

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi Declared Tehran's Support for Syria's Unity and Any Gov't Legitimately Approved by the Syrian People

# IRAN NEWS

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### President Declares Enemy Efforts to Undermine the Country Have Failed



TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian announced on Sunday that adversarial attempts to weaken Iran have not succeeded. During a visit to an exhibition showcasing the Ministry of Defense's latest aerospace and defense achievements, he emphasized that these advancements demonstrate Iran's resilience despite external pressures.

Speaking at the event, President Pezeshkian congratulated the Iranian people on the religious celebrations of the month of Sha'ban and the National Day of the Revolutionary Guard. He expressed pride in the nation's youth, whose creativity and technical skills have contributed to the country's defense capabilities. He noted that, during the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's air and land borders were highly vulnerable, but today, due to these advancements, no foreign power can easily threaten Iranian territory.

The President stressed that Iran's military capabilities are solely for defense and deterrence, not aggression. He pointed out that Iran's defense strength has reached a level where even the idea of attacking the country no longer crosses the minds of its adversaries. "What we are showcasing here is the enhancement of our defensive strength, not offensive capabilities," he asserted. "Our goal is to ensure that no country dares to violate Iran's sovereignty."

Praising the efforts of scientists and engineers who contributed to these achievements, Pezeshkian also highlighted Iran's progress in space exploration. He stated that Iran is now among the countries capable of conducting research and exploratory missions beyond Earth's atmosphere. "These advancements demonstrate our scientific and technological strength to the world," he added.

The President concluded by reaffirming Iran's commitment to self-sufficiency, stating that foreign attempts to hinder Iran's progress have backfired, instead motivating the country to achieve even greater technological and scientific milestones. "Had we operated under normal conditions, we might not have reached these levels of advancement," he admitted. "Now, with determination and national effort, we must continue expanding these capabilities across all sectors and use them to solve our country's challenges."

Pezeshkian urged continued support for Iran's scientists and innovators, emphasizing that perseverance is key to reaching even greater heights. "We must not tire on this path. With the dedication of our talented youth, we will achieve whatever is necessary for the nation's progress," he concluded.

### Europe Tightens Visa Restrictions for Iranian Truck Drivers



TEHRAN - Javad Hedayati, Director General of Transit and International Transport at the Road Maintenance and Transportation Organization of Iran, has addressed truck drivers' concerns over visa issuance difficulties for European destinations.

Speaking to ILNA, he stated that the German and Italian embassies previously had dedicated visa issuance windows for Iranian truck drivers. These visas were granted based on appointments organized by professional associations. However, due to the European Union's policies aimed at reducing cooperation with Iran, these dedicated visa windows were discontinued last year.

As a result, Iranian truck drivers must now apply for visas through the general public queue, alongside tourists, immigrants, and students. This change has significantly increased the waiting time for visa issuance. Previously, around 30 to 40 drivers were granted visas weekly through a structured appointment system, but this process has now been eliminated.

Hedayati further noted that during peak travel and work seasons, particularly in the summer, the high volume of applications extends wait times even further. While visas are still being issued, the process has become more limited and difficult to track.



## U.S. an Aggressor, Liar, Deceiver, and Arrogant Power

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In a significant address on Sunday morning, Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei emphasized the remarkable progress Iran has made over the past four decades, stating that despite opposition from global powers, the nation has grown stronger and more advanced.

Speaking at a gathering of distinguished Quran reciters and scholars participating in the 41st International Quran Competition, Ayatollah Khamenei underscored the resilience of the Iranian people. "The Iranian nation has endured and strived over these 40-plus years while all arrogant global powers have united against it. They have worked against us, yet Iran has not only withstood their pressures but has also advanced in all areas," he remarked. "Iran today is not the Iran of 40 years ago; we have progressed in every aspect."

The event, held at Imam Khomeini Hussainiya, featured recitations by top Quranic scholars from Iran and abroad. Participants included Seyed Mohammad Hosseni-Pour, winner of the research recitation category, and Mohammad Khakpour, the first-place winner in Quran memorization. The ceremony also featured a performance by the internationally acclaimed Quran reciter Hashem Roghani and an invocation by Egyptian Quranic master Mohammad Ali Jabin.

Following the Quranic recitations, Ayatollah Khamenei addressed the attendees, expressing gratitude to the organizers for their efforts in promoting the Quran and its teachings. He highlighted the transformative power of the Quran, stating, "The Quran is a miracle, and if we truly benefit from it, all problems will be resolved."

During his speech, the Supreme Leader also spoke about Iran's firm stance against global arrogance, particularly the United States. "Unlike many other nations, Iran has the courage to openly declare 'Death to America.' The U.S. is an aggressor, a liar, a deceiver, and an arrogant power. The Iranian nation has no fear in calling it out," he said.

Ayatollah Khamenei reiterated Iran's unwavering support for Palestine, predicting victory for Gaza over Israel. "With God's permission, the impossible becomes possible. A small group can defeat a much larger force if it is divinely supported. Have faith that, by God's will, Gaza will prevail over the Zionist regime and the American-backed oppressors," he asserted.

Concluding his speech, the Supreme Leader emphasized the importance of faith and reliance on God in addressing the challenges facing the Muslim world. "The difficulties of the Islamic nation can be resolved with trust in God. Iran's progress over the past four decades is proof of this faith-driven success," he said.

The gathering concluded with remarks from Hojatoleslam Wal-Muslimeen Khamoushi, head of the Endowments and Charity Affairs Organization, who provided an overview of the 41st International Quran Competition and its significance in promoting Quranic knowledge worldwide. Ayatollah Khamenei's statements come at a time of heightened tensions in the region, reinforcing Iran's commitment to self-reliance, resistance against external pressures, and support for oppressed nations.

## At Least 2 Million Undocumented Foreign Nationals in Iran

TEHRAN - Interior Minister announced that the country hosts an estimated 6 million foreign nationals, with at least 2 million of them residing illegally, even for short-term stays.

Eskandar Momeni stated that it is impossible to obtain accurate statistics on undocumented individuals. He explained that the government is following three approaches to address the situation, the first of which is the expulsion of illegal foreign nationals.

Momeni emphasized that while Iran shares historical and cultural ties with its neighboring countries, it cannot accommodate such a large number of foreign residents. He also pointed out that international assistance has been minimal and that the presence of undocumented migrants has taken away job opportunities from Iranian citizens. Therefore, he stressed the need for structured immigration management without political or emotional considerations.

The minister revealed that since the beginning of the year, approximately 1.1 million foreign nationals have been deported in cooperation with the International Organization for Migration (IOM). He further stated that mechanisms have been put in place to immediately identify repeat offenders.

