

Chief of staff of Iran's Armed Forces Condemned the U.S.-Israeli Plan for the Forced Displacement of Gazans, Saying the Only Way to Confront the Israeli "Terrorist" Regime Is Through Unity Among the Countries of the Region

IRAN NEWS

National Iranian Copper Industry Company Said in a Statement That Its Sales Had Reached 1,330 Trillion Rials (the Equivalent of \$1.92b at Rates in a Government-Controlled Market) in April-January, Up 32% From the Previous Same Period

VOL. XXIX, No. 8203 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

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Iran Condemns Trump's Threat to Use Force Against Country



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran has strongly condemned US President Donald Trump's threat to use force against the country, as deeply alarming and irresponsible.

Iran's permanent ambassador to the UN made the remarks in a letter to the UN chief and the president of the Security Council on Tuesday.

Amir Saeid Iravani said Trump's reckless and inflammatory statements flagrantly violate international law and the UN Charter.

"Upon the instructions from my Government, I am writing to draw the Security Council's attention to deeply alarming and irresponsible remarks made by the President of the United States, in which he openly threatened the use of force against the Islamic Republic of Iran," Iravani said.

Trump said he would prefer to make a deal with Iran rather than "bombing the hell out of it," in a media interview published on Saturday. "I would like a deal done with Iran on non-nuclear. I would prefer that to bomb the hell out of it," Trump told the New York Post. "They don't want to die. Nobody wants to die."

In yet another belligerent statement, during an interview with Fox News on Monday, Trump reiterated the same language of war. "I would like to make a deal without bombing them."

Iravani said Trump's "reckless and inflammatory statements flagrantly violate international law and the UN Charter, particularly Article 2(4), which prohibits threats or use of force against sovereign states."

The Iranian diplomat also slammed Trump's so-called maximum pressure policy against Iran as a blatant violation of fundamental principles and norms of international law.

"Such provocation is further compounded by the so-called 'maximum pressure' policy, outlined in the National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM) of 4 February 2025. This policy reinforces unlawful, unilateral coercive measures and escalates hostility against Iran, blatantly violating fundamental principles and norms of international law," he stated.

Iravani called on the Security Council not to remain silent in the face of such brazen rhetoric and condemned it unequivocally.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran firmly rejects and condemns this reckless threat. The UN Security Council must not remain silent in the face of such brazen rhetoric, as normalizing the threat to use force sets a dangerous precedent and must be unequivocally condemned," he said.

Tehran, Riyadh Expanding, Deepening Mutual Cooperation



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's ambassador to Riyadh says the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia have been expanding and deepening their mutual cooperation since they restored their ties two years ago.

Alireza Enayati made the remarks during a ceremony marking the 46th anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution in the Saudi capital which was attended by senior Saudi officials and media figures, as well as diplomats and ambassadors.

"The two countries are carefully moving ahead through developing, deepening, and consolidating bilateral cooperation, and are proceeding with this path, thanks to the special attention of the two countries' officials."

Enayati reiterated Iran's determination to strengthen its cooperation with the neighboring Persian Gulf Arab countries.

After several days of intensive negotiations hosted by China, Iran and Saudi Arabia clinched a deal on March 10, 2023 to restore diplomatic relations after seven years of estrangement.

During the ceremony, the Iranian ambassador also referred to Israel's crimes and condemned the regime's killing of Palestinians.

Enayati urged the world's countries to support the truce deal reached in Gaza and continue pushing for a full ceasefire, amid fears of the breakdown of the agreement.

Leader Hails Nation for Marking Islamic Revolution Anniversary in Style Amid Enemy's Stupid Threats

TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has commended the Iranian nation for relaying its "message of unity" to the international community on the 46th anniversary of the country's historic 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Ayatollah Khamenei made the remarks in Tehran on Wednesday, addressing a gathering of Defense Ministry officials, defense industry elites, the ministry's experts and staff, and families of the martyrs hailing from the country's defense industry.

The Leader described the day marking the Revolution's victory as one of the most significant national events, showcasing the unity and strength of the Iranian people despite relentless external pressures.

Ayatollah Khamenei emphasized that the celebrations on this year's anniversary were not just a commemoration, but a powerful act of resistance and national unity.

"This was a message of unity from the Iranian people. Despite the constant, idiotic threats against us, the people of Iran showed the world their identity, their strength, and their unwavering resolve."

"This year's February 22nd was one of the most outstanding celebrations of the Revolution," the Leader stated.

"It was a people's uprising, a grand national movement. People took to the streets, raised their voices, and shared their views across the media, all over the country. This was a true popular uprising, a major national movement."

Ayatollah Khamenei noted that, "Despite ongoing media bombardments, psychological warfare, and unfounded threats from adversaries against the historic development, the Iranian people stood strong in their commitment to the values of the Revolution with their indication of strong support for the event during this year's marches and jubiliations."



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"Under the relentless propaganda attacks and soft war tactics of the enemy, constantly speaking against the anniversary of February 22nd and those who made it possible, the people showed their unity and resilience," the Leader said.

Ayatollah Khamenei made special reference to the presence of young people in the celebrations, their vibrant energy, which was visible across the country's various cities, not just in Tehran and major urban centers, but in remote towns and villages.

Even in cities where the weather was harsh and conditions unfavorable, millions of Iranians participated, demonstrating their collective will, the Leader remarked.

In a visit to the national nuclear industry exhibition, the Supreme Leader expressed his appreciation for the efforts of scientists, officials, and industry professionals.

"I am truly grateful to the scientists, officials, and those active in this industry for organizing this excellent meeting and outstanding exhibition for us today. It was a very impressive display—encouraging, reassuring, and promising," he stated.

The exhibition showcased key achievements by Iranian nuclear specialists and researchers, particularly in fields that directly impact people's lives. These included advancements in medicine, pharmaceuticals, industry, agriculture and food, energy, water and power plant construction, and geology.

Another highlight of the exhibition was Iranian scientists' success in developing indigenous technology and expertise in the nuclear fuel cycle—a significant step in the country's nuclear industry.

Judiciary Chief Emphasizes Commitment to Combat Societal Corruption

TEHRAN - In a recent address at the twentieth International Conference on the Doctrine of Mahdism, Iranian Judiciary Chief Hojjatoleslam Mohseni Ejei underlined the essential role of promoting moral virtues and fighting against corruption in society. He emphasized that all citizens, especially government officials, are responsible for developing ethical values and preventing the emergence of societal vices.

