

Foreign Ministry Spokesman Esmail Baghaei Has Condemned the Terrorist Attack in Balochistan Province, Pakistan, Which Resulted in the Deaths and Injuries of Several Innocent Workers

IRAN NEWS

Foreign Ministry Spokesman Condemned the U.S. for What He Described as Humiliating Treatment of Migrants, Including Iranian Nationals, Characterizing Such Behavior as Unjustifiable and Contrary to Human Rights Standards

2 DOMESTIC



Iran, UNCTAD to Expand Digital Collaboration in Transportation and Transit

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

Vance Attacks Europe Over Free Speech and Democracy



> SEE PAGE 3

Iran Condemns Israel Threat Against Iranian Passenger Plane



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The spokesman for Iran's Foreign Ministry says the Israeli regime's threat against a passenger plane transporting Lebanese citizens is a blatant violation of principles and rules of international law and Lebanon's sovereignty.

In a statement, Esmail Baghaei said the Israeli regime's threat to the passenger plane has "disrupted normal flights to Beirut Airport."

He made the comments after the cancellation of two scheduled civilian flights from Iran to Lebanon.

The cancellation was ordered by the Lebanese Roads Minister under pressure from the Israeli regime, which claimed that the plane was transferring funds to the Hezbollah resistance movement.

The Iranian spokesman called for serious measures by relevant international bodies, particularly the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), to "stop dangerous Israeli actions against safety and security of the country's aviation."

The refusal to allow Iranian flights to land sparked protests around Beirut International Airport.

A large number of people have taken to the streets around Beirut's International Airport on Thursday night, blocking the entrance to the airport and the international road leading to it and setting tires alight while chanting anti-US and anti-Israeli slogans.

Tensions rose during clashes with Lebanese military personnel who attempted to clear the route.

Iran does not accept Lebanon's plan for alternative flights: Ambassador
Iran's Ambassador to Beirut Mojtaba Amani said on Friday that Tehran does not accept the Lebanese government's offer of alternative flights for Iranian planes.

"The Lebanese government is seeking alternative flights for Iranian planes. We generally welcome the establishment of Lebanese airline flights to Iran, but not in a way that cancels Iranian flights," he added.

He emphasized that Iran would certainly agree to the Lebanese government's plan only if Beirut "does not create obstacles for Iranian airlines."

The envoy noted that talks are underway between the two countries to reach an agreement.

He said the cancellation of the flights caused Lebanese passengers, mainly pilgrims, to be stranded at Tehran airport and the Lebanese individuals, who were supposed to come to Iran for pilgrimage, failed to travel.

No Arrests Following Tehran University Student's Death, Minister Apologizes

TEHRAN - Minister of Science, Research, and Technology, Hossein Simayi Sarraf, has issued an apology following the tragic death of a Tehran University student. He confirmed that no students were arrested during last night's gathering at the university dormitory.

Simayi Sarraf met with the Tehran University leadership on Saturday to address the passing of Amir Mohammad Khaleqi, an undergraduate student of Business Management. Expressing his sorrow, the minister stated, "This is a tragic incident, and as the Minister of Science, it deeply saddens me to hear of the murder of one of our students."

Simayi Sarraf revealed that he was on an official trip to Jeddah when he received the news. He immediately returned to Tehran and visited the site of the incident last night. Offering condolences to the student's family, he assured that a Ministry of Science representative would attend the memorial service at Khaleqi's family home.

The minister conveyed his apologies on behalf of all institutions involved and stated that the President has personally assigned him to oversee the investigation. "We will not allow this case to be manipulated or exploited. Any unauthorized interference in the matter will be met with serious action," he emphasized.

Addressing concerns over student safety, Simayi Sarraf asserted, "I am committed to protecting our students. Law enforcement agencies are already investigating, and the judiciary has opened a special case." In response to the tragedy, the director of student dormitories has resigned and issued an apology to the victim's family and the public.

The minister highlighted ongoing efforts to improve security in the area. Tehran University has been coordinating with law enforcement for several years to enhance safety, including better street lighting. As part of immediate measures, surveillance cameras and security gates will be installed around the dormitory area.

He further mentioned that a meeting took place from 7:00 AM to 11:30 AM to assess all aspects of the situation. Based on the discussions, instructions were sent to university officials across the country to enhance security at dormitories and campuses. Additionally, two security kiosks will be established at vulnerable locations.

Addressing reports of student arrests, Simayi Sarraf denied any such claims, stating, "The news of student detentions is incorrect. We have no records of any arrests." Tehran University's acting president, Seyyed Hossain Hossaini, also confirmed that only one person was briefly detained and later released, adding that reports of two other arrests were false.



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

The minister stated that he had reviewed the medical report, confirming that medical assistance was provided as soon as the student was transferred to the hospital. Despite efforts from two attending university professors in the operating room, the student succumbed to his injuries early Thursday morning due to their severity.

Simayi Sarraf emphasized that university authorities are not responsible for external security, but he acknowledged the existing security gaps. He has instructed immediate action to resolve issues such as inadequate lighting and the installation of additional security kiosks in vulnerable areas.

According to IRNA reports, Amir Mohammad Khaleqi, an undergraduate Business Management student at Tehran University, was attacked by two motorcycle-riding assailants wielding knives near Gisha Bridge on the night of

February 13. He was on his way back to the dormitory when he was assaulted during an attempted robbery. Despite being rushed to Shariati Hospital by emergency responders, he succumbed to his injuries the following morning.

The Ministry of Science, Tehran University, and the Faculty of Management have issued separate statements expressing deep sorrow over the incident and calling for urgent action against those responsible.

In response, law enforcement officials have launched an extensive investigation. The spokesperson for Iran's Law Enforcement Forces (FARAJA) announced that General Radan, the National Police Chief, has ordered a swift and thorough investigation. Special police teams have been deployed to identify and apprehend the culprits as soon as possible.

Furthermore, Tehran's Public and Revolutionary Prosecutor's Office confirmed that a special case has been opened. Following reports of the attack, Tehran's Prosecutor immediately ordered an investigation, with a designated special judge initiating judicial proceedings. Authorities have assured that the perpetrators will be brought to justice swiftly.

The tragic murder of Amir Mohammad Khaleqi has raised significant concerns over student safety in Tehran, prompting swift responses from government officials, law enforcement, and university administrators. Students and citizens are now awaiting further developments as the investigation unfolds.