"We estimate that 50% of these individuals attempt to return," he said. "To prevent this, securing the borders has become a top priority. Plans include building border walls and implementing full surveillance measures."

Momeni also mentioned that the National Immigration Organization Bill has been approved by the government and submitted to parliament. He expressed hope that its approval would provide the necessary tools for better immigration management.

Regarding Iran's border with Afghanistan, Momeni acknowledged that progress has been slower than expected. However, he reassured that advancements have been made based on available resources. He expressed optimism that by mid-year, certain key border security projects would be operational, with further developments to follow gradually.

Momeni praised the police force, describing them as dedicated and self-sacrificing in all conditions. He stated that resources have been allocated to strengthen the police, including budget provisions for better equipment. He also mentioned that during a recent visit to law enforcement units, the President personally instructed the government to provide all possible



support to the police.

"Our duty is to support the police force, and every directive related to their reinforcement has been approved unanimously by the government," he added.

Addressing a controversial Tehran City Council proposal, which aims to impose higher tolls on out-of-city vehicles after a seven-day stay, Momeni expressed strong opposition.

He argued that such measures violate citizens' rights and would not effectively reduce traffic congestion or air pollution. He warned that implementing such a rule could set

a precedent, leading other cities to impose similar restrictions, which would disrupt national unity.

"This plan is not enforceable, and as Interior Minister, I will not allow it to be implemented," Momeni asserted. "We must have a unified approach to national issues instead of introducing new laws that inconvenience the public."

Discussing the upcoming midterm elections, Momeni confirmed that preparations are proceeding according to schedule. He noted that the election for municipal councils is set to take place in late spring next year, with an official timeline already established.

Regarding electronic voting, the minister stated that efforts are being made to expand digital elections by at least 10% more than the previous cycle. However, he acknowledged that achieving this goal depends on available financial resources.

Momeni also criticized the high turnover rate of Tehran's municipal administrations, noting that the average tenure of a mayor is less than two years, with some serving less than a year. He argued that such instability prevents effective governance and leads to incomplete projects.

"In Tehran alone, seven municipal councils have been dissolved for various reasons," he said. "This instability is a serious concern, and we are working with Parliament to introduce reforms that ensure mayors cannot be easily dismissed. A proper assessment is needed after 20 years of such governance issues."

Momeni concluded by stating that the Interior Ministry must be given the necessary authority to oversee municipal management and ensure stability in city governance.

### IRGC Stores Coastal-to-Sea Missile Systems in Underground Tunnels



TEHRAN - In a significant military development, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has successfully stored all its coastal-to-sea missile systems in secure underground tunnels, according to Major General Hossein Salami, Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC.

The announcement was made during the unveiling of a strategic missile base of the IRGC Navy in Bandar Abbas, coinciding with the birth anniversary of Imam Hussein (AS) and Iran's annual Day of the Guardsman.

During the ceremony, the IRGC Navy showcased a large number of long-range and medium-range missile systems equipped with artificial intelligence technology. General Salami emphasized that these underground structures, known as "missile cities," have been expanded along the coastline and deep within Iran's territory, housing a vast arsenal of missiles and advanced defense systems.

According to the IRGC commander, some of these newly developed missiles have a range exceeding 1,000 kilometers. The IRGC Navy is now capable of launching missile strikes from deep within Iranian territory, effectively targeting enemy positions both at sea and on land with high precision.

One of the key highlights of the event was the first-ever public display of the Qadr-380 long-range missile. This missile, which utilizes AI technology, can fly at extremely low altitudes, making it undetectable by enemy radar. It also features advanced capabilities such as adjustable flight altitude, high-energy warheads with superior explosive power, multi-mode radar guidance, pinpoint accuracy, and the ability to evade electronic warfare countermeasures.

General Salami asserted that the IRGC Navy remains an unpredictable force in military calculations, continuously upgrading its arsenal. He stressed that Iran's missile production rate is increasing daily and that the country's military advancements are unstoppable.

This latest revelation highlights Iran's growing focus on developing underground military infrastructure and expanding its missile capabilities, reinforcing its strategic deterrence posture in the region.

### Iran Unveils Next-Generation Bavar-373 Air Defense System



TEHRAN - Iran has officially unveiled the upgraded version of its Bavar-373 air defense system, named Bavar 2-373. This latest iteration features launchers equipped with independent fire control and tracking radars.

According to Tasnim News Agency, images of the upgraded Bavar 2-373 system were showcased for the first time during a visit by Iran's president to an exhibition organized by the Ministry of Defense's Aerospace Organization.

The unveiling follows an earlier announcement by Ministry of Defense spokesperson Brigadier General Talaei-Nik, who had confirmed the development of an improved version of the Bavar-373 system.

Images released today reveal that the launchers in the new system have been upgraded with integrated tracking and fire control radars. Unlike the initial version, which relied on a central radar system for target tracking and engagement, the upgraded launchers can now operate independently.

Reports indicate that each Bavar 2-373 battery consists of a detection radar and six radar-equipped missile launch platforms (TELAR). These enhancements are expected to significantly improve the system's ability to engage enemy targets autonomously. Additionally, if the system incorporates traditional TEL (radar-less launchers), its overall engagement capacity will increase considerably.

The original Bavar-373 air defense system was first unveiled in 2019. Its initial specifications included a detection range of 320 km, a tracking range of 260 km, and a missile engagement range of 200 km. However, with the addition of the new Sayyad 4B missile, the system's engagement range has now been extended to 300 km.

The Bavar-373 is capable of simultaneously tracking 60 targets and engaging six of them at once.



# IRAN NEWS



## Iran Produces 400,000 Tons of Agricultural Pesticides Annually

TEHRAN (ISNA) - The Iranian Agricultural Pesticides Producers Association has highlighted the country's significant production capacity, urging government support to enhance regional market competitiveness.

Speaking at the opening ceremony of the 11th Comprehensive Agricultural Exhibition, Massoud Gilabadi, President of the Agricultural Pesticides Producers Association, stated that Iran consumes between 35,000 to 40,000 tons of pesticides annually, while domestic production capacity stands at 400,000 tons—ten times the country's demand. He emphasized the need for government intervention to facilitate competitive regional markets for exports.

## Iran's Rail Corridor: The Safest Route for Cargo to Open Waters



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Ambassador of Kazakhstan to Iran has stated that Iran's rail corridor is the safest and most direct route for transporting cargo to international waters.

According to a report from the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways (RAI), Ambassador Ontalbayev emphasized the importance of continued bilateral meetings to achieve the transport goals set between the two nations.