Speaking in Qom, Ejei congratulated the audience on the auspicious occasion of the birth of Imam Mahdi, stating that the Islamic Revolution, led by the late Imam Khomeini, exemplifies the emergence of the awaited Savior. He praised Khomeini's ability to rally the nation during a time when many thought the collapse of the Shah's regime was impossible, noting how the revolution confounded oppressive regimes.

Ejei highlighted the need for the Islamic Revolution to focus on nurturing a generation capable of upholding the values of Imam Mahdi. He stressed that gaining expertise in modern science and technology is essential for resisting global powers that often misapply technological advancements for destructive purposes. He argued that addressing contemporary economic, security, and social issues necessitates mastery of these new technologies.

To prepare for the expected return of Imam Mahdi (AS), Ejei asserted that it is critical for society to adhere to the rightful leadership, which, according to him, will provide guidance amidst political and propaganda storms. He called for strengthening the jihadist and revolutionary spirit among the populace while expanding human virtues daily.

As the head of the judiciary, Ejei acknowledged his responsibility for enforcing the law and ensuring compliance by all citizens. He declared, "It is my duty to compel others to abide by legal rulings and to refrain from defying the law."

Ejei mentioned the importance of having faith in divine promises, especially as adversaries increase pressures against Iran. He noted the enemy's initial infiltration through deception, but he commended Iran's leadership for recognizing and thwarting conspiracies.

Reflecting on the Islamic Revolution's achievements, Ejei stated that it has made the impossible possible and instilled a belief in the mantra "We can." He expressed confidence that Iran can advance technologically and scientifically, ultimately contributing to the global Muslim community in preparation for the Mahdi's return.

In a poignant part of his speech, Ejei addressed the current situation in Gaza and praised the



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resilience of its inhabitants amid ongoing Israeli aggression. He lauded the "We can" slogan of the Islamic Revolution, which he believed has reverberated throughout the Islamic world, especially in Gaza where, despite severe destruction, residents have resolutely declared their unwillingness to leave their homeland. He also commended Hezbollah in Lebanon, recognizing its strength and commitment to resistance despite sustaining losses.

Ejei also stated that the resistance movement is alive and well. He mentioned that today the enemy (Israel) has not achieved its goals and has failed, and the people of Gaza are returning to their homes.

He added that in Lebanon, they carried out those actions and martyred the commanders, but Hezbollah remains steadfast and will continue its path even stronger and more resolutely.

The head of the judiciary further emphasized that we should be careful not to get ahead of or fall behind the leadership. He stated that if we want to free ourselves from the manipulations, we must align ourselves with the ship of the Imams (Peace be upon them), and the teachings of the Supreme Leader, the dignified jurist, should guide and be our focal point.

Before Ejei's remarks, Hojjatoleslam Ojaghazhad, custodian of the Jamkaran Mosque, conveyed greetings for the celebrations of the Shaban month, especially noting the significance of the Mid-Shaban festival. He elaborated on the conference's objectives, which center around the principles of Mahdism.

Furthermore, Hojjatoleslam Poursaeid Aqae also spoke at the event, asserting that the essence of Mahdism and the culture of waiting is essentially about preparing for the reappearance of Imam Mahdi. He outlined the role of Mahdism as a driving force for the resistance front and the liberation of Jerusalem.

The conference, attended by notable figures including the judiciary chief, the custodian of the Holy Shrine of Lady Fatima Masumeh (AS), and representatives from various governmental and military organizations, concluded by honoring several advocates of Mahdism and those dedicated to its promotion.

This gathering highlighted the Iranian leadership's commitment to nurture a society based on religious values, emphasizing the fight against corruption as both a moral obligation and a religious duty.

OIC Set to Hold Emergency Meeting on Trump's Gaza Plot



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) is to reportedly hold an emergency meeting of its foreign ministers in response to an Iran's diplomatic initiative, to address the US's "plans" for forced displacement of Palestinians from Gaza.

Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi said he had engaged in extensive diplomatic outreach over the recent days, holding discussions with his counterparts from Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Algeria, Turkey, Pakistan, Malaysia, and Gambia, which currently holds the OIC's rotating presidency.

In an official letter to the OIC Secretary General Houssein Ibrahim Taha, the top diplomat said he had outlined the urgency of convening the meeting to discuss and counter colonial efforts to forcibly relocate the Gaza Strip's Palestinian population.

Iran's proposal has garnered widespread support from the OIC member states, and the meeting is expected to take place in a few days' time, an IRNA correspondent reported on Wednesday citing an informed source at the Iranian Foreign Ministry.

The Islamic Republic's initiative follows US President Donald Trump and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu's either announcing or advocating for forced exodus of Gazans to countries such as Egypt, Jordan, and even Saudi Arabia.

Tehran has urged unity among Muslim nations and a collective stance against such measures.

"The forced displacement 'plan' is a continuation of colonial efforts to erase Palestine," Araqchi warned, emphasizing the need for immediate and decisive international action.

He further condemned "a blatant attempt to normalize genocide and lawlessness by the occupying regime."

The official also denounced recent statements by the Israeli prime minister, who suggested "establishment of a Palestinian state within Saudi territory."

Araqchi called these remarks "an unprecedented display of aggression by the occupying regime and a serious threat to regional peace and security."

Gov't Fully Supports Artificial Intelligence



TEHRAN - Iran's First Vice President on Tuesday emphasized that the country is fully in support of artificial intelligence (AI), highlighting the significant progress made in the development of this technology during the current administration's term.

Speaking at a meeting on AI with relevant officials, including the Minister of Communications and Information Technology, the Head of the Government Secretariat, and the Head of the Administration and Employment Organization, Mohammad Reza Aref said that "the current government is fully committed to explaining, promoting, and developing AI."

He noted that the previous government faced significant challenges in adopting AI technology, but thanks to the wise leadership of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the subsequent adoption of a comprehensive plan, Iran has made significant progress in this field.

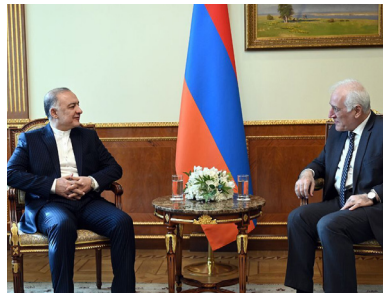
Aref emphasized that AI is a necessity that will soon permeate all aspects of life for both individuals and governments, and that in the future, no part of society will be immune to the impact of AI.

The First Vice President praised the efforts of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, the Scientific and Technological Vice Presidency, and the Economic Development Organization to promote AI, and highlighted the importance of establishing a strong AI leadership council, which has now been formed.