Iran at Forefront of Fight Against al-Qaeda, Daesh, Supports Regional Peace



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's ambassador to Yemen has reaffirmed Tehran's steadfast commitment to regional peace and stability, emphasizing the country's influential and leading role in combating the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group and al-Qaeda across West Asia.

Ali Mohammad Rezaei made the remarks during a press conference in the Yemeni capital Sana'a.

He, meanwhile, highlighted the Islamic Republic's foreign policy principles, stating, "Iran consistently respects the sovereignty of its neighbors and adheres to a policy of non-aggression concerning regional countries."

The stance, reiterated by the envoy, reflected Iran's broader diplomatic approach, which prioritizes peaceful coexistence, mutual respect, and cooperation with neighboring nations, observers say.

Rezaei reasserted the Islamic Republic's long-standing position against foreign military presence in the region, declaring, "For the past decade, Iran has advocated for withdrawal of foreign forces from the region and an end to external interference in Yemen's internal affairs."

The call, experts point out, aligns with the country's overarching strategy to reduce tensions and promote regional autonomy, particularly in conflict-affected nations like Yemen.

Addressing the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, the ambassador underscored the urgency of lifting the United States-led and Saudi Arabian-enforced blockade against the impoverished country and initiation of comprehensive reconstruction efforts there.

"We emphasize the importance of fully lifting the siege on Yemen and starting the rebuilding process. Supporting victims of the conflict and reconstructing [its] war-torn regions are essential steps towards [enabling] lasting stability, security, and fulfilling the aspirations of the Yemeni people," he said.

In 2015, a Saudi-led military coalition embarked on ferocious large-scale and deadly aggression against Yemen as a means of reinstating the Arab Peninsula nation's Riyadh- and Western-allied officials, who had fled the country amid a power crisis.

Iran Receives Messages from Syria



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran has received messages from Syrian officials, according to Mohammad Reza Raouf Sheibani, the Special Envoy of Iran's Foreign Minister for Syria. He confirmed recent remarks by Syria's new Foreign Minister, Assad Sheibani, regarding positive exchanges between Tehran and Damascus.

Speaking to Tasnim News Agency, Sheibani stated that Iran maintains indirect communication with Syria's current leadership and is closely monitoring developments in the country.

"Our approach to Syria's developments and the restoration of relations is forward-looking," Sheibani said, emphasizing that Iran is observing the situation with caution and will make its own decisions at an appropriate time.

He underscored that all political factions in Syria should participate in determining the country's future, reaffirming Iran's position on the importance of national unity in Syria. Given Syria's strategic significance in the Middle East, Sheibani stressed that its destiny should be determined by its people, without foreign interference.

"Iran attaches great importance to Syria's stability and security," he added, reiterating Iran's opposition to any external interference in Syria's internal affairs.

Sheibani also revealed details of his recent visit to Moscow, where he met with Russia's presidential envoy for Syria and the country's deputy foreign minister. The discussions focused on the latest developments in Damascus and were part of broader regional consultations with key stakeholders in Syria's crisis.

"Iran and Russia share common views on several Syrian matters, and during this trip, we agreed to intensify our consultations," he noted.

During talks on Friday with Russian officials, Tehran and Moscow reaffirmed the necessity of inclusive political participation by all Syrian factions. Both sides stressed that a national dialogue—in line with United Nations Resolution 2254—is the best path to determining Syria's future.

Iran, Oman to Ramp Up Cooperation in Maritime Security



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's deputy Border Police Commander Mohammad Sahebdel (L) and Colonel Abdulaziz bin Mohammed al Jabri, Commander of Oman's Coast Guard Police, meet in Muscat.

Iran and Oman have expressed the need to expand maritime security cooperation in various areas.

The fifth two-day meeting of the commanders of the coast guards of Iran and Oman on maritime security opened in Muscat on Thursday.

The meeting was co-chaired by Iran's deputy Border Police Commander Mohammad Sahebdel and Colonel Abdulaziz bin Mohammed al Jabri, Commander of Oman's Coast Guard Police.

The Iranian and Omani commanders stressed the importance of increasing cooperation in fighting drug trafficking and rescue and relief operation, protecting maritime borders and sharing intelligence.

The joint meeting of the Iranian and Omani coast guards is held annually in a regular manner in one of the two capitals.

On the sidelines of the meeting, the Iranian delegation visited some facilities and centers related to Oman's coast guard.

In October 2024, Iran and Oman held a joint maritime rescue and relief exercise involving the naval forces of both countries in the Indian Ocean and the Strait of Hormuz.

TEHRAN - The Secretary of the Supreme Council of Free and Special Economic Zones has announced plans to enhance technology development in these zones, including the launch of a metaverse platform by the end of the year.

Speaking at a press conference on Saturday, Reza Masroor emphasized that the development of technology is a key priority for free zones. He stated that all free zones have been instructed to incorporate this initiative into their agendas.

Masroor also revealed that a dedicated platform will be introduced to connect free zone manufacturers with knowledge-based companies, helping them address their challenges. Additionally, he announced the creation of an artificial intelligence assistant for free zones and highlighted competitive advantages being offered to technology companies operating within these zones.

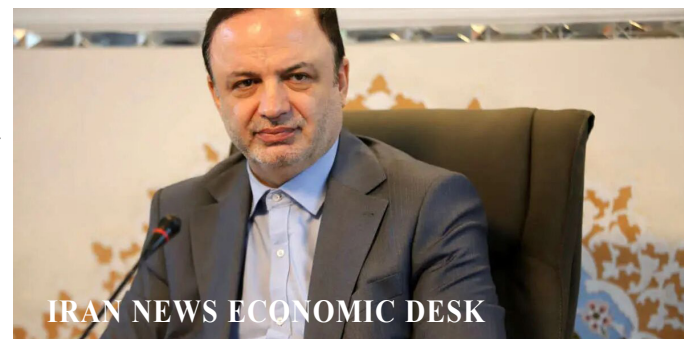
Masroor discussed efforts to strengthen international cooperation, stating that each free zone is encouraged to establish ties with relevant international organizations. He disclosed that a proposal for forming a Supreme Council for Eurasian Relations has been submitted to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

"Increasing our engagement with regional organizations will enhance international cooperation in free zones," he added.

Regarding foreign investments in free zones, Masroor pointed out that joint free zones with neighboring countries are a necessity. He revealed that Turkey has invited Iran to hold discussions in March with its Ministry of Trade on establishing a joint free zone. However, he noted that this process is complex, as the designated zones must be aligned.