During a meeting with Iran's railway chief, both sides highlighted the expansion of cooperation to reach a capacity of five million tons of cargo transport per year through Iran's rail corridor.

Jabarali Zakeri, the head of Iran's railway system, underscored the progress made in previous discussions between railway authorities from Iran and Kazakhstan. He confirmed that a five-million-ton transport capacity has been identified, with both countries aiming to achieve this target within the next five years.

Zakeri also noted that agreements have been reached with CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries, including Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, allowing Iranian rail wagons to operate in Kazakhstan and vice versa. This agreement enhances connectivity and streamlines cargo transportation across the region.

Currently, Kazakhstan transports around 275,000 tons of cargo annually via Iran's railway network, a figure Zakeri deemed insufficient. He emphasized that joint meetings between the railway authorities of both nations would help resolve logistical barriers and align transport capacities with trade objectives.

Furthermore, the Iranian railway chief reaffirmed Iran's readiness to expand collaborations, aiming for maximum cargo transport efficiency through the Iranian rail corridor and its ports.

At the conclusion of the meeting, it was agreed that discussions between representatives from Iran's railway sector and the Embassy of Kazakhstan would continue regularly until concrete results are achieved.

## Iran Ranks Fifth in Natural Resources



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran ranks fifth globally in terms of natural resource value, and with a strategic focus on mining, exploration, extraction, and processing, the country's reliance on oil could be replaced, said Dariush Esmacili, head of the Geological Survey and Mineral Exploration Organization.

According to IRNA, Esmacili stated that Iran holds approximately \$27.5 trillion in natural resources, including oil, gas, and minerals. Of this, around five percent comprises mineral resources, amounting to over \$1.4 trillion in raw minerals. If these resources are extracted and processed effectively, with a value-added coefficient exceeding 50, they could significantly boost the country's economy.

Esmacili highlighted the organization's exploratory activities in Kurdistan, where 25 applied geological sheets and 75 exploration projects have been undertaken across three key fields: geology, economic geology, and geochemistry. These projects, covering an area of 16,000 square kilometers, required an investment of around 30 trillion rials (\$300 million).

He further noted that this investment has led to the identification of 57 gold anomalies, 36 copper anomalies, 18 iron ore anomalies, and 10 lead and zinc anomalies, along with traces of manganese. If these resources were auctioned to the private sector or stock market, they would be valued at over 200 trillion rials (\$2 billion). This, Esmacili emphasized, demonstrates that investing in exploration is akin to sowing seeds that yield significantly greater returns.

When asked whether Iran still has undiscovered mineral reserves, Esmacili affirmed that past exploration efforts have been predominantly surface-level due to short-term outlooks. However, with modern techniques, it is now possible to explore deep underground resources comprehensively.

New exploration methods, particularly airborne geophysics, allow researchers to map underground reserves. Helicopter surveys provide crucial data about underground deposits, significantly enhancing resource mapping capabilities. Over the past 45 years, Iran has conducted only 550,000 kilometers of aerial geophysical surveys. However, under the Seventh Development Plan, this figure is set to increase to 2 million kilometers, covering nearly two-thirds of the country within three years.

Esmacili noted that before the 1979 revolution, aerial survey intervals

were around 7.5 kilometers, whereas current surveys use 250-meter intervals, providing much more detailed insights. Conducting these studies will require approximately 150 trillion rials (\$1.5 billion), but the revenue potential is significantly higher.

Esmacili also addressed concerns about land subsidence, clarifying that mineral extraction does not contribute to the phenomenon. Instead, excessive groundwater extraction is the primary cause of subsidence in many parts of the country.

He pointed out that Iran receives only one-third of the global average annual rainfall—about 230 millimeters compared to the worldwide average of 830 millimeters. The country ranks 37th in groundwater potential and 62nd in surface water availability, yet it is the fifth-largest consumer of water globally. Although Iran covers 1.2% of the world's land area, its share of global water resources is only 0.36%.

Iran's groundwater deficit currently stands at 145 billion cubic meters, meaning the country has extracted far more water than has been replenished over the years. This imbalance has caused underground voids, leading to severe land subsidence. Esmacili warned that if water extraction continues unchecked, subsidence will pose a significant threat to many cities across the country.

He emphasized that while energy and gas supply imbalances can be corrected within a few years, addressing water shortages is far more challenging. Replenishing groundwater reserves takes decades, making it imperative to implement effective water management strategies.

To mitigate this crisis, the Geological Survey and Mineral Exploration Organization, under the directive of the First Vice President, is developing a "Water Consumption Movement" plan. This initiative aims to curb further subsidence and protect urban areas from the looming threat of groundwater depletion.

With Iran ranking among the world's top five nations in natural resource wealth, a shift toward mining could drive economic growth and reduce dependency on oil. Simultaneously, addressing groundwater mismanagement is critical to preventing irreversible land subsidence. Government-led initiatives in both mining and water conservation are essential to ensuring sustainable economic and environmental stability in the country.

## Iran-Turkey Trade Surpasses \$14 Billion



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran to Turkey emphasized the strong ties between the Iranian Ministry of Roads and Urban Development and Turkey, highlighting the continuation of this cooperation. He announced that trade exchanges between the two countries have exceeded \$14 billion this year.

Mohammad Hossein Habibollahzadeh made these remarks on Monday during a coordination meeting at the Iranian Embassy in Turkey, which was held on the sidelines of a visit by Minister Farzaneh Sadegh to Turkey. He noted the close cooperation between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey in various sectors such as rail, road, maritime, transit, border terminals, and economic and trade exchanges. He emphasized that this collaboration remains crucial for Turkey.

The Iranian ambassador further stated that last year, Turkey was Iran's third-largest trade partner, and it is expected to become the second-largest partner this year.

Habibollahzadeh explained that in the Iranian calendar year 1402 (March 2023 - March 2024), trade exchanges between the two countries amounted to \$12 billion, which has now exceeded \$14 billion by December 2024. It is anticipated that the total trade volume will reach \$16 billion.

He added that Turkey's distinction from other countries lies in the quality of imports and exports exchanged between the two nations. A wide range of essential goods and equipment are imported from Turkey to Iran and vice versa, creating unique opportunities for both sides. Therefore, maintaining the strong bilateral relationship is essential.

The report also mentioned that during the coordination meeting, discussions were held on topics related to highway tolls and transit issues.

