive 181-9 following half-centuries by Hardik Pandya and Shivam Dube.

England were 166 all out with two deliveries left in their innings as India grabbed an unassailable 3-1 lead in the five-match series.

All-rounder Dube was hit on the helmet by a Jamie Overton bouncer and seamer Rana replaced him despite it not being a like-for-like replacement as concussion substitute rules mandate.

"When Dube came back, two overs into the chase, I was told (about being the concussion substitute)," Rana told the broadcasters.

"I have been waiting for this moment to prove myself," he said of his "dream debut".

England captain Jos Buttler was not happy with India being allowed to field primarily a seamer for a batting all-rounder, who rarely bowls.

"It's not a like-for-like replacement," Buttler told reporters.

"Either Shivam Dube has put on about 25mph with the ball, or Harshit has really improved his batting.

"It's part of the game. I still think we should have gone on to win the match but yes, we disagree with the (substitute) decision."

Earlier, England fast bowler Saqib impressed on debut as he began with a three-wicket maiden over to rattle India at the Maharashtra Cricket Association (MCA) Stadium.

U.S. Takes Lead Over Taiwan in Davis Cup Qualifiers

LONDON (Dispatches) - Alex Michelsen hung on to defeat Tung-Lin Wu and help the United States take a 2-0 lead in their matchup against Taiwan in Davis Cup qualifiers in Taipei City.

American Marcos Giron opened the tie with a 6-2, 6-2 victory over Chun-Hsin Tseng before Michelsen fired 12 aces and saved both break points he faced to get away from Wu.

Their tie will continue Saturday with a doubles match and more singles as necessary.

Argentina knocked off Norway 3-2 in Oslo when Mariano Navone beat Nicolai Budkov Kjaer 4-6, 6-3, 6-4 in the do-or-die match.

Also Austria took a 2-0 lead over Finland in Schwechat, Austria; Serbia went in front 2-0 on Denmark in Copenhagen; Germany took a 2-0 edge over Israel in Vilnius, Lithuania; Japan and Great Britain split their first two matches in Miki, Japan; Australia earned a 2-0 advantage over Sweden in Stockholm; and Croatia grabbed a 2-0 lead over Slovakia in Osijek, Croatia. Their matchups will continue Saturday.

Meanwhile American qualifier Aleksandar Kovacevic knocked



off fourth seed Alexander Bublik of Kazakhstan 6-3, 6-2 to advance to the semifinals in Montpellier, France.

Kovacevic, ranked No. 102 in the world, saved all eight break points he faced and won 31 of 37 first-service points (83.8 percent). Bublik had 12 aces but also committed seven double faults.

Kovacevic's next assignment will be No. 1 seed Andrey Rublev of Russia, who led 5-2 when Georgian qualifier Nikoloz Basilashvili retired.

No. 2 seed Felix Auger-Aliassime of Canada defeated No. 8

seed Yunchaokete Bu of China 6-3, 6-4, and the Netherlands' Jesper de Jong upset fifth seed and countryman Tallon Griekspoor 7-6 (5), 6-4.

Meanwhile no. 1 seed Anna Kalinskaya of Russia and No. 2 seed Elise Mertens of Belgium advanced to the semifinals of the Singapore Tennis Open with their respective victories.

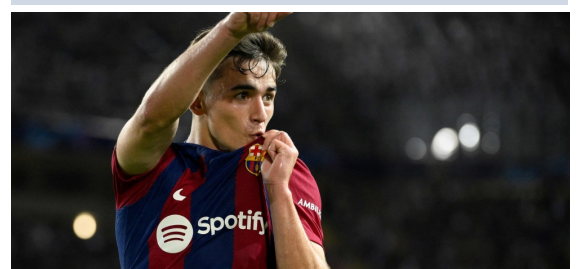
Kalinskaya fended off Thailand's Manachaya Sawangkaew 6-3, 4-6, 6-0, while Mertens was a 6-4, 6-2 winner over sixth seed Camila Osorio of Colombia.

Mertens will face No. 4 seed Xinyu Wang of China, who saved all eight break points she faced in a marathon 6-7 (5), 7-6 (5), 6-4 victory over Switzerland's Jil Teichmann in three hours and 19 minutes.

Kalinskaya's semifinal opponent is American Ann Li, who won a pair of tiebreakers to beat Australian Kimberly Birrell 7-6 (2), 7-6 (4).

Top seed Karolina Muchova of the Czech Republic went the distance in a 6-3, 3-6, 6-3 quarterfinal win over sixth seed Anastasia Potapova of Russia in Linz, Austria.

Gavi Extends Barcelona Contract Until 2030



BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Spanish international midfielder Pablo Paez Gavi, known as Gavi, has extended his contract with La Liga giants Barcelona until June 2030, the club announced.

"I'm very happy to continue with the club of my life and I hope that we will give you a lot of joy this season," the 20-year-old said on social media.

Gavi arrived at Barcelona a decade ago making his first team debut in August 2021 when he was only 17.

