

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei Has Appointed the Secretary General of the Lebanese Hezbollah Resistance Movement, Sheikh Naim Qassem, as His Envoy in the Arab Country

# IRAN NEWS

Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces, Major General Mohammad Baqeri, Emphasized That the Offensive and Defensive Capabilities of the Armed Forces Are Key to Ensuring Sustainable and Effective Deterrence

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### Another Maximum Pressure, Another Defeat for Washington



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has asserted that another round of deployment of the "maximum pressure" policy on the part of the United States against Iran will only lead to another defeat.

"The policy of maximum pressure has already proven to be a failure, and any attempt to revive it will only lead to another defeat," the top diplomat told reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting on Wednesday.

Araqchi was referring to the policy that the US adopted during Donald Trump's former tenure, as part of which Washington quit a 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and world powers, returned the sanctions that the agreement had lifted, and piled up even more illegal and unilateral bans against the Islamic Republic.

Retaliating against the measures, Iran took legitimate nuclear steps that have featured its operationalizing advanced centrifuges among other things.

The country also explored various means to skirt the sanctions and boost its economy by fostering foreign trade and enhancing domestic production, causing Washington to suffer "maximum defeat" in adoption of such policy.

On Tuesday, Trump promoted new "tough" measures aimed at, what Washington has called, "detering" Iran from obtaining a "nuclear weapon."

Trump also signed a presidential memorandum, authorizing stricter illegal actions against Iran, while saying, "They can't have a nuclear weapon, we'd be very tough if they insist on doing that."

Washington's adversarial stance comes despite Tehran's repeated assurances that its nuclear activities remain in full compliance with international regulations, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)'s invariable verification of the peaceful nature of the Islamic Republic's nuclear energy program.

Reacting to Trump's remarks, Araqchi said, "If the main issue is that Iran should not pursue nuclear weapons, this is achievable and not a difficult matter."

"Iran's stance is clear, and it is a member of the NPT (Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty), and there is also the fatwa (religious decree) of the Leader, which has clarified the matter for us," he added.

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei's has prohibited pursuance, attainment, and storage of such non-conventional arms through an official decree as per religious and moral grounds.

"The Leader's fatwa has made Iran's position crystal clear," Araqchi concluded.

### Envoy Says Iran, Russia to Continue Regional Cooperation



TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Ambassador to Moscow Kazem Jalali has referred to signing the joint comprehensive strategic agreement between Tehran and Moscow as the legal basis of bilateral relations in the next five years and said that the two countries will continue cooperation in the regional level.

Addressing a press conference on the occasion of the anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Jalali said that 2024 was one of the busiest years in Iran-Russia relations.

Various political, security and defense delegations were exchanged between the two countries in 2024, he added.

He also praised significant progress in economic relations. Elsewhere in his remarks, Jalali referred to Iran-Russia cooperation in the North-South International Corridor, saying that the Rasht-Astara railroad project agreement will be signed as the missing link of the western part of the corridor by the end of March 2025.

We are working seriously on Russian gas transfer to Iran and have reached an understanding in this regard. He stressed that the two countries do not need the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (Swift), saying that the Iranian and Russian central banks had various meeting in 2024 and 2025.

Jalali reiterated that Iran's nuclear program and its nuclear cooperation with Russia is peaceful and said that the two countries are negotiating on construction of new nuclear plants.

## Vice President Rules Out Talks with Trump, Prioritizes Economic Stability

TEHRAN - First Vice President, Mohammad Reza Aref, has stated that while no meeting between two individuals is entirely impossible, holding talks with former U.S. President Donald Trump is not on the agenda of the Islamic Republic.

During a press briefing following a government cabinet meeting on Wednesday, Aref responded to Trump's recent remarks about potential negotiations with the Iranian president. He emphasized that Iran's strategic policies, particularly in defense, have always been clear, stable, and long-term.

Aref reaffirmed Iran's commitment to its religious decree (fatwa) against nuclear weapons. "If Trump believes that Iran should not pursue nuclear weapons, he can rest assured, as our policy on this matter is permanent. We have a clear strategy, and our stance on this issue has not changed," he asserted.

He also referenced a government exhibition showcasing achievements of the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Support, highlighting Iran's progress in scientific self-sufficiency and food security. "The exhibition displayed valuable advancements in industrial sectors, artificial intelligence, and the oil industry, as well as significant progress in food security and agriculture," he noted.

Aref acknowledged Iran's reliance on imported essential goods, particularly cooking oil, but stressed that efforts are underway to achieve self-sufficiency. "We hope to expand these efforts beyond oil to other sectors and ultimately reach self-sufficiency in agriculture," he stated.

He further emphasized Iran's commitment to self-reliance in defense, declaring, "We are not a nation that seeks war, but we will firmly defend ourselves and procure the necessary equipment. We also believe that peaceful nuclear technology should be accessible to all nations for maximum benefit."

Regarding Iran's economic situation, Aref reaffirmed the government's commitment to structural and economic reforms. "Our top priority is the livelihood of the people," he said, explaining that the government is implementing a five-pillar economic plan aimed at improving living conditions.

He acknowledged short-term economic hardships but assured that the government is implementing support packages, particularly for vulnerable groups. "Market regulation is a key focus, and committees within relevant agencies are actively monitoring inflation. We have already seen a significant decline in inflation rates, and we aim to achieve sustainable economic growth," he added.

Addressing concerns over Iran's currency exchange policy, Aref highlighted the government's goal of stabilizing the exchange rate by adopting a single-rate currency system. "The integration of different exchange rates into a single market will help balance supply and demand. Although there have been fluctuations, we believe that stabilizing the market will resolve existing challenges," he explained.

He also acknowledged public concerns regarding the slow implementation of policies,



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expressing hope that collaboration between the Ministry of Industry and the Central Bank would resolve currency-related issues and ensure businesses receive the necessary foreign exchange resources.

Aref outlined the government's foreign policy approach, emphasizing enhanced trade relations. "Our primary focus is strengthening ties with neighboring and regional countries, followed by Islamic nations and other interested countries. Africa is also a priority," he stated.

He highlighted Iran's active participation in regional economic unions, including its recent observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). "We have signed a free trade agreement with EAEU members, which has been ratified by the Iranian parliament. Although some legal amendments are required, this agreement

will significantly boost trade and cooperation," he explained.

Aref also noted Iran's efforts to develop major trade corridors, including the North-South and East-West routes, with infrastructure projects such as the Basra-Shalamchah and Chabahar-Zahedan railway lines expected to enhance trade relations.

Addressing speculation about the role of former national security official Ali Shamkhani in nuclear negotiations, Aref clarified that Iran's foreign ministry is solely responsible for handling nuclear talks. "Decisions on major foreign policy matters are made by the Supreme National Security Council and require the Supreme Leader's approval. The foreign ministry leads negotiations, with contributions from experts in relevant committees," he stated.