## Isfahan to Host 100 Global Tour Operators in a Landmark Tourism Event



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Isfahan is set to welcome 100 tour operators from around the world in a major international gathering, marking a significant milestone for Iran's tourism industry. The event, titled "100 Tour Operators in Half of the World," will take place from February 20 to 24 and aims to showcase Isfahan's rich cultural and historical heritage to global travel industry leaders.

Mojgan Izadi, head of the Tourism, Carpet, and Handicrafts Commission at the Isfahan Chamber of Commerce, highlighted the event as a key opportunity for international tour operators and travel agencies to explore Iran's tourism potential. With over 22,000 registered heritage sites, Isfahan is often referred to as the heart of Iranian tourism and a symbol of the country's culture and civilization.

The five-day event is expected to promote innovative tourism packages, strengthen global partnerships, boost economic growth, and create employment opportunities. Participating tour operators from Austria, Switzerland, Romania, India, Vietnam, Singapore, Indonesia, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Thailand, Iraq, Malaysia, Turkey, and China have already confirmed their attendance.

Izadi emphasized the significance of the event, stating that it will help elevate Iran's standing in the global tourism industry by introducing lesser-known attractions of Isfahan and fostering international collaborations. She noted that the city's renowned landmarks, such as Naqsh-e Jahan Square and the historic Zayandeh Rud River, make it an ideal destination for such an event.

Amir Karamzadeh, Director-General of Isfahan's Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Organization, expressed full readiness for the gathering. He revealed plans for a traditional polo match at Naqsh-e Jahan Square as part of the event, adding that efforts are underway to ensure maximum international media coverage.

Karamzadeh also addressed challenges facing foreign tourists, particularly in financial transactions. He mentioned that intermediary companies, in cooperation with banks in the UAE and Turkey, have facilitated banking solutions for travelers by offering prepaid cards with a limit of up to \$10,000.

Additionally, Isfahan will host Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage next week for the inauguration of four luxury accommodations in Kashan and discussions with private-sector representatives.

## Iran Raises Concerns Over Afghanistan's Dam Constructions on Shared Water Resources

TEHRAN - Iran has expressed serious concerns over Afghanistan's dam constructions on shared rivers, emphasizing the negative impact on Iran's eastern water resources. The Iranian government has officially communicated its stance to Afghan authorities through diplomatic channels, highlighting the necessity of adhering to international water-sharing agreements.

Eisa Bozorgzadeh, spokesperson for Iran's water industry, stated in an interview with ILNA that Afghanistan must consider customary water rights and international legal frameworks when implementing projects on shared rivers. He pointed out that the construction and filling of the Pashdan Dam on the Harirod River has led to a reduction in the natural water flow, causing significant environmental and social damage in downstream areas, particularly affecting the drinking water supply of Mashhad, Iran's second-largest city.

Bozorgzadeh warned that any restrictive measures affecting one part of a river basin inevitably impact all inhabitants of the region. He stressed that Afghanistan's unilateral actions not only jeopardize drinking water supplies for millions of people but also cause extensive environmental damage in downstream areas.

"The unilateral and non-cooperative exploitation of the Harirod basin's water resources is not beneficial to either upstream or downstream nations," he said, underscoring the need for collaborative water management.

The Iranian Ministry of Energy has consistently raised this issue in meetings with Afghan officials and has formally conveyed its concerns through diplomatic correspondence. Bozorgzadeh reiterated that Iran will not tolerate any damage to its citizens and territories due to Afghanistan's unilateral water resource exploitation.

Iran's Minister of Energy, Abbas Aliabadi, also commented on the country's response to Afghanistan's recent dam constructions. He emphasized the critical importance of border water management, explaining that Iran both receives and provides water in different regions. The government, he stated, is committed to ensuring equitable water distribution in accordance with international



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regulations.

"Our policy is to act fairly with neighbors who receive water from Iran while also securing our own rightful share from others," Aliabadi said. He highlighted Iran's use of political and local resources to protect its water rights, calling such efforts highly effective.

During a recent visit to Kabul, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi met with Afghanistan's Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi to discuss Iran's water rights over the Helmand River. Araqchi described water as a crucial issue for Iran and noted that Afghanistan's leadership had shown a constructive approach to resolving disputes.

According to Araqchi, Afghan officials have reaffirmed their commitment to honoring Iran's water rights under the Helmand Treaty. He further quoted Afghan officials as saying that even in the absence of a treaty, their moral and religious obligation would require them to ensure water reaches Iran. While acknowledging that regional drought conditions complicate the issue, he emphasized the need for bilateral cooperation to address technical challenges.

An unnamed Afghan official involved in the discussions stated that water is a vital issue for both nations. He stressed that Afghanistan does not control natural precipitation levels and that prolonged drought conditions have impacted water availability. He explained that water from central Afghanistan must travel a distance of 600 to 700 kilometers through porous, sandy terrain before reaching Iran's Sistan and Baluchestan province. This natural loss due to absorption and evaporation further reduces the volume reaching Iranian territory.

"Despite these challenges, even if there were no treaties, we recognize our Islamic and humanitarian duty to ensure water reaches the people of Sistan and Baluchestan," the Afghan official asserted.

The ongoing dispute over water rights remains a critical issue in Iran-Afghanistan relations. While Iran continues to push for adherence to international agreements, Afghanistan maintains that natural conditions and regional droughts are the primary obstacles. Both nations have signaled willingness for further discussions, with diplomatic efforts ongoing to reach a fair and sustainable resolution.

## NIGC Commissioning Nearly 4,000 Gas Projects



TEHRAN (Shana) - The CEO of the National Iranian Gas Company (NIGC) announced the commissioning of 3,984 gas supply and development projects in celebration of the Ten Days of Fajr and ahead of the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution.

Saeid Tavakoli stated that expanding gas supply to cities, villages, and underdeveloped regions is a top priority of these projects, aiming to ensure all citizens benefit from natural gas in line with social justice principles.

Tavakoli highlighted NIGC's commitment to enhancing service delivery and securing the country's energy supply.

He noted that the completed projects include gas supply to 800 villages, five cities, 2,636 industrial units, and one gas transmission pipeline, with a total investment exceeding 75 trillion rials.

Additionally, the executive operations for gas supply to 24 villages, 519 industrial units, and another gas transmission pipeline, costing over 6 trillion rials, will commence during this period.

Tavakoli also emphasized the inauguration of key infrastructure projects, including the Shahid Akhlaghi Gas Pressure Boosting Station, upgraded measurement equipment at the Bazargan Export Gas Station, the Arsanjan Operation Center, the Siraf Port Gas Condensate Export Facilities Dock, and the 104-kilometer Rasht-Chelvand (Phase 2) and Javimm-Banaruyeh gas transmission pipelines in Fars Province. These projects, costing approximately \$182 million, are now operational.