He stressed that the success of the country in the field of AI depends on the consensus of all relevant institutions, and that a strong and active organization in the field of AI affairs must be established, with a clear responsibility and accountability mechanism.

In his opening remarks, Aref expressed gratitude to the Iranian people for their enthusiastic participation in the Revolution Day celebrations, which he said highlights the resilience and dedication of the Iranian nation.

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Yerevan Thanks Iran for Supporting Armenia's Territorial Integrity

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The President of the Republic of Armenia, Vahagn Khachaturyan, has expressed gratitude to Iran for its steadfast support of Armenia's territorial integrity.

Khachaturyan made the remarks during the meeting of Iran's Ambassador in Yerevan, Mehdi Sobhani, noting that the Islamic revolution in Iran empowered the Iranian people to overcome the challenges it is facing.

Referring to the long-standing ties between the two nations, Khachaturyan also praised the Islamic Republic's decisive stance on regional developments and its support for Armenia's territorial integrity.

During the meeting, both sides discussed a wide range of issues related to the development of bilateral relations. They also emphasized the importance of continuously expanding cooperation and partnership in the fields of economy, culture, and transportation.

Future of Iran's Gas Exports to Iraq in Question



TEHRAN - In an interview with ILNA, the spokesperson for the Union of Exporters of Oil, Gas, and Petrochemical Products discussed the current situation regarding Iran's gas exports to Iraq amid recent news of changes in U.S. sanctions.

Seyyed Hamid Hosseini stated, "I believe the Iraqi government will negotiate and offer concessions to the U.S., extending their exemption quietly."

Responding to reports about the U.S. cancelling Iraq's exemption for buying gas from Iran, Hosseini clarified that this does not mean Iraq cannot receive gas from Iran. He noted, "The reality is that the receipt of gas and electricity is not included in the sanctions. The exemption was intended to allow Iraq to pay Iran for gas, and that exemption has presumably been lifted now."

Hosseini emphasized that whether Iran continues its gas exports depends on decisions made by the Iranian government, particularly in light of the U.S. lifting the exemption for payments. He expressed that Iran is bound by existing contracts to export gas to Iraq, but currently lacks surplus gas to meet the annual demand of 20 billion cubic meters.

He pointed out the significant dependency of Iraq on Iranian gas, highlighting that Iraq recently reported losing 8,000 megawatts of electricity generation due to reduced gas supplies from Iran, leading them to burn high-sulfur diesel or heavy fuel oil, which has significantly increased air pollution in the country.

Hosseini also referenced statements from Iraq's Prime Minister, Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, indicating that Iraq will continue to need Iranian gas until 2028.

He suggested that Iraq would negotiate with the U.S. for a discreet extension of its exemption from sanctions.

Regarding a trilateral gas agreement between Iran, Iraq, and Turkmenistan that was intended to pass through Iran, Hosseini explained that while the agreement was signed, it has not been realized due to difficulties in payment conditions set by Turkmenistan.

Opportunities for Business and International Cooperation in Tourism



TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization has emphasized the significant economic and cultural impact of tourism, stating that foreign currency brought in by international tourists plays a vital role in ensuring a country's economic development.

Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi made these remarks on Tuesday during the inauguration of the 18th Tehran International Tourism and Related Industries Exhibition. He highlighted that this annual event is one of the most important gatherings in Iran's tourism sector.

Dehnavi, who also serves as the Deputy Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade, noted that tourism not only contributes to economic growth but also plays a key role in cultural exchange and employment creation. "Foreign tourists help open up new employment and business opportunities in different regions," he said.

He further explained that tourism fosters a deeper understanding of a country's cultural and historical heritage among other nations, which in turn has a positive impact on diplomatic relations.

Dehnavi emphasized that the Tehran International Tourism and Related Industries Exhibition has grown over the years to become one of the most prestigious regional trade fairs. Held annually at the Tehran International Permanent Fairground, the event attracts significant participation from both domestic and international companies.

Recognized as Iran's only official exhibition dedicated to the tourism sector, the event is also registered in the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) calendar. Participant information from the exhibition is recorded as part of the UNWTO's official industry records.

"The exhibition serves as a strategic platform to showcase Iran's tourism potential and capabilities," Dehnavi said. "It allows industry players to exchange ideas, introduce their products and services, and explore new business collaborations."

The primary goal of the exhibition is to promote tourism culture and introduce Iran's attractions to both domestic and international visitors. In addition, the event aims to create business opportunities and foster international cooperation within the tourism and related industries.

Industry professionals attending the exhibition have the chance to share experiences, exchange information, and establish direct connections with potential partners. The event is also structured around regional and specialized themes, facilitating targeted networking and collaboration.

Iran Positioned as a Safe Investment Hub for European Investors

TEHRAN - Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, has emphasized that Iran is a secure region for investment by European entities, particularly in the tourism sector. He asserted that the Iranian government is actively supporting foreign investors looking to engage with the country's burgeoning tourism industry.

This statement was made on Tuesday, during a meeting held on the sidelines of the 18th International Tourism Exhibition in Tehran with Antonio Sanchez Bedito Gaspar, the Spanish Ambassador to Iran. The minister highlighted the significant opportunities for investment in Iran's cultural heritage and tourism sectors, presenting Iran as a nation rich in historical and cultural assets ready for extensive collaboration with Spain.

Salehi Amiri reiterated the importance of developing cultural and economic relations between Iran and Spain, noting that cities like Isfahan and Barcelona share a sister city relationship. He expressed his belief that this partnership could serve as a valuable bridge for expanding tourism and cultural cooperation between the two nations.

In his remarks, he invited Ambassador Gaspar to visit various tourism attractions across Iran, pointing out the country's diverse and unique attractions. For instance, Isfahan and Kerman are considered major tourist destinations. Recently, the inauguration of a large tourism complex in Kerman, attended by the Iranian President, underscored the government's commitment to enhancing the country's tourism infrastructure.

The minister also addressed the issue of negative media portrayals of Iran, which have contributed to a climate of fear regarding travel to the country. He lamented the prevalence of "Iranophobia" in some foreign media spheres, asserting that these misrepresentations do not reflect the reality of Iran being a safe and receptive destination for both tourists and investors.

Ambassador Gaspar welcomed the discussion on expanding cultural and tourism cooperation and emphasized the importance of increasing interactions between the two countries in these sectors. His engagement signals Spain's interest in fostering closer ties with Iran, particularly in promoting cultural exchanges that can benefit both nations.