Aref also addressed Iran's privatization efforts, emphasizing that it is a key government policy and a legal obligation. However, he stressed the importance of ensuring privatization is conducted under proper conditions, including job security and industrial growth. "The government remains committed to privatization, including in major industries such as Iran Khodro, but the process must be carefully managed to protect employment and production," he said.

In response to questions about alleged dual citizenship concerns within the administration, Aref dismissed the claims as inappropriate, especially during the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. "Everyone, including government officials, must adhere to the law. Any legal concerns should be addressed through proper channels, rather than being used for political maneuvering," he stated.

Iran's Vice President reiterated the government's focus on economic stability, self-sufficiency, and regional cooperation. He ruled out negotiations with Trump, reaffirmed Iran's anti-nuclear stance, and outlined policies aimed at economic growth, market regulation, and currency stabilization. Additionally, he emphasized the importance of trade partnerships, infrastructure development, and privatization while clarifying the role of the foreign ministry in nuclear negotiations.

## Resistance Won Media War Against Israel During Gaza Genocide

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's foreign minister says the resistance front has won the war of narratives during the Gaza genocide, as evidenced by the Zionist regime's unprecedented isolation and massive anti-Israel protests across the globe.

Speaking at a conference in Tehran on Tuesday, the minister stated that since the beginning of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood, a significant media struggle has unfolded, with all sides striving to influence international opinion.

He noted that while the adversaries of the Resistance possessed significant media capabilities, they ultimately failed to dominate the narrative.

Resistance forces made a deep impact in the media sphere, aided by certain regional and international outlets.

"In this domain, the enemies of the Resistance did not achieve much success, while the Resistance movement, alongside their military operations in Gaza, Lebanon, and beyond, effectively leveraged media platforms. Several regional and international networks played a crucial role in amplifying its message," he said.

The minister said the combination of extensive narratives and the sheer scale of crimes committed by the Zionist regime resulted in a global outcry.

"As images, videos, and reports of these atrocities circulated, coupled with worldwide protests and conferences, the international landscape shifted significantly. One could confidently say that the Zionist regime has never been as globally isolated and discredited as it is today."

Araqchi further noted that although Israel has achieved some tactical military gains, these have been largely confined to the destruction of homes in Gaza and Lebanon. However, the regime has failed to accomplish its stated objectives or eliminate Resistance.

The minister highlighted Israel's severe reputational damage, stating that global perception of the regime has shifted from being merely a "child killer" to a "genocidal entity." This shift, he noted, is so profound that even the International Criminal Court was compelled



to issue an arrest warrant for the Israeli prime minister as a war criminal.

Many countries now refuse to host him, and some have even denied his aircraft access to their airspace, forcing him to take alternative routes during his recent trip to the US, Araqchi said.

Araqchi further emphasized the unwavering strength of Resistance.

"The image it has projected is one of a confident force that has withstood brutal aerial and ground attacks for over 16 months. It has now emerged stronger than ever, exchanging prisoners on its own terms while

maintaining its position on the battlefield," he said, referring to the large-scale presence of Gaza's Resistance forces during the recent exchange with Israel.

The Iranian minister said that this perception has sparked internal debates within Israeli society, where many now see themselves as defeated.

Addressing the military aspects of the war in Gaza and Lebanon, Araqchi said despite suffering attacks, Hezbollah has maintained its operational strength.

He said the group continues to hold its ground in southern Lebanon, demonstrating resilience that prevented Israel from achieving the territorial gains it had secured during the 2006 war.

While acknowledging the losses suffered by Resistance in Gaza, Lebanon, and beyond, Araqchi reiterated that Resistance is not merely a movement but an ideology, one that cannot be eradicated through bombings or massacres.

He said despite repeated efforts to disarm Resistance, its greatest weapon is not conventional arms but the sacrifice of its martyrs.

Concluding his speech, Araqchi said the Resistance forces must rebuild and apply lessons learned from the recent conflict.

"I am confident they will return stronger than before. This is not the first time Hezbollah has lost a leader, yet each time, it has emerged more powerful."

### Iran's Tax Receipts Up 47% y/y



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's tax revenues increased by nearly a half in the 10 months to January 19 compared to the previous same period, according to the country's tax office (INTA). INTA figures cited in a Tuesday report by Tasnim news agency showed that Iran's tax receipts had reached a total of 9,208.02 trillion rials (\$10.95 billion) in the 10 months to late January, an increase of 47% year on year.

Direct tax accounted for 67% or 6,120 trillion rials of Iran's tax revenues over the period, the figures showed.

Value-added tax (VAT) was responsible for a major part of INTA's indirect tax revenues over the 10 months to late January as VAT receipts reached 1,930 trillion rials, the data showed.

INTA chief Mohammad Hadi Sobhanian said on Tuesday that the government seeks to use artificial intelligence in its tax-collection systems to increase its ability to detect tax dodging.

Sobhanian said that increased use of technology in taxation could increase Iran's tax revenues by five times.

He said that Iran's tax revenues had increased by 70% year on year in the calendar year to March 2024 to reach 8,000 trillion rials, adding that tax receipts are expected to reach over 10,000 trillion this calendar year.

### Hamas Strongly Condemns Trump Dangerous Remarks on Gaza Takeover



GAZA (Dispatches) - The Gaza Strip-based Palestinian resistance movement Hamas has strongly condemned as incendiary US President Donald Trump's remarks concerning Washington's plan to "own" Gaza.

"These remarks are hostile to our people and our cause," the group said in a statement on Wednesday, referring to the Palestinian cause of liberation from Israeli occupation and aggression.

Such comments "will not serve stability in the region, and will only add fuel to the fire."

Speaking at the White House on Tuesday alongside Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump had said the United States would oversee clearing up of destroyed buildings, removing of unexploded ordnance, and "resettling" of Palestinians elsewhere.

"The US will take over the Gaza Strip, and we will do a job with it too. We'll own it," he had noted, saying that Washington could even deploy troops to the territory.

Trump's announcement came after the Israeli regime failed to realize its objective of forcing Gaza's entire population to leave for neighboring Jordan and Egypt, despite taking the coastal siver under a war of genocide for over 15 months, during which the regime killed way upwards of 61,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children.

Hamas, however, asserted, "We will not allow any country in the world to occupy our land or impose guardianship over our great Palestinian people."

It also urged the US administration to retract the statements, calling them irresponsible and in contradiction with the international law and the rights of the Palestinian nation.

Sami Abu Zuhri, a senior Hamas official, meanwhile, characterized Trump's comments as "ridiculous and absurd."

Speaking to Reuters, he reiterated the movement's warning that such ideas would only fuel further instability in the region.