Addressing energy management challenges, Tavakoli identified gas supply-demand imbalance as a critical issue. He cited factors such as the lack of implementation of upstream documents, weak social support, insufficient energy conservation culture, the high share of natural gas in the energy mix, and its low price as key obstacles.

He stressed that overcoming these challenges requires collaboration among organizations, institutions, and the public.

Tavakoli also announced the commissioning of an advanced data center during the Ten Days of Fajr. The center, built to two major data center standards, provides a secure, high-availability infrastructure based on modern standards and is equipped to meet the organization's hardware needs for the foreseeable future.

Despite the challenges faced by the NIGC this year, Tavakoli expressed optimism about the company's effective management of production and consumption. He described this as a positive shift in the country's approach to energy resource management and expressed hope for continued improvements in Iran's energy sector.



### U.S. Carries Out Airstrikes on Islamic State in Somalia

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. forces carried out airstrikes in Somalia on Saturday targeting a senior Islamic State attack planner and other members of the militant group, killing many of them, President Donald Trump said.

"These killers, who we found hiding in caves, threatened the United States and our Allies," Trump said in a post on Truth Social. "The strikes destroyed the caves they live in, and killed many terrorists without, in any way, harming civilians."

Saturday's strikes were carried out in the Golis Mountains and an initial assessment indicated many militants were killed, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth said. No civilians were harmed, he said.

Reuters could not independently verify those details.



# IRAN NEWS

### Students Lead Danube Bridge Blockade in Protest Over Serbia's Leadership



BELGRADE (Dispatches) - Serbia's students led a mass protest and blocked bridges over the River Danube in the northern city of Novi Sad on Saturday, drawing tens of thousands into the streets to express their anger with the country's populist leadership and to call for change.

Saturday marked three months since a huge concrete canopy at Novi Sad's main railway station collapsed, killing 15 people. The crash on Nov. 1 sparked a wide anti-corruption movement and months of student-led street protests.

Many in Serbia believe that the collapse was essentially caused by government corruption in a large infrastructure project with Chinese state companies.

Critics believe graft led to a sloppy job during the reconstruction of the Novi Sad train station, poor oversight and disrespect of existing safety regulations. The issue has come to symbolize a wider discontent over the rule of law in Serbia.

Tens of thousands of people converged on Novi Sad for the blockades, dubbed "Three Months — Three Bridges." One of the blockades was set to extend until Sunday.

As the blockades started, entire bridges and the streets around them were flooded with people, while many more stood on the riverbanks below. Self-appointed student guards had to control the number of people walking on the bridges for security reasons. Slavica Nikolic, a local resident, said that "after long time we can feel positive energy in the air, on the streets, among people."

"When I talk to people, it feels like the hope has woken up," she said. "We remember well some uglier times. This is finally some sort of new hope, that something good is going to happen in this country."

Roads into the city were clogged with cars ahead of the rally as people tried to reach Novi Sad from Belgrade and other Serbian cities.

Tractors rolled through the city streets as farmers drove in front of three separate student columns heading toward the three bridges and thousands of residents cheered them along the way. Many carried Serbian flags in the crowd or banners reading "Three months" or "We are defending freedom."



## Israel, Hamas Complete Latest Ceasefire Swap

GAZA (Dispatches) - Freed Palestinian inmates were greeted by a cheering crowd in the occupied West Bank city of Ramallah, after Hamas released three Israeli hostages from the Gaza Strip in the fourth exchange under the group's ceasefire deal with Israel.

Three other buses carrying freed Palestinians also arrived in the southern Gaza city of Khan Yunis, with the inmates in grey prison uniforms met by hundreds of well-wishers.

In Ramallah, the bus carrying the inmates struggled to make its way through the jubilant throng of supporters as it arrived from the Israeli-run Ofer Prison.

Several of the freed inmates were hoisted onto the crowd's shoulders, including an elderly man who raised his crutches over his head in a triumphant pose.

Earlier in Gaza, hostages Ofer Kalderon and Yarden Bibas were paraded on stage by Hamas fighters before being handed over to the Red Cross in the southern city of Khan Yunis. American-Israeli Keith Siegel was freed shortly thereafter in a similar ceremony at Gaza City's port in the north.

Israel's military later confirmed that all three were back in Israel.

Israeli campaign group the Hostages and Missing Families Forum hailed the release as "a ray of light in the darkness". French-Israeli hostage Kalderon's uncle Shemi told AFP: "We have waited for this moment for a very long time."

"I hope that this is a sign of the rebirth of the people of Israel, not just of Ofer, not just of the hostages," he said, overcome with emotion.

After holding the hostages for more than 15 months, militants in Gaza began releasing them on January 19 under the terms of the ceasefire deal with Israel.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants have so far handed over 18 hostages to the International Committee of the Red Cross in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, many of them women and minors.

The Palestinian Prisoners' Club advocacy group had said Israel would free 183 prisoners Saturday.

Hamas sources said a fifth hostage-prisoner exchange would take place next Saturday. Militants took a total of 251 people hostage that day. Of those, 76 remain in Gaza, including at least 34 the military says are

dead. Those seized include Bibas's wife Shiri and their two children, whom Hamas has declared dead, although Israeli officials have not confirmed that.

Bibas's sons — Kfir, the youngest hostage, whose second birthday was earlier this month, and his older brother Ariel, whose fifth birthday was in August — have become symbols of the hostages' ordeal.

"Our Yarden is supposed to return tomorrow and we are so excited but Shiri and the children still haven't returned," the Bibas family said on Instagram Friday, adding it had "such mixed emotions".

Footage released by the Israeli military showed Bibas being reunited with his sister and father, who held him in a lengthy embrace.

Hundreds had gathered in Tel Aviv's "Hostage Square" to watch the live broadcast of the latest hostage releases.

Ahead of both exchanges in Khan Yunis and Gaza City, scores of masked Hamas fighters stood sentry, apparently to control onlookers, and large crowds were mostly absent.

It was a sharp contrast to Thursday's frenzied exchange, which drew Israeli condemnation and led it to briefly delay the release of Palestinian prisoners.

After Saturday's hostage release, Gaza's key Rafah border crossing was reopened, with the health ministry in the Hamas-run territory saying 50 Palestinian patients had gone through the crossing to Egypt.

Egyptian state-linked channel Al-Qahera News showed footage of the first evacuees, including a child with an autoimmune disease, crossing into Egypt to receive treatment.

Muhammad Zaqout, director for Gaza hospitals, said he hoped the number would increase.