Prominent figures from both the government and private sectors were present during this meeting, including Anoushiravan Mohseni Bandpay, Deputy Tourism Minister; Maryam Jalali, Deputy for Handicrafts; Ali Asghar Shalbfanian, Head of the Investment Center; and various other officials.

Overall, the Iranian government appears to be on a mission to counter negative stereotypes while simultaneously promoting the country as a



member countries are significant, and they can play an active role in the tourism industry. We are ready to host the ECO Tourism Ministers' Conference in Tehran next year and are even prepared to sign a memorandum of understanding in this regard."

Referring to Iran's previous collaborations with ECO in tourism, he added: "Iran boasts over 40,000 nationally registered sites, 28 tangible UNESCO World Heritage Sites, and 26 intangible UNESCO heritage sites, showcasing unparalleled potential in the domain of civilization and tourism. These collaborations should be expanded more than ever."

The Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts emphasized the importance of strengthening relationships among nations stating, "While communication between governments is an unavoidable necessity, communication among nations is even more important. We must identify necessary solutions and take effective steps in strengthening relations by showcasing the potentials of Iran and the ECO member countries."

The Secretary-General of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) also expressed gratitude to Iran for hosting the Tehran International Tourism Exhibition, stating, "ECO member countries share many cultural similarities, and we must leverage this capacity for tourism development."

Asad Majid Khan pointed out the priorities of the ECO organization in the areas of trade, transportation, and tourism, asserting, "Neglecting communication between nations will seriously hinder the realization of ECO's goals. We regard Iran as the tourism capital of ECO member countries and consider the Tehran International Tourism Exhibition a significant and world-class event."

The ECO Secretary-General also stressed the necessity of enhancing tourism cooperation between Iran and the member countries, adding, "One of the most important solutions to facilitate these collaborations is the cancellation or easing of visa issuance between Iran and ECO member countries, which could significantly impact regional tourism."

Tehran and Moscow Capable of Tackling New Challenges

TEHRAN - The head of the Russian side of the Russia-Iran Intergovernmental Joint Economic Commission stated that in the rapidly changing geopolitical landscape, Tehran and Moscow stand together, ready to address new challenges and threats.

Sergey Sivilov made these remarks on Monday, during a ceremony attended by a significant number of Russian officials, diplomats, and military attachés in Moscow to mark Iran's National Day. He emphasized that the victory of the Islamic Revolution on February 11, 1979, was one of the most significant events of the 20th century, later becoming Iran's primary national celebration.

Addressing the Iranian ambassador and diplomats at the event, Sivilov extended his congratulations on the National Day of the Islamic Revolution and wished Iran continued progress and prosperity.

Sivilov highlighted that the Islamic Revolution initiated a new era of transformation, granting Iran momentum as an independent and sovereign nation. He emphasized the historically strong ties between Russia and Iran, rooted in strategic partnership and shared perspectives.

The Russian energy minister stressed that bilateral economic and trade cooperation between the two nations is progressing within a legal and regulatory framework. He noted that several key projects in the energy and transportation sectors are actively being implemented and expanded.

Sivilov pointed out that the two countries' leaders play a central role in maintaining constructive and regular communication between governments, ministries, and various organizations to enhance collaboration.

One of the key milestones in Iran-Russia relations, according to Sivilov, was the signing of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran in January 2025. He described this agreement as a significant step forward in strengthening bilateral cooperation.

As the head of the Russian side of the Joint Economic Cooperation Commission, Sivilov highlighted the mutual



determination of Iran and Russia to implement major infrastructure projects. These include agreements in the energy sector, fuel supply, energy security, and technological independence for both nations.

He acknowledged the challenges posed by sanctions imposed by unfriendly countries and reaffirmed his commitment to increasing trade and economic exchanges with Iran. Sivilov praised the efforts of his Iranian counterpart, Oil Minister Mr. Paknejad, in fostering economic cooperation.

The Russian official stated that increasing the volume of bilateral trade is a top priority, especially following the signing of a full-scale free trade agreement between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union in December 2023 (signed in Saint Petersburg).

Sivilov expressed optimism that the upcoming 18th session of the Russia-Iran Intergovernmental Joint Commission, set to be held in Moscow soon, will result in new agreements for the execution of current and future projects, further strengthening ties between the two nations.

He also extended his gratitude to Iranian officials for their constructive cooperation and dedication to achieving tangible results.

The 46th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution and Iran's National Day was celebrated in Moscow on Monday, February 12, 2025, with speeches from Sergey Sivilov, Iran's ambassador to Moscow Kazem Jalali, and other notable Russian figures.

Among the attendees were Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Rudenko, prominent philosopher Alexander Dugin, Russia's Attorney General, ambassadors, diplomats, and military attachés from various countries.

On the sidelines of the event, an exhibition showcasing Iran's scientific and technological achievements drew significant attention. The ceremony also featured traditional Iranian handicrafts, live Santur music performances, and a book exhibition by Sadra Publications, offering a visual narrative of the Islamic Revolution.

Afghanistan Begins Cotton Exports to Iran



TEHRAN - The President of the Iran-Afghanistan Joint Chamber of Commerce has announced that Afghanistan has started exporting cotton to Iran. However, he also stated that the implementation of a preferential trade agreement between the two countries remains unlikely in the near future, as Afghanistan depends on customs revenues and is unwilling to reduce them.

In an interview with ILNA, Mahmoud Siyyadat provided insights into the current state of trade between Iran and Afghanistan. He noted that there are significant discrepancies between the trade volume and value figures reported by the customs authorities of both countries. Despite this, Iran's exports to Afghanistan have increased by 30% compared to the previous year.

Siyyadat confirmed that Afghanistan has begun exporting cotton to Iran, following the removal of regulatory barriers. Previously, restrictions imposed by the Plant Protection Organization had hindered the import of Afghan cotton, but with these obstacles now resolved, imports have surged significantly.

Regarding other goods traded between the two nations, Siyyadat highlighted that Afghanistan exports orchard products, livestock, dried fruits, construction stones, and raw minerals—particularly zinc and lead ore—to Iran. However, Kabul has recently imposed restrictions on mineral exports. Iran is also working to facilitate the import of Afghan livestock, while Afghanistan welcomes Iranian investment in domestic animal husbandry for export purposes.

Discussing border trade, Siyyadat noted that the Mahirood border crossing has seen a substantial increase in exports and transit compared to last year. However, he emphasized that the lack of unified management at border checkpoints, combined with inconsistent policies among regulatory agencies, has caused delays in cargo transportation. These logistical hurdles could pose serious challenges to bilateral trade.