But the 27-times capped player suffered a severe knee injury playing for Spain in November 2023, missing his country's Euro 2024 triumph.

"Barcelona and Gavi have reached agreement regarding a new contract, and he is set to remain at the club until 30 June 2030," the club said.

"Gavi has character and drive in abundance, which he combines with great technique, defensive awareness and goalscoring ability."

He has scored nine goals for the team but was unavailable for almost a year before returning in October 2024.

"It's not all been plain sailing though, as he had to spend almost an entire year on the sidelines due to a complete tear of the anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee and an associated injury to the lateral meniscus," the club said.

"His contract renewal gives the story the ending it deserves."

Barcelona are third in the Spanish league, seven points behind leaders Real Madrid, and are through to the Champions League knockout rounds.

Meanwhile Aston Villa striker Jhon Duran joined Saudi Pro League side Al Nassr in a deal worth a reported £64 million (\$79 million).

Duran was unable to break into Villa's team on a regular basis despite a series of impressive substitute appearances.

The 21-year-old Colombian scored Villa's winner in their memorable Champions League victory against Bayern Munich earlier this season.

"Aston Villa can confirm that Jhon Duran has joined Al-Nassr for an undisclosed fee," the Premier League club said in a statement.

"The striker moves to Saudi Arabia having scored 12 goals for Villa this term, including the winner against Bayern Munich in the Champions League.

"Everyone at Aston Villa would like to wish Jhon all the best in the next step of his professional career."

Duran will link up with Cristiano Ronaldo and Sadio Mane in the Al Nassr attack after completing his move on the Saudi transfer deadline day.

Man City Face Real Madrid in Pick of Champions League Play-Off Ties

PARIS (Dispatches) - Reigning champions Real Madrid will face 2023 winners Manchester City in the plum tie of the play-off round of this season's Champions League, following Friday's draw.

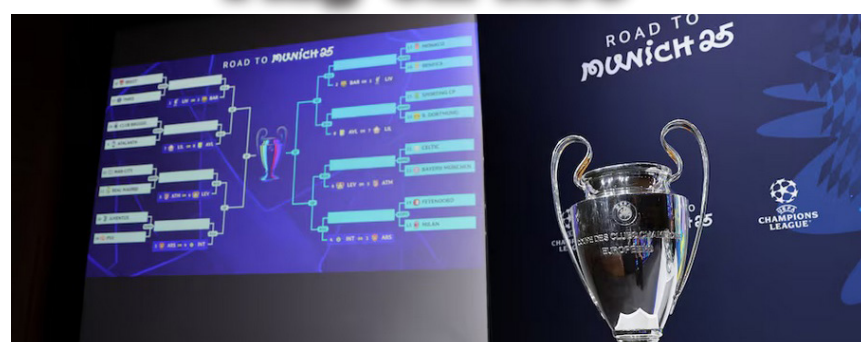
It is the fourth year running in which the sides have been drawn against each other in a knockout tie, with Real emerging victorious in a penalty shoot-out in the quarter-finals last season.

City, who scraped through after finishing 22nd in the league phase in this first season of the new format for Europe's elite club competition, will be at home in the first leg before going to Spain for the return.

Elsewhere, Celtic will face six-time European champions Bayern Munich, after the Scottish champions reached the knockout stage for the first time in 12 years.

Paris Saint-Germain will play surprise package Brest in an all-French tie, while Juventus play PSV Eindhoven and Feyenoord take on AC Milan in two ties between former winners of the competition.

Although City thrashed the Spanish club 5-1 on aggregate in the semi-finals in 2023 en route to the treble, Real exacted revenge last year when they beat Guardiola's side on penalties in the quarter-finals after two draws.



"In a perfect world, we wouldn't play them, but we weren't able to get into the top eight and that's OK," Real Madrid manager Carlo Ancelotti said.

I was then effectively buried in the delivery of a London games, either winning or.

"Playing two more or fewer games doesn't matter ... we have the resources to deal with it."

The competition does not get any easier for either team as they will face either Atletico Madrid or Bayer Leverkusen in the last 16.

With teams from the same country also allowed to face each other, unlike in previous years, the playoffs will have an all-French tie with Paris St Germain facing Brest. The winners will face either Liverpool or Barcelona in the last 16.

"There will be a French team in the last 16, so we have to see the positive side," PSG coach Luis Enrique said ahead of Saturday's Ligue 1 game against the same opponents.

"The French league is not valued enough, yet there are four French teams in the Champions League (knockouts)."

Juventus and AC Milan avoided each other in the draw, with the two Serie A sides facing Dutch clubs PSV Eindhoven and Feyenoord, respectively.

However, the Italian sides may face Inter Milan if they advance to the next round or they could come up against Arsenal.

Last year's runners-up Borussia Dortmund take on Portuguese side Sporting while Club Brugge face Atalanta.

Last season's Europa League winners Atalanta, who finished one place outside the top eight which offered a direct path to the last 16, will face Club Brugge of Belgium.