"We now have 6,000 cases ready to be transferred, and more than 12,000 cases that are in dire need of treatment," he said.

Rafah was a vital Gaza aid entry point before the Israeli military seized the Palestinian side of the crossing in May.

The fragile ceasefire's 42-day first phase hinges on the release of a total of 33 hostages in exchange for around 1,900 people, mostly Palestinians, held in Israeli jails.

### Russian Air Strikes Leave Several Dead



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia launched a barrage of drones and missiles on Ukraine, killing 11 people and damaging dozens of residential buildings as well as energy infrastructure across the country, Ukrainian officials said.

The Interior Ministry said that a Russian missile struck a residential building in the central city of Poltava, killing seven people and injuring 14, including three children.

The ministry posted pictures on the Telegram messaging app showing the building with several top floors smashed and thick columns of smoke rising into the sky. Firefighters and dozens of rescuers were searching through the rubble.

One person was killed and four were wounded in the city of Kharkiv in the northeast in a drone attack, the mayor said.

Three police officers were killed during the attacks as they patrolled streets in a village in the northeastern region of Sumy, regional officials said.

"Last night Russia attacked our cities using various types of weapons: missiles, attack drones, and aerial bombs," President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said, adding damage was caused in six regions.

"Each such terrorist attack proves that we need more support in defending ourselves against Russian terror. Every air defence system, every anti-missile weapon, saves lives," he said on the Telegram app.

The Ukrainian air force said Russian forces launched 123 drones and more than 40 missiles. Its air defence units shot down 56 of the drones and redirected 61, it said. The air force provided no figures on how many missiles were intercepted.

## U.S. Wants Ukraine to Hold Elections Following a Ceasefire

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - The United States wants Ukraine to hold elections, potentially by the end of the year, especially if Kyiv can agree a truce with Russia in the coming months, President Donald Trump's top Ukraine official told Reuters.

Keith Kellogg, Trump's special envoy for Ukraine and Russia, said in an interview that Ukrainian presidential and parliamentary elections, suspended during the war with Russia, "need to be done".

"Most democratic nations have elections in their time of war. I think it is important they do so," Kellogg said. "I think it is good for democracy. That's the beauty of a solid democracy, you have more than one person potentially running."

Trump and Kellogg have both said they are working on a plan to broker a deal in the first several months of the new administration to end the all-out war that erupted with Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

They have offered few details about their strategy for ending the deadliest conflict in Europe since World War Two, nor when they might unveil such a plan.

The Trump plan is still evolving and no policy decisions have been made, but Kellogg and other White House officials have discussed in recent days pushing Ukraine to agree to elections as part of an initial truce with Russia, two people with knowledge of those conversations and a former U.S. official briefed about the election proposal said.

Trump officials are also debating whether to push for an initial ceasefire before trying to broker a more permanent deal, the two people familiar with the Trump administration discussions said. If presidential elections were to take place in Ukraine, the winner could be responsible for negotiating a longer-term pact with Moscow, the people said.

The sources declined to be named in order to discuss sensitive policy and security issues.

It is unclear how such a Trump proposal would be greeted in Kyiv. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said Ukraine could hold elections this year if the fighting ends and strong security guarantees are in place to deter Russia from renewing hostilities.

A senior adviser to Kyiv and a Ukrainian government source said the Trump



administration has not yet formally requested Ukraine hold presidential elections by the end of the year.

Zelenskyy's five-year term was supposed to end in 2024 but presidential and parliamentary polls cannot be held under martial law, which Ukraine imposed in February 2022.

Washington raised the issue of elections with senior officials in Zelenskyy's office in 2023 and 2024 during the Biden administration, two former senior U.S. officials said.

State Department and White House officials told their Ukrainian counterparts that elections were critical to uphold international and democratic norms, the officials said.

Officials in Kyiv have pushed back on elections in conversations with Washington in recent months, telling Biden officials that hosting polls at such a volatile moment in Ukraine's history would divide Ukrainian leaders and potentially invite Russian influence campaigns, the two former U.S. officials said.

Asked about what the former Western official and two other people familiar

with the matter told Reuters, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said: "We do not have that information."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov was cited by the Interfax news agency on Jan. 27 as saying that direct contacts between Moscow and the Trump administration were not yet underway. The Russian Foreign Ministry says it is still waiting for the U.S. to approve its new pick as Moscow's ambassador in Washington, a post currently unoccupied.

Putin has said publicly he does not think Zelenskyy is a legitimate leader in the absence of a renewed electoral mandate and that the Ukrainian president does not have the legal right to sign binding documents related to a potential peace deal.

According to the Russian leader, however, Zelenskyy could take part in negotiations in the meantime but must first revoke a 2022 decree he signed banning talks with Russia for as long as Putin is in charge.

The Ukrainian government source said Putin was using the election issue as a false excuse to disrupt future negotiations.

"(He) is setting a trap, claiming that if Ukraine doesn't hold elections, he can later ignore any agreements," the source said.

Ukrainian legislation explicitly prohibits presidential and parliamentary elections being held under martial law.

The former Western official raised concerns about the U.S. push for elections, saying lifting martial law could allow mobilized soldiers to leave the military, trigger an exodus of hard currency and prompt large numbers of draft-age men to "run for the border".

It could also ignite political instability, the source said, because it would make Zelenskyy a lame duck, diluting his power and influence and fueling jockeying by potential challengers.

If Trump pressures Zelenskyy to agree to elections, Washington would be playing into Putin's recent statements questioning the Ukrainian leader's legitimacy, the former Western official said.

"Trump is reacting, in my view, to ... Russian feedback," the official said. "Russia wants to see an end to Zelenskyy."

## Sudanese Paramilitary Forces Kill Scores of Civilians in Attack on Khartoum Market

KHARTOUM (Dispatches) - Sudan's paramilitary shelled a market in Omdurman, part of greater Khartoum, killing an estimated 54 people on Saturday, a medical source told AFP in an updated toll.

Requesting anonymity for their safety, the source at Al-Nao Hospital said the wounded were "still being brought to the hospital" following the attack by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

Saturday's attack on the Sabrein Market also wounded at least 158 others, the health ministry said in a statement.

The RSF denied carrying out the attack.

Khalid al-Aleisir, minister of culture and government spokesperson, condemned the attack, saying that the casualties included many women and children. He also said the attack caused "widespread destruction to private and public properties."

"This criminal act adds to the bloody record of this militia," he said in a statement. "It constitutes a blatant violation of international humanitarian law."

Since April 2023, the paramilitary RSF has been at war with the regular army, in a brutal conflict that has killed tens of thousands and uprooted over 12 million.