He also pointed out infrastructure issues at key border points, mentioning that construction of a second bridge at Milak has been stalled for years. Meanwhile, the paving of roads at the Mahirood border remains incomplete, and the X-ray scanning system is currently only operational at the Dogharoon terminal.

Regarding the possibility of preferential trade between the two countries, Siyyadat reiterated that Afghanistan is unlikely to agree to such an arrangement in the near future due to its reliance on customs revenue. Kabul continues to impose tariffs to protect its domestic industries, making the implementation of a preferential trade system unfeasible at present.

Afghan Brokers Enter Iran's Saffron Market



TEHRAN - A board member of Iran's Saffron Export Development Fund has raised concerns about the growing presence of Afghan brokers in Iran's saffron market, which has led to a significant portion of saffron leaving the country without being recorded in official export statistics. This has resulted in Iran's share of the global saffron trade being far below its production potential.

Speaking at a press conference, Mohammadreza Ardikhani emphasized that Iran, which has a 3,000-year history of saffron cultivation and produces 90% of the world's supply, should have a dominant share in the global saffron market. However, he noted that much of Iran's saffron is either sold as raw material or smuggled out of the country.

Ardikhani described saffron as a luxury product, explaining that foreign buyers, particularly from Afghanistan and India, purchase large quantities—ranging from 200 kilograms to a ton—directly from producers and markets in Mashhad at low prices before exporting it openly.

The official noted that a significant portion of Iran's saffron is exported in bulk and without added value, while another portion is smuggled out of the country via trucks, containers, or individuals using rented commercial export permits.

He pointed to Afghanistan's saffron production and export statistics as evidence of this issue. While Afghanistan produces only 20 tons of saffron annually, its reported exports reach 90 tons. This indicates that at least 70 tons of saffron smuggled into Afghanistan actually originates from Iran, allowing Afghan traders to re-export it at higher profits.

Russia Offers India Its Most Advanced Su-57 Stealth Fighter Jet

BENGALURU (Dispatches) - Russia has offered to make its fifth-generation stealth fighter jet Sukhoi Su-57 in India for the Indian Air Force, a Russian and an Indian official said on Tuesday, as Moscow looks to boost defense ties with New Delhi.

Russia has for decades been the main weapons supplier to India, the world's biggest arms importer, and its fighter jets are part of India's military fleet. But Moscow's ability in recent years to export has been hobbled by the war in Ukraine, making New Delhi look westward.

A spokesperson for Russian state arms exporter Rosoboronexport told reporters the fighter jet could go into production as early as this year if the Indian government accepts its offer.

India's defense ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.



Ukraine Prepared to Swap Russian Territory in Peace Negotiations



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine will offer to swap territory with Russia in any potential peace negotiations, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in an interview published Tuesday, adding that Europe alone would not be able to shoulder Kyiv's war effort.

Zelenskyy will meet US Vice President JD Vance on Friday at the Munich Security Conference, the Ukrainian leader's spokesman told AFP, as Washington pushes for an end to the nearly three-year war with Russia.

Vance has been a frequent critic of US support that has been vital to Ukraine's war effort.

"There are voices which say that Europe could offer security guarantees without the Americans, and I always say no," Zelenskyy told the Guardian newspaper in an interview published on the UK newspaper's website on Tuesday.

"Security guarantees without America are not real security guarantees," he said.

Trump is keen for both sides to reach a deal, the terms of which are a source of concern in Ukraine.

Zelenskyy told the Guardian he would offer Russian President Vladimir Putin territory that Ukraine seized in Russia's Kursk region six months ago.

"We will swap one territory for another," he said, adding that he did not know which territories he would ask for in return.

"I don't know, we will see. But all our territories are important, there is no priority," he said.

Russia says it has annexed five regions of Ukraine - Crimea in 2014 and then Donetsk, Kherson, Lugansk and Zaporizhzhia in 2022 - though it does not have full control over them.

Trump confirmed Monday that he would soon dispatch his special envoy Keith Kellogg, who is tasked with drawing up a proposal to halt the fighting, to Ukraine.

The US president is pressing for a swift end to the conflict, while Zelenskyy is calling for tough security guarantees from Washington as part of any deal.

WHO Faces New Funding Realities as USAID Withdrawal Looms



GENEVA (Dispatches) - The World Health Organization wrapped up its executive board meeting, held against the backdrop of the United States - by far its largest donor - heading for the exit.

The agenda-setting eight-day gathering at the WHO's Geneva headquarters wrestled with the impact of US President Donald Trump's January 20 decision to start the one-year process of withdrawing from the UN health agency.

"We are operating with twin strategic goals: to mobilize resources and to tighten our belts," WHO chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said in his closing remarks.

"We regret the announcement by the United States of its intention to withdraw, and it was also sad to see them participating less this week," he said.

"I think we all felt their absence. We very much hope they will reconsider and we would welcome the opportunity to engage in constructive dialogue."

The United States is on the executive board, but made only fleeting contributions throughout the eight-day event.

The board is composed of 34 member states, who nominate a board member who is technically qualified in health.

The board agrees the agenda and resolutions for the decision-making World Health Assembly in May.

"We have had to face new realities, with the announcement of the withdrawal of the US from the WHO," said Barbados's health minister Jerome Walcott, the board's chair, as he closed the meeting.

"Despite the many challenges we faced, we have come together and found agreement on 40 decisions and seven resolutions, which aim to strengthen our work and to enhance good public health."

If anything, the US move has driven home the need for more secure and reliable funding at WHO, which in recent years has relied heavily on voluntary contributions.

As part of a plan to swell membership fees to cover at least half of the organisation's budget by 2030, the board recommended a 20 percent fee hike.

Boosting membership fees is seen as a way for WHO to reduce its reliance on a handful of major donors and ensure more predictable and flexible finances.

"This is a very strong signal of your support, and it's a major step towards putting WHO on a more predictable and sustainable financial footing," Tedros said.

"You said we need to prioritise based on realistic funding. We agree," he added.

"You said we need to improve efficiency, enhance oversight and reduce unnecessary expenditures. We agree."

Last week, the board also re-adopted a resolution on responding to the health conditions in the Palestinian territories.

The total planned costs required to implement the decision were given as US\$648 million, including US\$275 million for emergency response and US\$265 million for early recovery and rehabilitation.

Other topics discussed by the board included non-communicable diseases, mental health, skin diseases, environmental health, air pollution, the global health workforce, substandard and falsified medicines, maternal and newborn health, health emergencies, and universal health coverage.