Masroor also mentioned ongoing negotiations with Pakistan for a joint free zone, though such an initiative requires parliamentary approval. Additionally, he confirmed discussions with Afghanistan about investment opportunities in the Chabahar Free Zone. "Free zones are designed to attract investments from all nationalities, and we welcome anyone willing to invest," he stated. A meeting with Afghanistan's ambassador has been held, and visits to the Doharoon, Sistan, and Chabahar free zones are planned.

Masroor acknowledged efforts to appoint experienced professionals to free zone boards while considering local representation. He admitted that board member appointments have taken time but



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

assured that further changes will be expedited in the coming months.

When questioned about political recommendations influencing appointments, he responded, "There are always recommendations, and we collaborate with parliamentarians and governors, but we do not compromise accuracy for speed."

Masroor announced a revision of policies regarding the participation of free zones in international exhibitions. Previously, attendance at foreign exhibitions was encouraged, but this directive has been

revoked. Now, free zones are only permitted to hold exhibitions within their own areas. Attendance at international exhibitions is allowed only if it provides significant benefits and does not impose additional costs.

Responding to concerns about smuggling, Masroor asserted that all imports into free zones are registered in the statistical system or official order records. "There are no unregistered imports, and if smuggling does occur, it is minimal," he stated. He also denied recent media reports about fuel smuggling in the Hormozgan free zones of Kish and Qeshm, clarifying that such incidents were unrelated to the free zones.

Masroor highlighted ongoing efforts to eliminate obstacles to free zone growth. He noted that previous regulations restricted free zones from importing vehicles, whereas the mainland allowed it. This restriction has now been lifted. He also mentioned efforts to amend the law imposing value-added tax (VAT) in free zones, stating that a proposal for legislative reform has been submitted to the government.

He detailed reforms aimed at increasing exports from free zones. He explained that first-generation free zones were designed primarily for trade and services rather than production. However, second-generation free zones focus on exports and manufacturing.

To facilitate exports, incentives have been introduced for production units, and agreements have been made with the Trade Promotion Organization to grant each free zone permission to establish an export management company. Masroor projected that these initiatives would lead to substantial export growth in the coming year.

Regarding export targets, he stated that free zones aim to achieve \$2 billion in exports next year, compared to an expected \$1.1 billion this year.

IRAN NEWS



Iranian Finance Minister to Visit Saudi Arabia

TEHRAN (ILNA) - Abdolnaser Hemmati, Iran's Minister of Economy and Finance, announced that he is traveling to Saudi Arabia at the joint invitation of his Saudi Arabian counterpart and the President of the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Hemmati stated in a social media post that he will be attending a conference over the next two days, focusing on "Challenges and Opportunities Facing Emerging Economies." The conference will bring together economy and finance ministers, central bank presidents, and selected policymakers with the goal of promoting inclusive progress and fostering economic resilience through international cooperation.

Hemmati further stated that the meeting will provide an opportunity for bilateral discussions with regional countries aimed at developing economic and financial relations.

Japan Reaffirms Long-Term Commitment to Iran, Eyes Enhanced Economic Ties



TEHRAN - Japan's Ambassador to Iran, Tsukada Tamaki, during a recent visit to the Qom Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture, underscored Japan's steadfast commitment to long-term cooperation with Iran, highlighting the nation's significant economic potential. He also expressed Japan's willingness to facilitate Iranian participation in the upcoming Expo 2025 Osaka.

Ambassador Tamaki emphasized that Japan remains committed to fostering a strong and enduring partnership with Iran, stating that the Japanese embassy in Tehran is actively working to establish the necessary infrastructure for the resumption of normal economic exchanges between the two countries.

This marks the Ambassador's first visit to Qom, having served 37 years in the diplomatic corps. He noted that his initial perception of Qom was solely as a religious and cultural center. However, the exhibition of Qom's capabilities at the Chamber of Commerce broadened his understanding of the province's extensive production and industrial capacities.

Addressing Iran's place in Japan's trade outlook, Ambassador Tamaki emphasized the country's substantial economic potential. He noted that prominent Japanese companies are well aware of Iran's economic strength, and unlike some European firms that have scaled back their activities in Iran in recent years, they continue to maintain a presence in the country.

Ambassador Tamaki also expressed optimism for positive developments in Iran's relations with the international community in 2025, assuring that Japan will utilize its full capacity to accelerate this trend.

Highlighting the importance of trade and international exhibitions in strengthening the relationship between the two nations, Ambassador Tamaki regretted the absence of official Iranian governmental participation in Expo 2025 Osaka. He stated that Japan views active participation in such events as crucial for showcasing Iran's economic and industrial capacities. Despite the lack of official government involvement, the Japanese embassy has indicated its readiness to provide extensive support to facilitate the participation of Iranians in the international exhibition.

Furthermore, Ambassador Tamaki detailed the Japanese embassy's initiatives to bolster trade relations between the two countries. He reiterated that the embassy is focused on creating the required infrastructure to normalize economic exchanges between Iran and Japan. He underscored Japan's unwavering dedication to a long-term collaborative approach with Iran.

Iran, UNCTAD to Expand Digital Collaboration in Transportation and Transit

TEHRAN - In a significant meeting at the United Nations headquarters in Geneva, Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Farzaneh Sadegh, met with Rebecca Grynspan, Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), to discuss strengthening collaboration in trade, development, and logistics.

In her opening remarks, Sadegh expressed her satisfaction with the meeting and highlighted Iran's strategic position in linking global value chains. Despite facing challenges due to unilateral sanctions, she reaffirmed Iran's commitment to continuing its development trajectory.

Sadegh noted Iran's foundational role in UNCTAD and its ongoing active participation in supporting the organization. She recognized UNCTAD's crucial role in advocating for the interests of developing countries and emphasized Iran's readiness to engage actively in the organization's processes.

The minister also mentioned Iran's prominent involvement in the Group of 77 and China, addressing collaborative efforts on development financing and the formulation of common positions as additional topics of discussion.

Looking ahead to the upcoming UNCTAD meeting in Vietnam in October 2025, Sadegh stressed Iran's preparedness to take part in the event's execution and proposed developing a roadmap for joint collaborations between Iran and UNCTAD.

Furthermore, she underscored the importance of developing physical and electronic infrastructure in customs and border areas, asserting the need for UNCTAD's assistance in aligning national systems with international standards.