Hamas spokesman Abdul Latif al-Qanoua also responded to Trump's proposal, calling it a "failed attempt to eliminate the Palestinian cause."



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## Iran's Petrochemical Production to Reach 131m Tons

TEHRAN (ILNA) - Iran's petrochemical industry is set for a significant expansion, with production expected to reach 131 million tons by the end of the Seventh Development Plan, according to Hassan Abbaszadeh, CEO of the National Petrochemical Company (NPC). Abbaszadeh highlighted the petrochemical sector's rapid growth as a major achievement in reducing crude sales and enhancing value chains within the oil industry. He stated that the industry has grown from an annual production capacity of just 3 million tons to approximately 96 million tons across various petrochemical products.

Emphasizing the sector's strategic importance, Abbaszadeh noted: "While all sectors of the oil industry are valuable, petrochemicals represent the core value chain, preventing raw material exports and driving economic growth. Despite advancements in oil production, the petrochemical sector has experienced unparalleled growth."

## Russia Requests Iran's Electricity and Water Technology



TEHRAN - Minister of Energy announced that Russia has formally requested Iran's technology in the electricity sector, particularly in power generation and gas turbine industries.

Minister Abbas Aliabadi made this statement on Tuesday during a ceremony honoring veterans of the water and electricity industries. He described these sectors as among the most prestigious and honorable achievements of the Islamic Revolution.

Aliabadi emphasized that Iran's electricity industry has advanced significantly, to the extent that the Russian president has requested access to its technology. He also highlighted the importance of recognizing the contributions of veterans in maintaining the Islamic Revolution.

The minister also raised concerns over the impact of unauthorized cryptocurrency mining on Iran's electricity network. He revealed that authorities discover thousands of illegal mining machines daily, describing them as a major burden on the power sector. Aliabadi warned that some of these mining operations are controlled by foreign entities.

Reaffirming his commitment to utilizing the expertise of veterans in the water and electricity industries, Aliabadi linked the Islamic Revolution to the legacy of Imam Hussein (A.S.) and called it Iran's most significant historical event. He stressed the government's responsibility to support war veterans by improving their welfare and living conditions.

## Pakistan Market: A Valuable Opportunity for Exporting Knowledge-Based Products



TEHRAN - The President of Khorasan Razavi Science and Technology Park has highlighted Pakistan's vast and ready market as a significant opportunity for exporting Iranian knowledge-based products, particularly in the tourism sector.

Regarding his visit to Pakistan alongside Khorasan Razavi officials for the 24th Sustainable Tourism Exhibition of Islamic Countries, Ali Esmaceli emphasized the crucial role knowledge-based companies can play in developing the tourism industry.

He noted the participation of several technology firms from Khorasan Razavi in the exhibition, stating that these companies explored potential collaborations with Pakistani counterparts. One successful member company in the tourism and related technologies sector unveiled its travel services application in Urdu during the event.

Esmaceli, also a faculty member at Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, stated that this initiative could significantly increase the number of Pakistani tourists visiting Iran, particularly Khorasan Razavi. Additionally, it would strengthen tourism and cultural ties between the two countries.

He further explained that supporting Iranian knowledge-based and technology firms in accessing international markets is a key objective of Khorasan Razavi Science and Technology Park, which is being pursued through strategic planning.

Esmaceli stressed that digitalizing tourism services is among the most critical areas for development. He pointed to the importance of smart travel guide applications, online booking systems, and electronic payment services in enhancing tourists' experiences.

Moreover, he highlighted the potential of virtual reality (VR) and artificial intelligence (AI) in introducing historical and religious sites in Khorasan Razavi. Smart transportation solutions for pilgrims and optimizing tourism routes are also essential areas where knowledge-based companies can contribute.

Esmaceli noted that beyond tourism, agriculture and food industries are key sectors where Khorasan Razavi can collaborate with Pakistan. He mentioned the potential for sharing advanced technologies in seed modification, smart irrigation, and water resource management.

He also pointed to the health and pharmaceutical sector as another crucial area for cooperation, particularly in the production of herbal medicines and advanced medical equipment.

## Iran's Trade Balance Improves



TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, announced an improvement in the country's trade balance over the first ten months of the current year compared to the previous year.

Speaking at the 7th Export Capabilities Exhibition, focused on Expo 2025, Dehghan Dehnavi stated that last year, Iran's non-oil exports reached approximately \$50 billion, while imports totaled \$67 billion. This resulted in a trade deficit of \$17 billion. However, he emphasized that the trade balance has shown signs of improvement this year.

Dehghan Dehnavi described the Iran Expo as a key initiative of the Trade Promotion Organization, providing businesses with a platform to connect and negotiate trade agreements. He highlighted that, despite sanctions, the private sector has played a crucial role in sustaining trade activities and mitigating the impact of restrictions.

"Iran Expo serves as a comprehensive exhibition, encompassing various industries and offering a broad spectrum of business opportunities," he added. The event aims to attract participants who have the potential to establish trade partnerships with Iran.

According to Dehghan Dehnavi, the exhibition will showcase Iran's export capabilities, demonstrating the potential of Iranian companies to foreign visitors. This initiative is expected to contribute significantly to increasing non-oil exports.

One of the main goals for the upcoming Expo is to enhance its quality by carefully selecting participating companies. Dehghan Dehnavi stressed the importance of ensuring that exhibitors have the potential to secure international trade deals, ultimately boosting Iran's non-oil exports.

Turkey's participation in Iran Expo 2025 was also a key topic. "Turkey has always been one of Iran's top five trade partners and serves as a gateway to other markets," he noted. A significant Turkish delegation attended this year's event, and efforts are underway to strengthen trade relations further. Iranian officials plan to invite both Turkish government representatives and private sector leaders to the next edition of the exhibition.

Discussing the impact of sanctions, Dehghan Dehnavi acknowledged that they have created barriers to trade. However, he praised the resilience of the Iranian private sector, which has actively worked around these challenges and contributed to economic growth.

"The private sector has been the strongest force in countering sanctions. By

finding alternative trade routes and strategies, it has kept the country's economy afloat," he said. He emphasized that any reduction in sanctions would lower costs and create new market opportunities for Iranian goods.

Regarding Saudi Arabia's potential participation in Iran Expo 2025, Dehghan Dehnavi stated that Iran seeks to expand trade ties with all countries, except for the Israeli regime. Given the historical, cultural, and geographical ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia, he sees a strong opportunity for trade cooperation.

"The resolution of political differences is progressing, and we will definitely invite Saudi representatives to participate in the upcoming exhibition," he confirmed.

Majid Takkiri, head of the Iran Expo Organizing Committee, highlighted the significant achievements of the previous event. He reported that the last Iran Expo, attended by traders from 94 countries, resulted in over \$3 billion worth of trade agreements.