M23 Rebels Threaten to Advance on Bukavu as Fighting Flares



BUKAVU (Dispatches) - The Rwandan-backed M23 armed group in Democratic Republic of Congo threatened on Tuesday to advance on the provincial capital of Bukavu, citing a "dangerously deteriorating" situation, as Congo rejected a call for direct talks with the rebels.

The capture of Bukavu would represent an unprecedented expansion of territory under the M23's control and deal a further blow to Kinshasa's authority in eastern Congo in the wake of the fall of Goma, the region's largest city, at the end of January.

Further fighting in the South Kivu province would also add to fears of a broader war due to the presence of Burundian troops, backing up Congo, and reports of more Rwandan troops gathering at the border to support the M23.

The M23 had paused their march towards Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu province, after declaring a unilateral ceasefire that was followed by calls for an immediate and unconditional ceasefire from regional leaders.

The regional leaders also called for direct talks between President Felix Tshisekedi's government and the M23 rebels.

Trump Insists U.S. to Own Gaza, Jordan King Pushes Back

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Donald Trump doubled down on his idea of exiling Palestinians and placing a rebuilt Gaza under "U.S. authority," but faced pushback from visiting Jordanian King Abdullah II.

"I reiterated Jordan's steadfast position against the displacement of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. This is the unified Arab position. Rebuilding Gaza without displacing the Palestinians and addressing the dire humanitarian situation should be the priority for all," Abdullah said on social media after the talks.

However, he told Trump that Egypt was working on a plan for how countries in the region could "work" with Trump on his shock proposal.

The Jordanian monarch also appeared to offer a sweetener to Trump, who the day before the visit floated the possibility of halting US aid to Jordan if it did not take in refugees.

"One of the things that we can do right away is take 2,000 children, cancer children who are in a very ill state. That is possible," Abdullah said as Trump welcomed him and Crown Prince Hussein in the Oval Office.

Trump replied that it was "really a beautiful gesture" and said he didn't know about it before the Jordanian monarch's arrival at the White House.

The U.S. leader stunned the world when he announced a proposal last week for the United States to "take over" Gaza, envisioning rebuilding the devastated territory into the "Riviera of the Middle East" - but only after resettling Palestinians elsewhere, with no plan for them ever to return.

Abdullah urged patience and said that Egypt was coming up with a response and that Arab nations would then discuss it at talks in Riyadh.

"Let's wait until the Egyptians can come and present it to the president and



not get ahead of ourselves," Abdullah said.

Trump retreated from his previous talk of an aid halt to Jordan and Egypt, saying: "I don't have to threaten that. I do believe we're above that."

The Egyptian foreign ministry later said it plans to "present a comprehensive vision for the reconstruction" of the Gaza Strip that ensures Palestinians remain on their land.

It said Egypt "hopes to cooperate" with Trump's administration on the matter, with the goal of "reaching a fair settlement of the Palestinian cause".

Trump, however, kept pushing his plan to "own" Gaza and place it under "US authority," despite the fact that it is home to more than two million Palestinians who want their own sovereign state.

"We don't have to buy. We're going to have Gaza," Trump said.

"We're going to take it, we're going to hold it, we're going to cherish it."

But Trump, who made his fortune as a real estate tycoon did however deny that he would seek to personally develop property in Gaza. "No. I've had a great career in real estate," he said.

The meeting came as the Gaza ceasefire appears increasingly fragile, after Trump warned on Monday that "all hell" would break out if Hamas fails to release all hostages by Saturday.

Trump said he doubted that the Palestinian militant group would abide by the ultimatum -- but played down the risk of a longer threat to efforts to create a lasting peace between Israel and Hamas.

"It's not going to take a long time," Trump said. "A bully is the weakest person, and they're bullies. Hamas is bullies."

King Abdullah is a key U.S. ally but last week rejected "any attempts" to take control of the Palestinian territories and displace its people.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who is expected to visit the White House later this week, urged on Tuesday the reconstruction of Gaza "without displacing Palestinians."

Analysts say the issue is an existential one for Jordan in particular.

Half of Jordan's population of 11 million is of Palestinian origin, and since the establishment of Israel in 1948, many Palestinians have sought refuge there.

But Jordan is also keenly aware of the economic pressure Trump could exercise. Every year, Jordan receives around US\$750 million in economic assistance from Washington and another US\$350 million in military aid.

On social media after the Trump talks, Abdullah stressed that his "foremost commitment is to Jordan, to its stability and to the well-being of Jordanians."

Russia Frees American Prisoner as Trump Envoy Sees Goodwill Over Ukraine

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia freed an American prisoner after the first-known visit by a member of President Donald Trump's administration to Russia, in a deal the White House called a positive sign for ending the Ukraine war.

The White House said Trump secured the release of Marc Fogel, an American jailed since 2021 on drug charges, as part of an "exchange," without offering further details.

Steve Witkoff, a property developer and friend of Trump who serves as his Middle East envoy, held talks and was "leaving Russian airspace" with Fogel, the White House said.

The US envoy in charge of hostages, Adam Bohler, later posted a picture of Fogel that appeared to show him savoring a stiff drink on a jet home, his other hand clasping both his passport and a plate of food.

"President Trump, Steve Witkoff and the President's advisors negotiated an exchange that serves as a show of good faith from the Russians and a sign we are moving in the right direction to end the brutal and terrible war in Ukraine," US National Security Advisor Mike Waltz said in a statement.

There was no immediate comment from Russia, where state-run news agencies quoted the White House announcement.

Russia's Supreme Court in December refused to consider an appeal Fogel made against his 14-year sentence.

Witkoff, who earlier played a key role in pushing forward a fragile Israel-Hamas ceasefire, would be the first senior US official known to have traveled to Russia in recent years.

Former president Joe Biden shut off most contact, although intelligence chiefs and



others still met quietly in third countries, after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022.

The announcement on Fogel came hours after Trump announced a visit to Ukraine by Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent -- another official in his cabinet on a mission unrelated to his primary job.

Bessent will meet Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who is also seeing US Vice President JD Vance on Friday at the Munich Security Conference.

Trump took office vowing to end the war in Ukraine, possibly by leveraging billions of dollars in US assistance sent by Biden, to force Kyiv into territorial concessions.

Trump in a Fox News interview aired Monday floated that Ukraine "may be Russian someday," words quickly welcomed by Moscow.

"The fact that a significant part of Ukraine wants to become Russia, and has already, is a fact," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, referring to Moscow's 2022 annexation of four Ukrainian regions after referendums widely criticized internationally as fraudulent.