Highlighting Iran's advantageous position in transit and access to open waters, Sadegh outlined the country's strategy of integrating road, rail, and maritime transport. She proposed enhancing trade and transit network connections through Iran and expressed interest in collaborating with UNCTAD



in the area of digital governance, emphasizing the importance of system interoperability.

Sadegh suggested expanding specialized cooperation in digitalizing transportation and transit, advocating for the implementation of a memorandum of understanding signed in 2015 between Iran and UNCTAD.

Concluding the meeting, she invited the UNCTAD Secretary-General to visit Iran to witness firsthand the country's economic, commercial, and transit capabilities.

In her remarks, Grynspan congratulated Sadegh and highlighted the importance of having a woman in a leadership role in logistics in Iran. She emphasized Iran's strategic position in the region and commended its role in the Group of 77 and China, as well as its international collaborations.

Reflecting on her previous experience as Costa Rica's Minister of Finance, Grynspan noted unconstructive behaviors from Western parties and reaffirmed her solidarity with Iran in addressing ongoing challenges, applauding Iran's resilience and commitment to multilateralism.

The UNCTAD Secretary-General stressed the importance of collaboration with Iran to strengthen regional and global trade, supporting the proposal to draft a joint cooperation roadmap. She welcomed Iran's role in developing sustainable logistics and transport infrastructure and expressed UNCTAD's readiness to collaborate with proposed initiatives.

Grynspan also reminisced about the exemplary backgrounds of Iranian experts at UNCTAD and expressed hope for greater utilization of their intellectual and operational capabilities in the near future, reiterating the significance of trade as a tool for peace in the region.

This meeting marks the second consecutive engagement between the Iranian Minister of Roads and Urban Development and high-ranking UN officials, representing a noteworthy initiative to enhance Iran's international collaboration efforts in trade, logistics, and sustainable development.

South Pars Gas Field Pressure Enhancement Project Set to Transform Iran's Oil Industry



TEHRAN - The monumental pressure enhancement project for the South Pars gas field is on the verge of entering the operational phase, heralding significant economic benefits for Iran's oil sector. This development has been characterized as one of the most promising initiatives in the industry, instigating excitement across the nation.

Recently, Mohsen Paknezhad, the Iranian Oil Minister, expressed optimism regarding the sector, citing a planned increase in oil exports among his announcements. However, another major piece of news pertains to the ambitious pressure enhancement project at South Pars, recognized as a strategic national initiative essential for preserving Iran's vast hydrocarbon resources.

The South Pars gas field is distinguished as the world's largest gas field, spanning both Iranian and Qatari territorial waters in the Persian Gulf. Approximately 33% of the field lies within Iran's borders in Bushehr province, while 67% is located in Qatari territory. In addition to its immense gas reserves, the field also contains considerable oil deposits, which Iran exploits through the Pars Oil Layers project, currently producing from seven development wells and utilizing the Korush floating production and export unit, capable of handling up to 700,000 barrels of crude oil.

The South Pars gas field is estimated to hold around 51 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, with a recoverable reserve of approximately 36 trillion cubic meters. Due to natural depletion over time, the field experiences pressure drops that necessitate the implementation of pressure enhancement technologies.

On January 7, 2024, Minister Paknezhad underscored the necessity of executing the pressure enhancement plan, stating that contracts for the initiative would soon be signed as a priority for the nation. He warned that without these implementations, the field would witness significant pressure loss within two years, potentially jeopardizing its productivity.

"This enhancement project is even more critical than daily bread for the country," Paknezhad stated, noting that financial provisions for the undertaking have already been meticulously planned.

Further emphasizing the government's commitment, a spokesperson for the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of the parliament revealed a planned investment of \$18 billion for the pressure enhancement of the South Pars gas field, as articulated by the oil minister.

Iran Ranks Second in World Date Palm Production



TEHRAN - Iranian National Date Palm Association President, Mohsen Rashid Farrokhi, said Iran is the world's second-largest date palm producer, with 30% of its production worth \$400 million exported annually.

Farrokhi stressed that Iran's date palm needs are met and there are no shortages in the market. The country produces around 1.4 million tons of date palm per year, covering 300,000 hectares of land, making it the second-largest date palm producer globally.

Egypt takes the top spot in date palm production, Farrokhi said, while Iran leads the world in date palm varieties. This allows Iranian date palm producers to cater to diverse tastes and preferences.

This year, around 350,000 tons of Iranian date palm, equivalent to 30% of domestic production, are expected to be exported to Muslim countries around the world in the holy month of Ramadan, generating \$400 million in foreign exchange earnings.

The majority of Iran's date palm exports go to Asian countries, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), India, the European Union, and Russia.

According to Farrokhi, 70% of Iran's date palm production is domestically consumed, with only 40% being consumed during the holy month of Ramadan.

Date palm production is mainly concentrated in 13 provinces across the country, including Sistan and Baluchestan, Hormozgan, Khuzestan, Bushehr, Fars, and Kerman provinces.

Farrokhi attributed the price of date palm to supply and demand and said that the increased supply of date palm, following the government's intervention, has led to increased availability in supermarkets, markets, and fruit and vegetable stores.

Iran and Brazil to Strengthen Tourism Ties with New Agreement

TEHRAN - In a significant step toward enhancing tourism relations, Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts met with Brazil's Deputy Minister of Tourism today at the 18th Tehran International Tourism Exhibition. The Iranian minister invited renowned Brazilian footballers to visit Iran and promote the country's tourist attractions globally.

According to a statement from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, the minister emphasized the role of influential figures in boosting tourism. "One of the most effective ways to develop tourism is through visits by prominent personalities from various fields. That's why we are inviting Brazilian footballers to explore Iran and showcase its beauty to the world," he said.

Highlighting the long-standing diplomatic ties between the two nations, the minister noted that despite the geographical distance, Iran and Brazil have enjoyed over 120 years of relations. He also referenced previous discussions with Brazil's Minister of Tourism and the Secretary-General of the World Tourism Organization about strengthening tourism cooperation.

"Iran's provinces, particularly Isfahan, Fars, Kermanshah, Sistan and Baluchestan, and Hamedan, have rich cultural and historical heritage that can attract Brazilian tourists," he added.

To formalize and expand these efforts, he proposed signing a new agreement focused on tourism collaboration, especially in the field of medical tourism.

Carlos Henrique Menezes, Brazil's Deputy Minister of Tourism, expressed his enthusiasm for closer ties with Iran. "Strengthening our relationship with Iran is very important to us, and I am pleased to be here," he stated.