"Iran Expo has become a strategic event for expanding target markets. It offers transparency in presenting capacities, challenges, and strengths while facilitating direct negotiations between Iranian exporters and international traders," Takkiri said.

He also noted that the event has evolved into a successful model of collaboration between the government and the private sector. Efforts have been made to invite influential business figures and high-ranking economic officials from around the world. In the last edition, 2,400 business representatives from 94 countries attended, demonstrating the global demand for Iranian products.

Iran Expo 2025 is scheduled to take place from April 27 to May 1, 2025, at Tehran's Permanent International Fairgrounds. The exhibition will focus on reducing trade costs, facilitating negotiations, and increasing non-oil exports. Given the rising costs of international trade fairs due to currency fluctuations, the event aims to provide a cost-effective platform for Iranian exporters to connect with global markets.

Takkiri highlighted the advantages of Iran Expo, including cost savings for exporters, improved marketing opportunities, and streamlined business negotiations. He also noted that delegations from various regions, including Africa, Latin America, East Asia, and Eastern Europe, attended the previous event and signed multiple trade agreements.

With a strategic focus on boosting non-oil exports, Iran Expo 2025 is expected to play a pivotal role in shaping the country's international trade landscape.

## \$70b in Currency and Gold Held by Public; Banks Creating Liquidity

TEHRAN - A member of the Expediency Discernment Council has revealed that the public holds \$70 billion in foreign currency and gold. He criticized the notion that increasing exchange rates would incentivize exporters, labeling it as incorrect.

Speaking at the 10th Islamic Finance Conference held on Tuesday, at the Securities and Exchange Organization, Hojjatoleslam Gholamreza Mesbahi Moghaddam emphasized that economics is about optimal utilization. He stated, "An Islamic society is not one where poverty is evident, as the affluence of the wealthy should alleviate the needs of the poor, thereby eliminating visible poverty."

Mesbahi Moghaddam highlighted that significant assets are idle among the populace, including foreign currencies kept outside economic activities and national gold reserves, totaling \$70 billion. He pointed out the irony of seeking \$5 billion in facilities from financial institutions while \$70 billion remains outside the national economic cycle in the hands of the people.

Reflecting on past practices, he noted that there was a time when individuals deposited their foreign currencies in banks and received interest. However, when they were encouraged to exchange these for the national currency, it eroded public trust, leading people to store their currencies in safety deposit boxes. The recent bank theft highlighted the extent of this issue.

He questioned whether these resources shouldn't be reintegrated into the country's economic cycle and urged the government to build trust. He acknowledged the Commodity Exchange's initiatives regarding gold as positive steps and suggested that the banking system should encourage people to invest their foreign currencies in banks. However, he noted that the current low returns on bank investments do not provide strong incentives.

Mesbahi Moghaddam proposed the establishment of project funds, emphasizing the need for transparency regarding investment returns. He cited the oil and gas sector as having the highest advantages and potential for annual profitability, which could attract substantial



investment. He mentioned presenting this proposal to President Dr. Masoud Pezeshkian on Saturday.

On the topic of foreign exchange, he argued that stable exchange rates lead to overall price stability. Businesses adjust their prices in response to currency fluctuations, and rising exchange rates fuel inflationary expectations.

He noted that Iran's trade balance, including oil and goods exports, is positive by \$28 billion, which is encouraging. However, excluding oil, there's a \$2 billion deficit.

He accused petrochemical and steel companies, mostly state-owned or affiliated, of withholding export-derived currency from the free market or wait months for their required funds.

He attributed rising prices to currency hoarding, stating that while currency is available, it's not accessible to the market. He also criticized individuals who, through careless remarks, shock the market by speculating on minimum exchange rates, sending negative signals.

Discussing liquidity growth, Mesbahi Moghaddam stated that in any economy, liquidity growth aligned with the increase in goods and services encourages production. However, if liquidity grows independently of goods production, it leads to higher demand than supply, causing prices to rise.

He emphasized that if economic growth is at 4%, liquidity growth should be 6%, not the 40% seen in the 2010s when economic growth was zero. Liquidity growth must align with production growth.

He criticized current banking resource allocation methods, noting that banks finance businesses and individuals, creating new liquidity and contributing to further liquidity creation within banks. To curb liquidity growth, he suggested that financing should be directed to sellers of goods rather than applicants, ensuring that liquidity supports production growth. Alternatively, funds should be channeled into projects that drive production leaps.

## Iran's Trade Ties at Risk Without FATF Membership



TEHRAN - Mohammad Reza Najafi-Manesh, head of the Business Environment and Production Barriers Removal Commission of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce, has warned that Iran's continued refusal to join the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is jeopardizing its trade relations with neighboring and allied countries, potentially leading to significant economic losses.

Speaking to the chamber's public relations office, Najafi-Manesh emphasized that FATF is an international body with nearly universal membership, except for a few nations. He noted that the organization and its regulatory framework are widely recognized as legitimate and essential for global financial transactions.

Iran's failure to join FATF has left it on the organization's blacklist, which has severely impacted its trade and financial exchanges. According to Najafi-Manesh, despite Iran's membership in organizations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, other member states expect Iran to comply with FATF regulations to facilitate smoother trade relations.

"As an example, establishing clear and efficient banking relations with China remains a challenge, largely due to FATF-related restrictions. Without joining FATF, even trade with friendly nations will become increasingly difficult, causing Iran to lose out on key economic opportunities," he explained.

Addressing arguments that Iran could bypass FATF by relying on alternative trade mechanisms, such as barter agreements, Najafi-Manesh dismissed this as unrealistic. He pointed out that these workarounds significantly increase transaction costs—sometimes by 5% to 15%—which translates into billions of dollars in additional expenses for Iran's economy.

"With an annual financial turnover of around \$100 billion, why should we unnecessarily incur an extra \$15 billion in costs? Every dollar counts in the current economic climate," he stated.

Najafi-Manesh also stressed that Iran's non-compliance with FATF has eroded international trust, discouraging many foreign companies from engaging in business with the country. He argued that by joining FATF, Iran could access global markets with better pricing and product quality, boosting economic efficiency.

## Iran's Exports to Saudi Arabia Surge by 10,000%



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TEHRAN - Iran's exports to Saudi Arabia have seen an unprecedented surge, increasing from \$235,672 last year to \$23.3 million this year—a remarkable 9,795% growth.

Seyed Rouhollah Latifi, a trade official, stated that the improvement in political relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia has positively impacted commercial ties. Over the past nine months, Iran exported 58,971 tons of goods to Saudi Arabia, valued at \$23.3 million.

This marks a dramatic rise compared to the same period last year when Iran exported only 331 tons worth \$235,672. The volume of exports increased 178 times, while the total value jumped 99 times.