Ukrainians reacted with scorn to Trump's remarks, with some questioning the Republican mogul's grasp of the situation.

"It is some kind of senile insanity," Kyiv resident Daniil told AFP.

A Ukrainian soldier on a street in central Kyiv, who only gave the name Mykola, said of Trump: "He can think anything and say anything, but Ukraine will never be Russia."

Trump in the past has voiced admiration for Putin and notoriously backed his denial of the US intelligence community's finding of Russian interference in the Republican's 2016 election victory.



Real Madrid Fight Back to Defeat Man City

LONDON (Dispatches) - Jude Bellingham scored the winner in stoppage time as Real Madrid twice came from behind to inflict more misery on Manchester City with a 3-2 Champions League play-off, first leg win at the Etihad on Tuesday.

Erling Haaland twice put City in front with his first goals in five games against Madrid. But the holders hit back through Kylian Mbappe and Brahim Diaz before Bellingham stroked home in the 92nd minute on his return to England.

City now have a monumental task ahead to progress to the last 16 when the sides meet again in the Spanish capital on February 19.

The clubs were meeting for the fourth consecutive season in the Champions League, with the winners in each of the previous three years going on to lift the trophy.

If that familiarity did not breed enough contempt, Madrid's decision to boycott City midfielder Rodri's crowning as Ballon d'Or winner last year added extra animosity.

The midfielder was rewarded for his role in Spain's Euro 2024 triumph and a fourth consecutive Premier League title.

However, the Spanish giants took umbrage at Vinicius Junior being overlooked for the prize and pulled out all of their representatives from the ceremony in October.

A huge banner before kick-off showed Rodri with the Ballon d'Or trophy alongside the lyric "Stop crying your heart out" from City-supporting band Oasis.

Rodri's absence since September with a season-ending knee injury has played a major role in City's decline this season as the English champions sit 15 points off the pace in the Premier League.

In recent years Madrid have been pegged back on the ropes at the Etihad, twice conceding four times in three visits.

This time the visitors had a series of early chances to sow more doubt in City minds.

Vinicius' every touch was booed and the home fans were delighted when he had a penalty ruled out for straying offside before he was wiped out by Ederson.

The City goalkeeper then made a vital save from Mbappe and Nathan Ake deflected Ferland Mendy's shot wide with the goal gaping.

Pep Guardiola's men hit the visitors with a sucker punch on 19 minutes thanks to a brilliant team goal. Jack Grealish's dinked cross was chested down by Josko Gvardiol into Haaland's path, who stayed millimetres outside before stroking home his 26th goal of the season.

Real came roaring back as Vinicius' effort came back off the bar.

City also hit the woodwork through Manuel Akanji and Thibaut Courtois was forced into a spectacular save from Phil Foden.

Haaland remained a constant threat to Madrid's injury-ravaged defence.

Ancelotti was forced to name midfielders Federico Valverde and Aurelien Tchouameni in his backline alongside the inexperienced Raul Asencio.

Haaland's deflected effort that came back off the crossbar seconds into the second half proved a turning point as Madrid again took control.

Bellingham headed wide and Ederson denied Mbappe as the pressure built before it finally told on the hour mark.

Mbappe's finish was far from his cleanest but his mishit from Dani Ceballos' cross deceived Ederson and looped into the net.

Madrid smelt blood and went for the kill. Valverde drilled inches wide before Bellingham should have scored when he shot low into the legs of Ederson.

But it was City who got the third goal when Foden was brought down by Ceballos as he weaved a way into the penalty area and French referee Clement Turpin pointed to the spot.

Haaland sent Courtois the wrong way for his 49th goal in 48 Champions League appearances.

Yet, by full-time the Norwegian was a disconsolate figure as City's poor campaign took another turn for the worse.

Shiffrin Ties Record at Worlds With 15th Medal, Eighth Gold



SAALBACH (Dispatches) - U.S. ski great Mikaela Shiffrin won a record-equalling 15th career world championships medal when she and downhill champion Breezy Johnson struck gold in the new women's team combined event on Tuesday.

The gold was the eighth at a world championships for Shiffrin, the most successful World Cup skier of all time, and Johnson's second after winning last Saturday's speed race on Saalbach's Ulli Maier piste.

Shiffrin, who was skiing her first event at the Austrian resort after making a comeback from an injury sustained in November, has now taken gold at the last seven world championships.

German skier Christl Cranz won 15 medals, all of them individual, between 1934-39 when the championships were held annually but Shiffrin stands alone in the modern era.

"If we keep adding team events maybe we can get, I don't know, 32 for her or something," joked Johnson, who had set the fourth fastest downhill time before Shiffrin was third quickest in the slalom.

"She's such a legend. It's super-cool to be hitting my stride and she's just obviously been on hers for a decade or more."

"She said it was nerve-racking but it's super nerve-racking being Mikaela's team mate. Nobody thinks she's going to be one that lets the team down."

Switzerland's Lara Gut-Behrami and Wendy Holdener took silver, 0.39 of a second slower, with Austria's Stephanie Venier and Katharina Truppe the bronze medalists.

The team combined, with each nation able to enter up to four pairs, was being held at a world championships for the first time and will feature at next year's Milan-Cortina Olympics. The men's event is today.

Karl-Anthony Towns, Knicks Trounce Pacers

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Karl-Anthony Towns notched 40 points and 12 rebounds, Josh Hart scored a season-high 30 points, and the New York Knicks beat the Indiana Pacers 128-115 on Tuesday night in Indianapolis.

Miles McBride added 15 points off the bench for New York and Landry Shamet added 11 as the Knicks secured the season series against the Pacers (2-1), and won for the eighth time in their past 10 games.

Pascal Siakam led Indiana with 24 points, Benedict Mathurin scored 18 off the bench, and Thomas Bryant added 18 points and nine rebounds.

New York used a 15-3 run late in the first half to move ahead 61-50 before eventually handing Indiana its third loss in four games.

Pistons 132, Bulls 92: Reserve Malik Beasley scored 24 points and Cade Cunningham added 20 points and seven assists as visiting Detroit demolished Chicago.

Tobias Harris (18 points), Ausar Thompson (16), Isaiah Stewart (14) and Marcus Sasser (14) also scored in double figures for the Pistons, who shot 53.1 percent and led by 49 as they won for the third straight game.

Rookie Matas Buzelis led Chicago with 12 points, scoring in double figures for the seventh straight game. The Bulls have lost



three games in a row.