Acknowledging the geographical distance, he stressed the need to bridge the gap through greater awareness and information-sharing about the tourist attractions in both countries.



He highlighted Brazil's Amazon rainforest as a key tourist destination and noted that Iran also possesses vast tourism potential. "We are ready to expand our cooperation in this sector," he affirmed.

Menezes also pointed out the deep appreciation for Brazilian football and culture in the Iranian city of Abadan, viewing it as an opportunity to further strengthen tourism relations.

In closing, the Brazilian official vowed to counteract negative and misleading media portrayals that could impact tourism relations between the two nations.

Earlier the Deputy Minister of Tourism of Iran, Anoushirvan Mohseni Bandpei, met with Menezes to discuss strengthening tourism ties between the two countries.

According to the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Bandpei emphasized Iran's safety and hospitality, urging Brazilian officials to promote a positive image of Iran among their citizens.

"Iran boasts a rich civilization and warm hospitality. We also have significant potential in health tourism. Every year, around 300,000 Brazilians travel to the Middle East, and we hope to increase tourist exchanges between our two nations," Bandpei stated.

To facilitate this, Iran has already unilaterally lifted visa requirements for Brazilian visitors and urged Brazil to reciprocate the gesture for Iranian tourists.

Bandpei also highlighted Brazil's expertise in water tourism and suggested collaboration in this area. Additionally, he proposed inviting Brazilian influencers to visit Iran and promote its attractions.

The Iranian official called for the establishment of a joint technical tourism committee and the signing of relevant agreements to formalize cooperation. He expressed hope that Brazilian tourist numbers would return to pre-pandemic levels.

India's First Rail Transit to Afghanistan Via Iran Successfully Completed



TEHRAN - In a historic development, the first-ever rail transit route between India and Afghanistan via Iran has been inaugurated, marking a significant milestone in regional trade and connectivity. The inaugural freight train, carrying a shipment of oilseeds, successfully traversed this route and arrived in Afghanistan.

The first India-Afghanistan transit train reached Rozanak station in Herat. The shipment, initially transported by sea to Iran's Bandar Abbas port, was then moved via Iran's railway network to its final destination in Afghanistan.

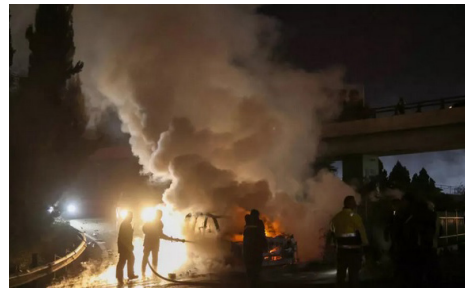
This development was facilitated by the Afghanistan Railway Development Consortium, with support from Iran's Ministry of Roads and Urban Development and the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways. Since the launch of the Khaf-Herat railway corridor earlier this year, more than 30,000 tons of export and transit goods have been transported between Iran and Afghanistan by rail. The corridor is expected to boost bilateral trade while ensuring greater security and reducing transportation costs for traders and manufacturers.

Experts predict that this successful transit will pave the way for expanded trade cooperation between India and Afghanistan through Iran. The Khaf-Herat railway, which connects Iran's railway network to western Afghanistan, plays a crucial role in regional connectivity. Additionally, it is a key part of the East-West railway corridor, which stretches over 2,000 kilometers, linking China, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and Europe. This railway is expected to enhance transportation security, cut logistics costs and transit time by 10%, and increase its appeal to regional traders.

UN Lebanon Force Demands Immediate Inquiry Into Torching of Vehicle in Beirut

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - The outgoing deputy commander of the UN peacekeeping force in Lebanon was injured Friday when protesters attacked a convoy taking peacekeepers to the Beirut airport, the force known as UNIFIL said in a statement. "We are shocked by this outrageous attack on peacekeepers who have been serving to restore security and stability to south Lebanon during a difficult time," it said, calling for a "full and immediate investigation by Lebanese authorities".

The Lebanese army intervened to disperse the protesters. The army said in a statement that acting commander Maj. Gen. Hassan Odeh had contacted UNIFIL and promised to "work to arrest the citizens who attacked its members and bring them to justice". Demonstrators have been blocking the road to the airport and other roads in the capital to protest a decision by Lebanese authorities to revoke permission for a passenger plane from Iran to fly to Beirut on Thursday, leaving dozens of Lebanese passengers stranded.



IRAN NEWS

Congo Rebels Enter Bukavu After Seizing Airport



BUKAVU (Dispatches) - Rwandan-backed M23 rebels entered eastern Democratic Republic of Congo's second-largest city Bukavu on Friday, a rebel leader told Reuters, as residents reported seeing the militants in the streets of a northern district.

Earlier on Friday, the Congolese army confirmed that M23 fighters had taken control of Kavumu airport, north of Bukavu, and that Congolese troops had pulled back with their equipment.

The rebels have been trying to push south towards Bukavu since they seized Goma, the largest city in eastern Congo, at the end of last month.

The capture of Bukavu, the capital of South Kivu province, would represent an unprecedented expansion of territory under the M23's control since the latest insurgency started in 2022, and deal a further blow to Kinshasa's authority in the east.

"I confirm that we entered Bukavu this evening, and tomorrow, we will continue with the operation to clean up the city," said Corneille Nangaa, leader of the Congo River Alliance, which includes the M23.

The Congolese army did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Two residents of a northern part of Bukavu called Bagira said they had seen rebels on the streets and no sign of fighting.

"Their uniforms were different. We had been prepared since the daytime for their arrival ... the FARDC (army soldiers) had left. There were no clashes," said resident Helene, who described watching the rebels pass by her window.

Earlier, Congolese army spokesperson Sylvain Ekenge said troops had pulled back after the seizure of the airport.

He did not say where they had withdrawn to, but Congolese and Burundian troops were seen leaving Bukavu's main military camp, Saio, during the day, two residents and one U.N. source said.

"They're retreating to avoid fighting in populated areas," said one person, who lives near the camp.

A Congolese officer at the camp, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed that some, but not all troops had left the camp.

Ukraine Has Low Chance of Survival Without U.S. Backing



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Ukraine has little chance of surviving Russia's assault without U.S. support, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Friday after phone calls this week by U.S. President Donald Trump with Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

"Probably it will be very, very, very difficult. And of course, in all the difficult situations, you have a chance. But we will have low chance - low chance to survive without support of the United States," Zelenskyy said in an interview on the NBC News program "Meet the Press."