Latifi highlighted that the bulk of exports consisted of iron and steel products, totaling 58,339 tons and valued at \$21.7 million. Among these: Iron billets: 30,000 tons (\$12.9 million); Sponge iron: 20,000 tons (\$5.09 million); Semi-finished iron products: 8,225 tons (\$3.66 million); and other iron and steel items: 99 tons (\$23,377).

Other significant exports included: Pistachios: 95 tons (\$832,065); Seedless raisins: 278 tons (\$583,912); Carpets and rugs: 17.7 tons (\$110,352); Glass sheets: 113 tons (\$18,916); Fresh apples: 22 tons (\$12,100); Polished stones: 50 tons (\$11,027); Marble: 49.6 tons (\$10,946); and ceramic tiles: 7 tons (\$486).

Latifi also noted that after an eight-year halt, Iran resumed imports from Saudi Arabia this year. In the past nine months, Iran imported 15.5 tons of mono-butyl ether, a chemical compound, valued at \$33,843.

Despite the recent growth, Latifi emphasized that trade between Iran and Saudi Arabia is still far from its full potential. Previously, the two nations had an annual trade volume of \$800 million. With current economic conditions, this figure could initially rise to \$1 billion and, over the coming years, exceed \$10 billion.



## U.S. Freezes Funding for Haiti Multinational Security Force

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The United States has frozen its financial contributions to a United Nations fund for a multinational security support mission in Haiti, a UN spokesperson said on Tuesday, a move that would stop \$13.3 million in pending aid. "We received an official notification from the US asking for an immediate stop work order on their contribution" to the trust fund for the Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission, said Stephane Dujarric, the UN secretary-general's spokesperson, referring to the already underfunded Kenya-led force.

The UN Security Council gave the green light in October 2023 to the Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission designed to support Haiti's authorities in their fight against criminal gangs, which control swaths of the country.



## Georgia Plans Tougher Penalties for Protesters Amid Political Crisis



TBILISI (Dispatches) - The Georgian government is pushing forward with a legislative package that would increase penalties for protest-related offences - in some cases to many years in prison - as the South Caucasus country grapples with a protracted political crisis.

Georgians have been rallying nightly since November, when the ruling Georgian Dream party, now in its fourth term in power, said it was suspending European Union accession talks until 2028, abruptly halting a long-standing national goal.

The demonstrations have drawn a swift crackdown by police, resulting in hundreds of arrests and beatings, rights groups say. The government has defended the police actions, suggesting shadow forces have been trying to orchestrate unrest and overthrow the authorities.

The proposed amendments will increase the length of jail sentences for minor administrative offences from 15 to 60 days, and boost fines and detention periods for petty hooliganism, insulting the police and other infractions.

Resisting, threatening and using violence against police officers would incur a prison sentence of five to 10 years.

Announcing the plans on Monday, Mamuka Mdivaradze, a senior Georgian Dream lawmaker, said the government was responding to attempts by "external forces... to destroy and weaken the state and its institutions".

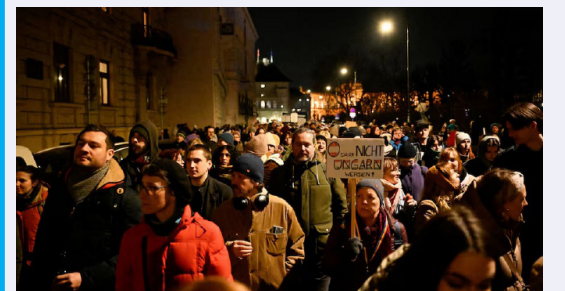
He did not explicitly identify the "external forces" but suggested the U.S. embassy was encouraging the protesters.

"If anyone believes that what is happening on the streets is happening independently of the U.S. Embassy, they know nothing about what is happening on the streets," Mdivaradze was cited as saying by the Interpress news agency.

The U.S. embassy in Tbilisi did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Georgia was traditionally one of Washington's strongest allies in the former Soviet Union, but critics say Georgian Dream is now taking the country in a more authoritarian and pro-Russian direction.

Demonstrations had waned in recent weeks but resumed with force on Sunday when thousands of people briefly blocked a major motorway leading out of the capital.

## Austrian Parties Deny Coalition Talks Have Collapsed



VIENNA (Dispatches) - Austria's far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) and the conservative People's Party (ÖVP) denied on Tuesday their talks on forming a coalition government had collapsed after media reports of a halt, but the ÖVP said they were in a "difficult phase".

The reports by tabloid media Heute and oe24 that the talks had at least temporarily been stopped, and the parties' swift response, illustrated how brittle the negotiations are. Negotiators say several stubborn obstacles remain to a deal that would produce Austria's first FPÖ-led government.

"No, talks have not been broken off. The ÖVP is evidently holding internal deliberations. That is completely normal in negotiations," the eurosceptic, Russia-friendly FPÖ said on social media platform X, calling the reports a "hoax" and adding: "We can continue (the talks) tomorrow."

The FPÖ came first in September's parliamentary election with around 29% of the vote. FPÖ leader Herbert Kickl was tasked last month with forming a government after a centrist attempt to form a ruling coalition without the FPÖ collapsed.

Soon after the FPÖ, the ÖVP issued its own statement saying negotiators were due to continue discussions on Wednesday.

# In Shock announcement, Trump Says U.S. Will Take Over Gaza Strip

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Donald Trump said the U.S. would take over the war-ravaged Gaza Strip and develop it economically after Palestinians are resettled elsewhere, moves that would shatter decades of US policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Trump unveiled his surprise plan, without providing specifics, at a joint press conference on Tuesday with visiting Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The announcement followed Trump's shock proposal earlier on Tuesday for the permanent resettlement of Palestinians from Gaza to neighbouring countries, calling the enclave - where the first phase of a fragile Israel-Hamas ceasefire is in effect - a "demolition site."

Trump can expect allies and foes alike to strongly oppose any US takeover of Gaza. The US taking a direct stake there would run counter to longtime policy in Washington and for much of the international community, which has held that Gaza would be part of a future Palestinian state that includes the occupied West Bank.

"The U.S. will take over the Gaza Strip, and we will do a job with it too," Trump told reporters. "We'll own it and be responsible for dismantling all of the dangerous unexploded bombs and other weapons on the site."

"If it's necessary, we'll do that, we're going to take over that piece, we're going to develop it, create thousands and thousands of jobs, and it'll be something that the entire Middle East can be very proud of," Trump added.

"I do see a long-term ownership position and I see it bringing great stability to that part of the Middle East," he said, adding that he had spoken to regional leaders and they supported the idea.

Asked who would live there, Trump said it could become a home to "the world's people." Trump touted the narrow strip, where Israel's military assault in response to Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, cross-border attack has leveled large swaths, as having the potential to be "The Riviera of the Middle East."