Raptors 106, 76ers 103: Scottie Barnes collected 33 points and 10 rebounds and Immanuel Quickley added 23 points, lifting the visiting Toronto Raptors to a 106-103 victory over the Philadelphia 76ers on Tuesday.

Barnes made 10 of 16 shots from the floor and Quickley sank 7 of 11 attempts for the Raptors, who snapped a four-game losing skid. The win was just Toronto's fifth in 26 road games this season.

Grady Dick had 17 points and three steals, including one on Joel

Embiid in the late stages, for the Raptors. He added a free throw with 5.3 seconds to play to cap the scoring.

Embiid recorded 27 points and 12 rebounds for the struggling 76ers, who have lost four in a row and 13 of their last 18 games.

Jared Butler scored 15 points, Paul George had 14, Quentin Grimes chipped in 13 and Kelly Oubre Jr. added 12 for Philadelphia.

Tyrese Maxey, however, was limited to just five points on 1-of-9 shooting from the floor -- including 1-of-7 from 3-point range. That performance came on the heels of a 39-point effort in Philadelphia's 135-127 loss to the Milwaukee Bucks on Sunday.

Maxey sank a 3-pointer to forge a tie at 103 with 1:49 remaining before Toronto regained the lead on its next possession, courtesy of a layup by Ochai Agbaji.

Dick stole the ball from Embiid with eight seconds left before splitting a pair of free throws, and Maxey was off on his tying 3-point attempt to end the game.

Toronto erased a modest two-point deficit by scoring 14 of the first 20 points of the third quarter to take a 64-58 lead. Quickley drained a pair of 3-pointers and Barnes and Agbaji each added four points during the run.

Borges Rallies Past Wawrinka in Marseille

PARIS (Dispatches) - No. 8 seed Nuno Borges of Portugal withstood a challenge from three-time Grand Slam winner Stan Wawrinka of Switzerland, prevailing 6-7 (4), 7-6 (1), 6-3 in first-round action at the Open 13 Provence in Marseille, France.

Wawrinka, playing as a wild card as he continues to attempt a comeback from injuries, had 12 aces and led the second set 4-1 before Borges stroked back to force a tiebreaker. By then, all the momentum belonged to Borges, and he finished the match having won a whopping 72 of 99 total service points (72.7 percent).

Two other matches Tuesday went the distance: China's Zhizhen Zhang fended off France's Quentin Halys 6-3, 6-7 (2), 7-6 (3), and lucky loser Luca Van Assche rallied past fellow Frenchman Benjamin Bonzi 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7).

Belgium's Zizou Bergs, Kazakhstan's Alexander Bublik and Germans Daniel Altmaier and Jan-Lennard Struff also advanced.

Meanwhile Spanish eighth seed Alejandro Davidovich Fokina saved 2 of 3 break points and converted all three of his break-point opportunities in defeating Japanese lucky loser Taro Daniel 6-2, 7-6 (2) in the first round in Florida.

No. 9 seed Arthur Rinderknech of France topped Kazakhstan's Dmitry Popko 6-2, 6-4, and Yoshihito Nishioka of Japan was a 6-3, 6-4 winner over Australian Aleksandar Vukic. China's Yunchaokete Bu needed 59 minutes to race past Australia's Rinky Hijikata 6-2, 6-0.



Two matches were left for the evening: Japan's Kei Nishikori against American wild card Mackenzie McDonald, and Christopher Eubanks of the U.S. against countryman and wild card Reilly Opelka.

No. 6 seed Sebastian Baez also emerged with a 6-4, 6-4 win over Argentine countryman Camilo Ugo Carabelli during the first round on a rainy day in Buenos Aires. Baez saved 6 of 7 break points he faced while breaking Carabelli three times.

Fifth-seeded Francisco Cerundolo of Argentina defeated Italy's Luciano Darder 6-4, 6-4. In a matchup of Argentine qualifiers, Juan Manuel Cerundolo earned a rain-delayed 7-6 (4), 5-7, 7-5 victory over Roman Andres Burruchaga.

stage and enabling more fans worldwide to enjoy the thrill of watching their favourite stars compete for this coveted Grand Slam Championship title," USTA chief Lew Sherr said in a statement.

"By giving the competition its own spotlight, we're elevating mixed doubles to put an even greater focus on the incredible talent we have across the sport."

The competition's format has also been overhauled, with 16 teams participating - half the 32 that competed last year.

Eight teams will earn direct entry via their combined singles ranking. The other eight will be wild-card entries.

Shock Defeats for Tennis Top Seed Sabalenka



DOHA (Dispatches) - World number one Aryna Sabalenka suffered a shock defeat in the second round of the Qatar Open.

The Belarusian was thwarted by Russian Ekaterina Alexandrova 3-6, 6-3, 7-6 (7/5) in a tense encounter lasting over two and a half hours.

This was Sabalenka's first match since losing the Australian Open final in three sets to Madison Keys in January.

Alexandrova has turned up in Doha in good form after claiming her fifth WTA title in Linz last week.

The 26th-ranked Alexandrova picked herself up after going one set down to level in the second - but not before an unscheduled appearance by an inquisitive four-legged feline spectator.

With the score at 2-2, 40-30 to Sabalenka, a cat nonchalantly took centre stage, inspecting proceedings courtside before sauntering off via the player's entrance.

Alexandrova shrugged off the interruption to level the match, then held her nerve to force the deciding set to a tie-break which she took 7-5.

Sabalenka was back competing at the Qatar Open for the first time since 2022, having won the 2020 title in what is the first WTA 1000 event of the season.

Alexandrova's reward was a last-16 date with Belgian Elise Mertens.

Also dumped out was Coco Gauff who lost in straight sets to Ukraine's Marta Kostyuk.

Former US Open champion Gauff blew a healthy advantage in the second set as Kostyuk sealed a 6-2, 7-5 victory and a third-round meeting with Poland's Magda Linette.

"Coco is an incredible fighter," Kostyuk said. "We always have incredible matches. I tried to stick to what I had to do."

Gauff, playing for the first time since a quarter-final loss to Paula Badosa at the Australian Open, served seven double-faults and made 39 unforced errors in an erratic display.

The American made a terrible start, slipping 4-1 behind after dropping her serve twice.

Gauff was broken again in the eighth game as Kostyuk secured the first set in just half an hour.

The world number three hit back with a break en route to a 4-2 lead in the second set as she started to find her rhythm.

But Kostyuk battled back, taking advantage of an error-strawed Gauff performance which ended when she served two double-faults to be broken for the fifth time.