"The shells fell in the middle of the vegetable market, that's why the victims and the wounded are so many," one survivor told AFP.



A volunteer at Al-Nao Hospital told AFP they were in dire need of "shrouds, blood donors and stretchers to transport the wounded".

The hospital is one of the last medical facilities operating in the area, and has been repeatedly attacked.

After months of apparent stalemate in the capital, the army this month managed to reclaim key bases including its Khartoum headquarters, pushing the RSF out of many of its strongholds and increasingly into the city's outskirts.

Eyewitnesses to the attack on Saturday -- only the latest to target civilians in markets -- told AFP the artillery shelling came from western Omdurman, where the RSF remains in control, and was supported by drones.

One resident further south in Omdurman reported that the RSF was firing on multiple streets at once, saying "rockets and artillery shells are falling".

Saturday's attack comes a day after RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Daglo vowed to retake the capital from the army.

"We expelled them (from Khartoum) before, and we will expel them again," he told troops in a rare video address.

Soon after the first shelling began nearly 22 months ago, Sudan's capital was turned into a shell of its former self.





## Australia and U.S. Ease Though in Davis Cup Qualifiers

LONDON 9(Dispatches) - Davis Cup heavyweights Australia and the United States eased through the first qualifying round but Britain were knocked out as Japan hit back from 2-1 down to win 3-2, while Denmark staged a dramatic comeback to overcome Serbia.

Australia, whose 28 Davis Cup titles is only bettered by the 32 of the U.S., proved far too strong for Sweden as doubles pair Matthew Ebden and John Peers beat Filip Bergevi and Andre Goransson 6-7(7) 6-3 6-2 to seal the tie.

Singles wins for Alex de Minaur and Aleksandar Vukic had put Australia in control of the tie.

The U.S. were 2-0 up against Taiwan after Friday's singles in Taipei City and sealed the tie when Olympic silver medallists Austin Krajicek and Rajeev Ram beat Ray Ho and Wu Tung-lin 6-4 7-6(4) to set up their first home tie in three years.

Mackenzie McDonald then beat Huang Tsung-hao 6-2 6-3 as the Americans' experience shone through and they won 4-0 without dropping serve even once in the tie.

"Fortunately we were able to finish the job in the first match. We took care of our serve really well," Krajicek said.

The U.S. will play the Czech Republic in the second round in September after the European side beat South Korea in the doubles rubber to take a 3-0 lead.

Japan and Britain were tied 1-1 after Friday's play but the visitors edged ahead as Joe Salisbury and Neal Skupski beat Japanese duo Yosuke Watanuki and Takeru Yuzuki 7-6(4) 7-6(3) in the doubles to move within one victory of the next round.

But Yoshihito Nishioka levelled the score with a 6-3 7-6(0) win over Jacob Fearnley before Kei Nishikori, a former world number four, got the better of Billy Harris with a 6-2 6-3 win.

Nishikori had lost to Fearnley in straight sets on Friday but this time the former U.S. Open finalist wrapped up the tie in 73 minutes for the 300th hardcourt win of his career as Japan beat Britain for the first time.

"I had a bad day yesterday. I tried to be more solid and aggressive and stay calm today," said the 35-year-old Nishikori, who was part of the team that lost to Britain in 2016.

"Very happy that the team won. This win will give us confidence. Our goal is to get to the main draw (Finals)."

Britain's Davis Cup captain Leon Smith congratulated Japan and praised their team's depth.

"You've got Nishioka who's been top 25, Nishikori has been number four in the ATP rankings," Smith said. "So there's a lot of quality and we pushed them hard."

Denmark were 2-0 down against Serbia after Friday's action, but Holger Rune made amends for his defeat on the opening day. He first joined forces Johannes Ingildsen to win the doubles, and then beat Miomir Kecmanovic 6-2 6-4 to level the tie.

In the deciding rubber, Elmer Moeller fought back from losing the opening set to beat Medjedovic 1-6 6-4 6-3 and send the Danes through to face either Spain or Switzerland next.

Spain take a 2-0 lead into next day after Pedro Martinez beat Dominic Stricker and Roberto Carballes Baena defeated Jerome Kym.

France also hold a 2-0 lead over Brazil, with Ugo Humbert beating Joao Fonseca 7-5 6-3 and Arthur Fils winning 6-1 6-4 against Thiago Seyboth Wild, and the winners will meet Croatia who went 3-0 up against Slovakia.

## Real Madrid Fall at Espanyol as Atletico Cut Liga Gap



CORNELLA DE LLOBREGAT (Dispatches) - Real Madrid stumbled to a shock 1-0 defeat at struggling Espanyol today which left them leading La Liga by a single point.

Carlos Romero's 85th minute strike snatched victory for the relegation-battling hosts, provisionally 17th.

Atletico Madrid pulled within a point of Los Blancos with a 2-0 win against Mallorca earlier, ahead of next weekend's crunch derby clash at the Santiago Bernabeu.

Real Madrid were left furious after Romero was only booked for a cynical foul on Kylian Mbappe before going on to net the winner.

However, Carlo Ancelotti's side played far within themselves and did not do enough to take anything from what seemed on paper an inviting fixture.

"Espanyol played a very good game in my opinion, they defended very well, they did what they had to do. Could we have done more? Yes," Ancelotti told reporters.

The Italian coach was angry about the decision not to send off Romero.

"This foul, the decision the referee and VAR took was inexplicable, everyone saw it," continued the coach.

"It's important to protect the players. It was a clear foul, a very ugly tackle, lucky there's no serious injury.

"To us it's inexplicable that they didn't send him off."

Romero admitted he felt bad about scything down the French superstar.

"I knew Kylian is impossible to stop when he's running. I stopped him how I could, it was a bit ugly," Romero told DAZN.

"I didn't like doing it and I said sorry. That's it and there's no more to it."

Espanyol largely kept the Spanish and European champions at bay in the first half.

Real Madrid were dealt a blow when Antonio Rudiger limped off in the first half, with their Champions League play-off tie against Manchester City less than a fortnight away.

## Salah Helps Liverpool Go Nine Points Clear

LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool's Mohamed Salah scored twice in a 2-0 win at Bournemouth that put them nine points clear atop the Premier League while Nottingham Forest's Chris Wood went one better with a hat-trick in a 7-0 rout of Brighton & Hove Albion.

Newcastle United missed the chance to move fourth though as they surrendered the lead in a 2-1 home defeat by Fulham.

Bottom club Southampton enjoyed some rare joy as they beat Ipswich Town 2-1 away for only their second league win of what has been a thoroughly gloomy campaign.