Trump did not directly respond to a question of how and under what authority the US can take over and occupy Gaza, home to around two million people with a long, violent history over control of the coastal strip. Successive US administrations, including Trump in his first term, had avoided deploying US troops there.

Netanyahu, referred to a few times by Trump by his nickname, "Bibi," would not be drawn into discussing the proposal in depth other than to praise Trump for trying a new approach.

The Israeli leader, whose military had engaged in more than a year of fierce fighting with Hamas militants in Gaza, said Trump was "thinking outside the box with fresh ideas" and was "showing willingness to puncture conventional thinking."

Some experts have suggested Trump sometimes takes an extreme position internationally to set the parameters for future



negotiations. In his first term, Trump at times issued what were seen as over-the-top foreign policy pronouncements, many of which he never implemented.

Jonathan Panikoff, former deputy U.S. national intelligence officer for the Near East, said Trump's plan would mean a lengthy US military commitment and if it came to fruition would be viewed by the Arab world as Washington "not learning its lessons from nation building in Iraq and Afghanistan."

Trump earlier repeated his call for Jordan, Egypt and other Arab states to take in Gazans, saying Palestinians there had no alternative but to abandon the coastal strip, which must be rebuilt after nearly 16 months of a devastating war between Israel and Hamas militants.

But this time Trump said he would support resettling Palestinians "permanently," going beyond his previous suggestions that Arab leaders had already steadfastly rejected.

Senior Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri condemned Trump's calls for Gazans to leave as "expulsion from their land."

"We consider them a recipe for generating chaos and tension in the region because the people of Gaza will not allow such plans to pass," he said.

Trump, a Republican, offered no specifics on how a resettlement process could be implemented but his proposal echoed the wishes of Israel's far right and contradicted Democratic former President Joe

Biden's commitment against mass displacement of Palestinians.

The Saudi government, in a statement, stressed its rejection of any attempt to displace Palestinians from their land and said it would not establish relations with Israel without establishment of a Palestinian state.

Just two weeks into his second term, Trump was hosting Netanyahu at the White House to discuss the future of the Gaza ceasefire, strategies to counter Iran and hopes for a renewed push for an Israeli-Saudi normalization deal.

His Gaza proposal followed a frenetic first two weeks in office in which Trump has talked about a U.S. takeover of Greenland, warned of the possible seizure of the Panama Canal and declared that Canada should be the 51st U.S. state.

Some critics have said Trump's expansionist rhetoric echoes old-style imperialism, suggesting it could encourage Russia in its war in Ukraine and give China justification for invading self-ruled Taiwan.

Trump described the Gaza Strip as a longtime "symbol of death and destruction" and said Palestinians there should be housed in "various domains" in other countries. He said the US will take over the Gaza Strip, "level the site" and create economic development but did not say how.

Trump, who had a career of developing real estate before getting into politics, cast a broad-brush, optimistic vision of a U.S. takeover of Gaza while skirting details on how the United States would go about possessing the enclave and securing it.

## Zelensky Ready for Direct Talks With Putin

KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky said in an interview posted Tuesday that he would agree to direct talks with Russia's Vladimir Putin to end almost three years of war.

His comments came amid high anticipation of talks to begin, with Donald Trump -- who has pledged to end the fighting -- back in the White House as the third anniversary of Moscow's invasion approaches.

Asked how he would feel if he sat opposite Putin at a negotiating table, Zelensky said: "If that is the only set-up in which we can bring peace to the citizens of Ukraine and not lose people, definitely we will go for this set-up," adding that he would be with "four participants."

He did not specify who the participants were but Morgan earlier spoke of hypothetical talks between Russia, Ukraine, the EU and the US.

"I will not be kind to him, I consider him an enemy. To be honest, I think he considers me an enemy, too," the Ukrainian leader said.

Putin last week said Moscow would hold talks with Ukraine, but ruled out speaking directly to Zelensky.

Both countries have tried to rush an advantage on the battlefield ahead of possible talks -- which so far remain hypothetical.

Kyiv has struggled to hold back Russian forces and Zelensky conceded that Ukraine is unlikely to get some of the territory it lost to Russia back.

"Regrettably, the support that is provided by our partners is insufficient to



push Putin fully out of our territories," he said.

The EU and Kyiv share some concerns that Trump would force Kyiv to make unfair concessions to Moscow.

Zelensky also repeated that a roadmap for Ukraine to join NATO remains Kyiv's favoured way to end fighting and get "security guarantees".

Meanwhile a Russian strike killed five civilians and wounded 55 on Tuesday in the town of Iziurm in Ukraine's northeastern Kharkiv region, partially destroying the city council building, officials said.

A Russian ballistic missile hit the building in the town's central district, governor Oleh Synyehubov said on Telegram.

Three children were among the injured, who also included many local government and social services workers, he said.

Vitaliya Kliuchanovych told Reuters she was looking for two female relatives, aged 18 and 19, who had gone to collect documents from the passport service. Synyehubov later said both women - one of them pregnant - were among those killed.

Bodies of those killed in the strike lay in black bags on the pavement.

"This brutality cannot be tolerated. Maximum pressure must be applied to Russia -- through military force, sanctions, and diplomacy -- to stop the terror and protect lives," President Volodymyr Zelensky said on X, commenting on the strike.

One section of the recently renovated council building had totally collapsed as a result of the strike, all its windows shattered.

Synyehubov said there were no military facilities in the area. One more administrative building was damaged, as well as residential blocks nearby, he added.

Olena Bespala, an employee in the child protection service, was at work when the attack happened.

"The air raid alert sounded only at the moment of the strike. And then, literally one second later, there was an explosion... (There were) plumes of smoke, and everything was blown away," she said, with her face injuries patched.

Ballistic missiles usually hit targets in Ukrainian regions bordering Russia within just minutes of being detected.

## Gunman Kills Several People in Sweden's Worst Mass Shooting

STOCKHOLM (Dispatches) - Around 10 people were killed on Tuesday in a shooting at an education centre in Sweden, including the suspected gunman, with the Swedish prime minister branding it the "worst mass shooting" in the country's history.

Authorities had initially said that several people were wounded in the violence at Campus Risbergska, a secondary school for young adults in the town of Orebro, but had not reported any fatalities.

School attacks are relatively rare in Sweden, but the country has suffered shootings and bombings linked to gang violence that kill dozens of people each year.

"Around 10 people have been killed today," Orebro police chief Roberto Eid Forest told reporters, adding that police could "not be more specific about the number due to the large number of wounded".

He provided no details about the number of wounded.

"This is the worst mass shooting in Swedish history," Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson told a press conference.

Forest said police were not aware of a motive yet, but believed the gunman had acted alone.

"This is a terrible event. This is exceptional, a nightmare," Forest said.

Police did not disclose any information about the identity or ages of the dead, nor whether they were students or teachers at the school.