An excerpt was released on Friday from the interview, which will be broadcast on Sunday.

Trump discussed the war on Wednesday in separate calls with Putin and Zelenskyy, in the U.S. president's first big step toward diplomacy in a conflict he has promised to end quickly.

Trump later said he did not think it was practical for Kyiv to join NATO and that it was unlikely Ukraine would get back all its land. Russia, which annexed Crimea in 2014, launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.

Israeli Hostages, Palestinian Prisoners Set for Release After Truce Crisis

GAZA CITY (Dispatches) - Gaza militants are due to release three Israeli hostages in exchange for 369 Palestinians in Israeli custody, the sixth swap of a truce that came close to collapse this week.

Israel and Hamas have traded accusations of violating the Jan 19 ceasefire, with the Palestinian group saying it would pause releases and Israel threatening the resumption of war in the Gaza Strip.

But yesterday, both sides signalled that the hostage release scheduled for today would go ahead.

The office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu named the hostages due for release as Israeli-American Sagui Dekel-Chen, Israeli-Russian Sasha Trupanov, and Israeli-Argentinian Yair Horn, who have been held by Gaza militants since Hamas's Oct 7, 2023, attack on Israel that sparked the war.

The Palestinian Prisoners' Club advocacy group said that Israel was to release 369 inmates in exchange, with 24 of them expected to be deported.

The vast majority, 333 people, are "prisoners from the Gaza Strip who were arrested after Oct 7," the group said.

After the crisis that appeared to bring the fragile truce to a breaking point, Hamas said yesterday that it expected talks on a second phase of the ceasefire to begin early next week.

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio, whose country is Israel's top backer and has been involved in mediation efforts during the war, is due to arrive in Israel later today ahead of expected talks with Netanyahu on the Gaza truce.



Last week's release sparked anger in Israel and beyond, with the emaciated state of the freed Israeli hostages sparking concern over conditions in captivity.

Israeli-American hostage Keith Siegel, who was released in a previous exchange, said he was "starved and... tortured, both physically and emotionally" during his captivity.

There were also fears for Palestinians in Israeli custody after some prisoners required medical treatment on their release.

The ceasefire has been under massive strain since US President Donald Trump proposed a takeover of the Gaza Strip under which the territory's population of more than two million would be moved to Egypt or Jordan.

Pistorius countered that "every opinion has a voice in this democracy. It makes it possible for partly extremist parties like AfD to campaign completely normally, just like every other party."

He noted that Weidel was on prime-time German television on Thursday night along with the other contenders.

But he added that "democracy doesn't mean that the loud minority is automatically right," and that "democracy must be able to defend itself against the extremists who want to destroy it."

Scholz took to social network X to "emphatically reject" Vance's comments.

"Out of the experiences of Nazism, the democratic parties in Germany have a joint consensus — that is the firewall against extreme right-wing parties," he wrote.

Bavarian governor Markus Söder — a prominent figure in Germany's center-right opposition bloc, which leads pre-election polls — told reporters that "we take every opinion seriously, but we decide ourselves with whom we form a coalition," German news agency dpa reported.

Vance's meeting with Weidel came after she was received on Wednesday by Hungary's right-wing nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orbán. The vice president's office said Vance also met Friday with German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and opposition leader Friedrich Merz, while he met Scholz earlier this week when both were in Paris for a summit on artificial intelligence.

Norwegian Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Store took issue with how Vance urged European officials to stem irregular migration in Friday's speech. Vance said the European electorate didn't vote to open "floodgates to millions of unvetted immigrants."

"He speaks as though we are not focused on immigration in Europe," Gahr Store said. "I mean, this is the big theme in every country, that we want to have control of our borders."

He argued that Ukrainian refugees accounted for a significant increase in unvetted immigrants in recent years — and they were accepted "because there is a bloody war going on, which he did not mention, which I think is not really addressing reality."

"I don't agree with him that what's happening in Ukraine, what's happening in Russia, what's happening in China is less important than the presumed loss of freedom of speech in Europe," Gahr Store said.

For Palestinians, any forced displacement evokes memories of the "Nakba", or catastrophe — the mass displacement of their ancestors during Israel's creation in 1948.

Arab countries have come together to reject the plan, and Saudi Arabia will host the leaders of Egypt, Jordan, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates on Thursday for a summit on the issue.

Trump warned this week that "hell" would break loose if Hamas failed to release "all" remaining hostages by noon today. Israel later insisted Hamas release "three living hostages" today or "the ceasefire will end".

If fighting resumes, Defence Minister Israel Katz said it would not just lead to the "defeat of Hamas and the release of all the hostages" — Israel's stated objectives since the start of the war — but also "allow the realisation of US President Trump's vision for Gaza".

Mairav Zonszein of the International Crisis Group said despite their public disputes, Israel and Hamas were still interested in maintaining the truce.

"They're just playing power games," she said. Arab countries have put on a rare show of unity in their rejection of Trump's proposal for Gaza.

After the Riyadh summit, the Arab League will convene in Cairo on Feb 27 to discuss the same issue.

Ukraine Slams Russian Drone Attack on Chernobyl Power Plant

KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that a Russian drone had struck a cover built to contain radiation at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, adding that radiation levels were normal.

Ukraine has repeatedly warned since Russia invaded that attacks and fighting near its vast nuclear power plants risk triggering a potential catastrophe.

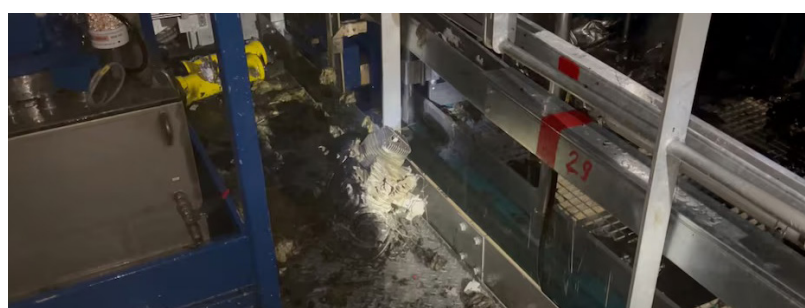
The Kremlin rejected that its military targets Ukrainian nuclear sites, while the European Union said the attack was "reckless" and showed Russia was "not looking for peace".