Liverpool under Arne Slot have quickly acquired the habit of winning even when not completely at their fluent best and in Salah they have a weapon of lethal efficiency.

The Egyptian converted a penalty on the half-hour and then curled home his second goal in the 75th minute to secure the points and end Bournemouth's 11-match unbeaten league run.

Salah now has 21 Premier League goals this season and 178 in his career, taking him sixth on the all-time list ahead of Chelsea great Frank Lampard.

Liverpool have 56 points from 23 games with Arsenal, who host fourth-placed Manchester City, and Forest level on 47 points, though



the Midlands side have played a game more.

"It's a great result that we have here away from home," Liverpool skipper Virgil van Dijk said. "We showed great desire, mentality and great quality to finish the situations that we created. Bournemouth are really intense. If you look to the data, they are top of the table for running, intensity -- the way they play, they're aggressive."

Forest's 5-0 loss to Bournemouth last weekend had some people suggesting their bubble may have burst. But Nuno Espirito Santo's team put that notion to bed in devastating fashion.

Wood's hat-trick and goals from Morgan Gibbs-White, Neco Williams and Jota Silva plus an own goal helped Forest consolidate

third spot as they chase what would be their first Premier League qualification in 45 years.

"The response on the pitch from the players was beyond our expectations," a smiling Espirito Santo told the BBC after Forest recorded the biggest winning margin in this season.

Fulham substitute Rodrigo Muniz struck in the 82nd minute to secure a 2-1 win at Newcastle who had taken the lead when Jacob Murphy slammed home a shot after good work by Anthony Gordon.

Fulham levelled after the break when Murphy deflected in a shot by Raul Jimenez. In-form Newcastle striker Alexander Isak struck the crossbar before Muniz stole it for Fulham.

Ipswich must have felt a home game against hapless Southampton would be the ideal opportunity to escape the relegation zone but they fluffed their lines.

Saints struck first as Joe Aribo's shot squirmed through goalkeeper Arijanet Muric and into the net but Ipswich levelled through top scorer Liam Delap on the half hour.

Paul Onuachu struck late on though to give Southampton a glimmer of hope in what looks like a forlorn escape act.

## Smith Praises Near Flawless Australia After Sri Lanka Thrashing



SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Australia's stand-in captain Steve Smith hailed his side's resounding innings and 242-run victory over Sri Lanka in Galle as "near flawless" after the visitors retained the Warne-Muralitharan Trophy.

The Australians were not required to bat again after posting a mammoth 654-6 in the first innings to record the nation's largest ever win in Asia in the first match of the teams' two-test series.

Opener Usman Khawaja hit 232 runs while Smith and Josh Inglis also scored centuries before spins bowlers Matthew Kuhnemann and Nathan Lyon took 16 wickets between them over two innings after the Sri Lankans were forced to follow on.

"I didn't think (Sri Lanka) bowled badly by any stretch," Smith said. "There was certainly some good spells but we just batted really, really well.

"Put them under pressure, particularly the guys that were playing the sweep shot. That was tough to defend.

"Uzzie (Khawaja) played probably 25 per cent of his balls as sweep or reverse sweeps so it was difficult for them to set fields to, and Inglis was similar, and (Alex) Carey was similar.

"And then a couple of us went down the straighter plane and did that well as well.

"To post 650 on what was a wicket that offered a fair amount of spin, was a very good effort.

"It was a near-flawless performance."

Australia and Sri Lanka face off again in the second and final test in Colombo from Thursday with Sri Lankan coach Sanath Jayasuriya ruing his side's performance in the field in the opening innings.

"You can't control the toss but we should have controlled the first session of the game," said the former opener. "We dropped two or three catches, and we didn't review crucial decisions and I think fielding was the key.

"It would have been a different story altogether if we got some wickets. Then they batted really well, Khawaja and Smith.

"The wicket was a little on the slow side and they adjusted themselves really well, front foot and back foot both and they played both sides of the wicket.

"They outplayed us, they played positive cricket and got runs on the board. That was the key I think."

## Wiggins Enjoys Career Night as Thunder Trounce Kings

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Aaron Wiggins recorded a career-high 41 points and 14 rebounds to lift the host Oklahoma City Thunder to a 144-110 victory over the Sacramento Kings.

Wiggins' previous career highs were 28 points as a rookie in 2021-22 and 10 rebounds the following season.

Wiggins was in the starting lineup as a replacement of All-Star Jalen Williams, who was out with a right wrist sprain.

The Thunder have won four of their last six games, while the loss was the fourth in five games for the Kings.

Oklahoma City's 144 points were its most this season and the most allowed by Sacramento.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 29 points and nine assists before sitting the entire fourth quarter with Oklahoma City having the game well in hand.

By then, the game was all about Wiggins, who scored 14 points in the fourth quarter.

In Wednesday's loss to Golden State, the Thunder were just 9 of 39 on 3-pointers.

Against Sacramento, they hit eight during a 46-point second quarter.



Oklahoma City built its lead to as much as 29 before halftime.

The Thunder led by just five to start the second but ripped off a 29-9 run that ate up much of the latter half of the quarter to take control.

Oklahoma City's 82 first-half points were its most in a half this season. The total was one shy of the most the Thunder have scored in a half since moving to Oklahoma City.

The Thunder finished with 19 3-pointers -- six each from Wiggins and Luguentz Dort, who finished with 20 points.

Isaiah Hartenstein (16 points, 14 rebounds) and Kenrich Williams (18, 11) joined Wiggins with double-doubles.

Oklahoma City had 37 assists on 57 field goals, one off their season high in assists.

De'Aaron Fox led Sacramento with 20 points.

The Thunder, who already were without both Williams and Alex Caruso (ankle), were hit with another injury when Cason Wallace suffered a right shoulder strain late in the first quarter and didn't return.

Meanwhile D'Angelo Russell scored 18 points, Ziaire Williams flirted with a double-double and the visiting Brooklyn Nets claimed a surprising 110-98 victory over the Houston Rockets.

After snapping a seven-game losing streak with a road win over the Charlotte Hornets on Wednesday, the Nets recorded back-to-back victories for the first time since late November. They did so by shooting 49.4 percent from the floor, posting a 60-50 advantage in paint points while limiting Houston to 40 percent shooting from the floor.

Russell provided a steady hand as six Nets scored in double figures. Williams paired 21 points with eight rebounds while Day'Ron Sharpe tallied 13 points off the bench. Jalen Wilson and Keon Johnson added 13 points and eight rebounds each to round out the balanced attack.