Several media reported the suspected gunman turned his gun on himself but police would not confirm those reports.

Kristersson noted a lot of "questions were still unanswered."

"But there will come a time when we will know what happened, how it could happen



and what motives may have been behind it," Kristersson said, urging people not to "speculate".

Forest said police received the first reports of a school shooting at 12:33 pm (1133 GMT), but could not specify how it unfolded.

The attacker is also believed to have carried some form of equipment to create smoke inside the school, he added.

Two Campus Risbergska teachers, Miriam Jarlevald and Patrik Soderman, told newspaper Dagens Nyheter they heard gunfire in a hallway.

"Students came and said someone was shooting. Then we heard more shooting in the hallway. We didn't go out, we hid in our offices," they said.

"There were a lot of gunshots at first and then it was quiet for a half-hour and then it started again. We were lying under our desks, covering."

Some witnesses told Swedish media they heard what they believed to be automatic gunfire.

Swedish television channel TV4 meanwhile reported that police had raided the suspect's home in Orebro late on Tuesday afternoon.

It said the suspect was around 35 years old and had a license to carry a weapon and no criminal record, but did not provide any details about his identity.

Police have not confirmed that information.

A church near the school was open Tuesday evening to provide support to the community.





## Buzelis Leads Bulls Past Heat

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Rookie Matas Buzelis scored a career-best 24 points on 10-for-10 shooting and Josh Giddey added 24 points to lift the host Chicago Bulls to a 133-124 win against the Miami Heat on Tuesday.

Ayo Dosunmu tallied 21 points and nine assists and Coby White had 22 points for Chicago, which outscored Miami 39-21 in the fourth quarter.

Tyler Herro had 23 points, nine assists and eight rebounds for the Heat, while Bam Adebayo contributed 23 points and eight boards. Kel'el Ware notched a double-double of 17 points and 12 rebounds.

Nikola Jovic scored 20 points and Jaime Jaquez Jr. chipped in 14. Giddey's personal 5-0 run tied the game at 114 with 6:17 remaining. Miami temporarily regained control before the Bulls closed the game on a 19-6 run. White's dunk with 2:21 left gave Chicago a five-point lead, and the Bulls led by nine down the stretch while closing the game from the free-throw line.

Chicago shot 52.7 percent and drilled 19 3-pointers in its first game since Sunday's three-team deal that sent leading scorer Zach LaVine to the Sacramento Kings. None of the three players Chicago acquired were in action.

Miami shot 47.8 percent and consistently created distance through the first three quarters with a solid long-range game. The Heat shot 17-for-44 from deep, including a Jovic trey that capped a 7-0 run to close the third quarter after the Bulls pulled within two points.

Nikola Vucevic scored each of his 12 points after halftime for the Bulls while completing a double-double with 10 rebounds. Patrick Williams scored 10 points.

Miami led 70-60 lead at halftime. The Heat raced to a 12-2 lead after just 2:42, punctuating the early run with a Ware alley-oop dunk off a feed from Adebayo.

Miami led by 13 before the break, capitalizing on early struggles from Bulls starters Nikola Vucevic and Lonzo Ball. The duo was a combined 1-for-12 from the floor in the first half, with Vucevic held scoreless with three rebounds.

Chicago has won six of the past eight in the series. The Heat's Jimmy Butler remained suspended for

conduct detrimental to the team.

Meanwhile D'Angelo Russell sank the game-winning 3-pointer with 3.4 seconds remaining as the Brooklyn Nets snapped an 11-game home losing streak with an unlikely 99-97 victory over the Houston Rockets Tuesday night in New York.

The Nets trailed by four with 9.5 seconds left after Dillon Brooks split a pair at the line. Following a clean inbound pass by Tosan Evbuomwan, Keon Johnson sank a 3-pointer over Jae'Sean Tate with 8.1 seconds left.

After Evbuomwan stole Amen Thompson's inbound pass for Brooks, he got the ball near the foul line and tapped it to Russell. Russell spotted up and his open 3 from the left side of the key clearly went in.

Following a timeout, the game ended when Jalen Green missed a desperation 32-foot 3-pointer with four-tenths of a second left.

Russell's 3-pointer gave the Nets their first home win since beating the Indiana Pacers on Dec. 4 and also capped a 3-of-15 showing for the guard.

Russell hit the game-winner after Alperen Sengun nearly willed the Rockets to the victory. Sengun scored 11 points in the final 3:23 and hit two free throws with 18.4 seconds left but Johnson dunked with 10.6 ticks left.

Johnson scored 22 points to lead the Nets, who tied a season high with their third straight victory. Evbuomwan and Nic Claxton added 14 apiece for the Nets, who shot 46.3 percent.

Sengun returned from missing the previous three games with a calf injury and collected 24 and a season-high 20 rebounds but the Rockets dropped their season-high fourth straight. Brooks and rookie Reed Sheppard added 16 apiece for the Rockets, who shot 41 percent.

After the opening half featured 18 lead changes and saw Houston take a 46-44 lead by halftime, Sengun hit a basket for a 57-49 lead with about 7 1/2 minutes left in the third. The Nets scored 14 straight and outscored the Rockets 22-10 the rest of the quarter for a 71-67 edge.

## Doncic Shocked by Trade to Lakers But Excited for New Journey



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Luka Doncic said he was as shocked as anyone by the blockbuster trade over the weekend that brought him to the Los Angeles Lakers but is excited to join forces with LeBron James in a move that could shape the franchise for years to come.

The 25-year-old Slovenian guard and perennial MVP contender admitted he figured he would spend his entire NBA career with the Dallas Mavericks, which made the news of his trade late on Saturday all the more surprising.

"I was almost asleep when I got the call, I had to check (if) it was April 1st. I didn't really believe it at first. It was a big shock. It was hard a moment for me," said Doncic.

"(Dallas) was home so it was a really hard moment for me, especially the first day, but as I said I get to play in the greatest club in the world and I am excited about this new journey."

Doncic, who has not played since Christmas Day because of a calf strain but is considered close to returning, had been with Dallas ever since a draft-night trade with the Atlanta Hawks, who took him with the third overall pick in 2018.

Last year, the five-times All-Star reached the NBA Finals for the first time in his career but the Mavericks lost 4-1 to the Boston Celtics in the best-of-seven championship series.

Now Doncic, who was wildly popular in Dallas, will chase a title alongside the NBA's all-time top scorer in James, who he said was quick to reach out when the trade was announced.

"He called me right away," Doncic said of his new teammate. "We didn't talk much because he said I understand what you are feeling, but that was really nice of him just to call me right away and welcome me to LA."

## Arteta Frustrated as Arsenal Fail to Land Striker in January Transfer Window



LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta has admitted he is "disappointed" by the club's failure to sign a new striker before the transfer window closed on Monday.