The strike comes with US President Donald Trump, who held calls with both Zelenskyy and Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier this week, pushing Kyiv and Moscow to urgently agree an end to the war.

"Last night, a Russian attack drone with a high-explosive warhead struck the cover protecting the world from radiation at the destroyed 4th power unit of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant," Zelenskyy said in a social media post.

He said it was evidence that "Putin is definitely not preparing for negotiations -- he is preparing to continue deceiving the world".

CCTV footage posted by the Ukrainian leader showed a blast on the side of the Chernobyl structure, timestamped 2:02 am (0002 GMT).



The Kremlin called the incident a "provocation" staged by Kyiv. "There is no question of any strikes on such nuclear infrastructure sites," Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

"Any claims that this was the case do not correspond to reality. The Russian military does not do this," he said, after stating that he did not have "exact information" about the reported hit on Chernobyl.

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas meanwhile said the strike "clearly shows" the

Russians "don't want peace".

Poland's Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski said the attack "strengthens the argument for improving Ukraine's air defences in our own self-interest."

"In 1986 the radioactive cloud endangered all Europe and beyond," he added.

In 1986, a reactor at Chernobyl exploded during a botched safety test, resulting in the world's worst nuclear accident, which sent clouds of radiation across much of Europe and forced tens of thousands of people to evacuate.

The IAEA, which has a team on the ground at Chernobyl, posted images after the reported attack.

Zelenskyy said the drone had flown at an altitude of 85 metres (280 feet), too low to be detected by radar.

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) also reported an "explosion" at the site, and said "radiation levels inside and outside remain normal and stable."

The agency, which has had a team deployed at Chernobyl since the early stages of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, published images showing a drone on fire after crashing into the covering.

The IAEA has warned of the dangers of fighting around nuclear plants following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.



Fonseca, 18, Wins Buenos Aires QF Marathon

BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) - Brazilian 18-year-old Joao Fonseca saved two match points and pushed past Argentina's Mariano Navone 3-6, 6-4, 7-5 in the quarterfinals of the IEB+ Argentina Open in Buenos Aires.

The match lasted two hours and 54 minutes and saw home favorite Navone serve for the match in the 10th game of the third set. Fonseca saved match point at 15-40 and 30-40 and won the game to extend the match. He finished with 10 aces and saved 9 of 14 break points.

It marks Fonseca's first semifinal berth at the tour level. His next match will be against Serbian qualifier Laslo Djere, who beat Brazil's Thiago Seyboth Wild 7-6 (3), 6-3.

The home fans got to savor an upset when No. 5 seed Francisco Cerundolo of Argentina rallied past No. 1 seed Alexander Zverev of Germany 3-6, 6-3, 6-2. After never producing a break point in the first set, Cerundolo took advantage of four of his five break opportunities in the last two sets.

Spainiard Pedro Martinez advanced when No. 3 seed Lorenzo Musetti of Italy withdrew due to a leg injury.

Meanwhile top two seeds Daniil Medvedev of Russia and Ugo Humbert of France advanced to the semifinals with straight-sets victories in Marseille, France.

Medvedev beat Germany's Jan-Lennard Struff 6-3, 6-2, and Humbert took down No. 7 seed Lorenzo Sonego of Italy 6-4, 6-4.

Medvedev will face Serbian Hamad Medjedovic, who outlasted German Daniel Altmaier 7-5, 6-7 (7), 6-4 in the quarters. Humbert will battle Belgium's Zizou Bergs, who won his first set 7-5 before Chinese opponent Zhizhen Zhang retired.

No. 7 seed Miomir Kecmanovic of Serbia rallied to beat American fifth seed Marcos Giron 2-6, 6-4, 6-2 to reach the semifinals in Florida.

Both players recorded 12 aces, but Kecmanovic won 36 of 44 first-service points (81.8 percent). His next opponent will be No. 3 seed Alex Michelsen, who fended off British foe Cameron Norrie 7-6 (3), 7-5.

Italian fourth seed Matteo Arnaldi got past sixth-seed U.S. player Brandon Nakashima 7-6 (2), 6-4.

Arnaldi's semifinal foe will be the winner of the Friday nightcap, top seed Taylor Fritz of the United States, the two-time defending champion, or Spanish eighth seed Alejandro Davidovich Fokina.

Fritz defeated Kecmanovic in the 2023 final. Meanwhile three-times defending champion Iga Swiatek was bundled out of the Qatar Open by Latvian Jelena Ostapenko, who beat the Polish second seed 6-3 6-1 in the semi-finals on Friday to set up a final showdown with American Amanda Anisimova.

The 23-year-old five-times Grand Slam champion Swiatek, who on Thursday became the player with the longest winning run at the tournament with 15 straight victories, looked a shadow of her usual self as she went down to world number 37 Ostapenko.

Meanwhile, 2017 French Open champion Ostapenko continued her commanding record over Swiatek and now leads the Pole 5-0 in head-to-head.

Ostapenko, 27, got off to a confident start by winning the opening two games before taking a 4-2 lead en route to taking the first set. She produced an utterly dominant display in the second set to race to a 4-0 lead before wrapping up the win in just a little over an hour.

"I was pretty confident that I will win against her. We played a lot of matches and I know how to play her. I'm really happy with how I'm handling my emotions this week. Just so happy to be in the final," Ostapenko said.

Ostapenko, who had said the partisan fans at the tournament were disrespectful for jeering her throughout her quarter-final match as she eased to a straight-sets win over Tunisian Ons Jabeur, celebrated her win over Swiatek by looking at the crowd.

World number two Swiatek, meanwhile, threw her racket mid-way through the second set as her woes against Ostapenko continued.

In the second semi-final, world number 41 Anisimova stormed past Russian world number 26 Ekaterina Alexandrova 6-3 6-3 in one hour and 30 minutes to reach her second WTA 1000 final.

Australia Thrashed as Sri Lanka Sweep ODI Series



COLOMBO (Dispatches) - Australia were handed a reality check ahead of next week's Champions Trophy after Sri Lanka thrashed them by 174 runs in the second one day international to complete a 2-0 series sweep.

Chasing 282 for victory, 50-overs world champions Australia were bundled out for 107 - their lowest ODI total in Asia - in the 25th over despite being reinforced by the return of frontline batters Travis Head, Glenn Maxwell and Josh Inglis.