Arsenal were unable to lure England forward Ollie Watkins away from Aston Villa after their £60 million (US\$75 million) bid was rejected last week.

Having failed to pivot to another deal after the Watkins snub, the Gunners ended the January window with questions about a forward line weakened by long-term injuries to Gabriel Jesus and Bukayo Saka.

Ahead of Wednesday's League Cup semi-final second leg at Newcastle, Arteta conceded the lack of transfer activity was frustrating.

"We talked very openly about the intention to improve the squad if we had the capacity. With players with injuries, we've been impacted and we haven't achieved it," Arteta told reporters on Tuesday.

"We are disappointed in that sense but as well we are very aware that we only want to bring certain kinds of players.

"We couldn't do it for certain reasons and we have to accept it. It was a combination of things. We have to be very disciplined with that as well."

Arsenal operated in the window without their former sporting director Edu, who resigned in November after playing a key role in their transfer policy.

Edu was a close ally of Arteta but the Spaniard insisted he had no complaints about Arsenal's recruitment process despite their unsuccessful striker hunt.

"When you try your best and do things with the right process, and after you don't achieve it, OK. For sure there are things to learn from it but now we have to move on," he said.

While Arsenal have to cope with an under-strength attack for now, they showed no signs of being affected in Sunday's 5-1 demolition of Manchester City.

German forward Kai Havertz and teenage attacking midfielder Ethan Nwaneri both netted against City and Arteta remains confident in the players at his disposal.

"From now there is no discussion on it and we focus on improving the group we have. It is remarkable what the team has done. I have full faith in them," he said.

"We are going to have to be flexible in the front line. We have to make sure they stay fit, contributing, and can play that position. At some point we will have to try something different."

Arsenal have a mountain to climb at St James' Park on Wednesday after losing the first leg 2-0 at home in January.

Newcastle also beat the Gunners 1-0 in the Premier League in November.

## Alcaraz Needs Three Sets to Win in Rotterdam

ROTTERDAM (Dispatches) - No. 1 seed Carlos Alcaraz of Spain was pushed to three sets before finishing off Dutch wild card Botic van de Zandschulp 7-6 (3), 3-6, 6-1 in the first round of the ABN AMRO Open on Tuesday in Rotterdam, Netherlands.

Alcaraz, the third-ranked player in the world, didn't get control of the match until the third set, when he won 32 of 51 total points. Alcaraz faced break point seven times in the match, saving four, while also converting 4 of 9 opportunities to break his opponent.

It was an easier day for third seed Alex de Minaur of Australia (6-2, 6-4 over Belgium's David Goffin), fourth seed Andrey Rublev of Russia (6-3, 6-4 over China's Zhizhen Zhang) and fifth seed Holger Rune of Denmark (7-6 (4), 6-4 over Italy's Lorenzo Sonego).

Pedro Martinez of Spain and Jiri Lehecka and Jakub Mensik of the Czech Republic also advanced.

Meanwhile no. 3 seed and defending champion Tommy Paul rallied from a set down to beat fellow American Jenson Brooksby 6-7 (6), 6-3, 6-4 in first-round action in Texas.

Paul was down 5-3 in the first set, charged ahead with three straight games, but still fell into a tiebreaker situation with Brooksby and lost a back-and-forth battle. Still, Paul pulled out the victory on the strength of saving 6 of 9 break points and winning 45 of 62 first



serve (72.6 percent).

Great Britain's Cameron Norrie upset No. 7 seed Alex Michelsen 2-6, 7-6 (1), 6-1, saving 11 of 14 break points along the way.

Two other matches were slated for the night session: No. 4 seed Ben Shelton against Australia's Aleksandar Vukic, and No. 2 seed Casper Ruud of Norway against Marcos Giron.

The Estoril Open will rejoin the ATP circuit next year while Metz will no longer conduct a tournament, the governing body of men's tennis said as it announced a 59-event calendar for the 2026 season.

Meanwhile the Estoril tournament, which had been operating under an ATP licence since 2015, was dropped from the calendar for the 2025 season but will now be held as an ATP 250 tournament in July,

a week after the Wimbledon Grand Slam concludes.

In other changes, the Marseille ATP 250 tournament will switch from February to October while the Stockholm ATP 250 event will move from October to November.

The season will feature nine ATP Masters 1000 tournaments, seven of which will be played across 12 days, apart from 16 ATP 500 events and 29 ATP 250 events.

"With premium events in some of the most iconic cities, we're showcasing what makes our sport so special," ATP chairman Andrea Gaudenzi said in a statement on Monday.

"Last season, we saw record-breaking attendance, and we're excited to keep that momentum going into next year."

The season will begin on Jan. 2 with the United Cup, with players enjoying a few more days off.

The \$10 million mixed team tournament, the result of a partnership between Tennis Australia and the ATP and WTA tours, began its third edition in Perth on Dec. 27 last year, just 33 days after the Davis Cup finals had concluded in Spain.

The ATP Finals will be hosted in Turin while the Next Gen ATP Finals will be played in Jeddah for a fourth year.

## Former World No. 1 Halep Announces Retirement

LONDON (Dispatches) - Former world number one and two-time Grand Slam winner Simona Halep announced her retirement from professional tennis on Tuesday after losing in the first round at her home event in Cluj.

Halep, whose career stalled due to a doping ban that was reduced on appeal last year, lost 6-1 6-1 to Italy's Lucia Bronzetti in her first match in 2025 before announcing her decision.

The 33-year-old Romanian had delayed the start of her season due to pain in her knee and shoulder.

"I don't know if it's with sadness or joy, I think I feel both, but I make this decision with my soul at peace, I have always been realistic with myself," Halep told the crowd at the BT Arena.

"My body cannot take as much so as to get back where I once was, it is very difficult to get there and I know what it means to get there. That is why I wanted to come to Cluj today to play before you and to say goodbye on the tennis court.

"Who knows whether I will return but at the moment it is for the last time that I play here. I don't want to cry, it is a beautiful thing, I became world number one, I won Grand Slams, it is everything I ever wanted. Life moves on, there is life after tennis



too."

Halep lost in three Grand Slam finals before finally clinching her first major at the French Open in 2018 and went on to win Wimbledon the following year.

She was provisionally suspended in October 2022 after she tested positive for roxadustat - a banned drug that stimulates the production of red blood cells - at the U.S. Open that year.

She was later banned for four years, a period which was cut to nine months last March following an appeal at the Court of Arbitration for Sport.

"Being away from the court in this period, I realised how hard the last 15 years were, working every day, no matter how you feel, you must push yourself to the max," Halep, who won 24 WTA titles, later told a press conference.

"Perhaps life also means something else. I understood that in this period, and I want to enjoy what I am living now. I have done a lot in tennis. I am at peace, content with what I did, and I feel the time has come to look in another direction."