Sri Lanka's Kusal Mendis (101) had earlier scored his fifth ODI hundred as they posted a commanding 281-4 after electing to bat first. Home captain Charith Asalanka chipped in with an unbeaten 78 as Sri Lanka plundered 97 runs off the last 10 overs.

Sri Lanka have not qualified for the Champions Trophy, which features the top eight ODI teams in the world.

"I thought their bowlers bowled exceptionally well," Australia captain Steve Smith said at the presentation ceremony.

"I think on this wicket (the ball) probably skidded on a lot more than the test wickets. But I think it was a fine bowling performance by Sri Lanka and not a great batting performance (by Australia)."

Australia's new ball pair of Ben Dwarshuis and Aaron Hardie began tidily, denying scoring opportunities to Sri Lanka's opening pair of Pathum Nissanka and Nishan Madushka.

Nissanka decided to break loose and charged out against Hardie only to drag the ball onto his stumps and depart for six.

Madushka (51) was joined by Kusal and they combined in a 98-run stand to shore up Sri Lanka.

Dwarshuis dismissed Madushka with a slower bouncer and Kamindu Mendis fell for four but Kusal and Asalanka batted brilliantly to take Sri Lanka past the 200-mark.

Liverpool Boss Slot Charged After Clashing With Officials



LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool boss Arne Slot has been charged with being abusive to match officials during Wednesday's stormy Merseyside derby at Everton.

Slot was shown a red card after approaching referee Michael Oliver in a heated scene on the pitch at the final whistle following the 2-2 draw.

Liverpool were furious that James Tarkowski's stoppage-time equaliser was not disallowed because of an alleged push by Toffees striker Beto on Reds defender Ibrahima Konate.

Slot's assistant Sipke Hulshoff was also dismissed during the row with Oliver in the last Merseyside derby at Goodison Park before Everton move to a new stadium next season.

According to the Football Association, Slot allegedly acted in "an improper manner and/or used insulting and/or abusive words and/or behaviour towards both the match referee and an assistant referee after the match had finished".

Liverpool midfielder Curtis Jones and Everton's Abdoulaye Doucoure were also sent off after the final whistle, with Jones angrily pushing Doucoure after he celebrated in front of Reds fans.

Both clubs have also been charged with "their players and/or technical area occupants behaving in an improper and/or provocative way following the final whistle".

Slot, Hulshoff, Liverpool and Everton have until Wednesday to provide their respective responses, which means the Reds boss will be available to sit on the bench for the Premier League leaders' game against Wolves at Anfield tomorrow.

Earlier yesterday, Slot accepted he made a mistake with his behaviour because he got caught up in the hostile atmosphere at Goodison Park.

"Emotions got the better of me. If I could do that differently, if I look back I would love to do that differently and I hope to do that differently next time," he told reporters.

"I should have acted differently after the game but it's an emotional sport and sometimes individuals make wrong decisions and that's definitely what I did."

Everton manager David Moyes said yesterday he had respect for Slot's fiery actions as he was fighting to protect his team.

"I feel a bit for Arne Slot. When I was a younger manager I was always getting involved in heated things," he said.

"And it also tells me that he cares a lot about his club and he's fighting for his players. I think when you get a bit older you stand back and you say, 'What was I doing there?'"

Mitoma Shines as Brighton Beat Shot-Shy Chelsea 3-0



BRIGHTON (Dispatches) - A brilliant goal by Brighton & Hove Albion's Kaoru Mitoma and a Yankuba Minteh double gave the Seagulls a 3-0 Premier League home win over Chelsea on Friday, a week after they knocked their London visitors out of the FA Cup.

Missing strikers Nicolas Jackson and Marc Guiu through injury, Chelsea dominated possession but did not manage a single shot on target as they slumped to a defeat that leaves them fourth in the table on 43 points ahead of the weekend's fixtures. Brighton moved up to eighth on 37 points.

Japanese winger Mitoma broke the deadlock with a moment of magic midway through the first half, bringing down a long ball from keeper Bart Verbruggen with an exquisite first touch before cutting inside Trevoh Chalobah and curling the ball in at the far post.

The closest Chelsea came to scoring was when captain Enzo Fernandez headed home in the 35th minute, but he was penalised for a push on Brighton defender Joel Veltman and the goal was chalked off.

Three minutes later his side were two behind as Chelsea failed to

clear their lines and Danny Welbeck poked the ball into the path of Minteh, who expertly evaded a tackle by ex-Brighton fullback Marc Cucurella before drilling it into the net.

With Chelsea barely threatening, Minteh added his second in the 63rd minute, delighting the fans by cutting inside Cucurella to score

at the near post.

Mitoma could have had a second in the 73rd minute as Brighton made a breakthrough, but he fired his shot straight at the keeper and it was easily saved.

Joel Veltman hit the post from a Yasin Ayari pass in the 85th minute.

The win was Brighton's first at home in the Premier League since beating Manchester City 2-1 on November 9, and Brighton striker Welbeck praised Mitoma's performance as his goal set them on the road to victory.

"It was slow-motion for me. He has got an amazing first touch, he has got a tremendous ability to bring it down and kill the ball instantly. Impeccable first touch, it is incredible. What a goal," he told Sky Sports.

After conceding seven goals in their last Premier League outing against Nottingham Forest, keeper Verbruggen was delighted with both the clean sheet and the assist for Mitoma's goal.

"We train it and I saw the space in behind. It was an unbelievable touch and a very good finish ... we needed to show a reaction and the boys did that," he said.

No Women Make List of Top 100-Paid Athletes Topped by Ronaldo



LONDON (Dispatches) - Cristiano Ronaldo again topped the list of the world's highest-paid athletes, with total income of \$260 million in 2024, according to sports industry news site Sportico, but there were no women in the top 100.

The leading 100, dominated by players from soccer, the NBA, NFL, golf and boxing, earned an estimated \$6.2 billion in total income last year. The figure includes \$4.8 billion in salary and prize money, plus \$1.4 billion in endorsements.

Former U.S. Open tennis champion Coco Gauff was the top-earning female athlete last year at \$30.4 million, well short of Minnesota Vikings quarterback Daniel Jones who squeezed in at number 100 with a total income of \$37.5 million.

Ronaldo's lucrative contract with Saudi Arabian soccer team Al-Nassr ensured he retained top spot for a second straight year after he moved to the Saudi Pro League in December 2022.

Sportico said the Portugal forward, who celebrated his 40th birthday last week, earned a hefty \$215 million in wages while he also made \$45 million in endorsements.

Ronaldo is so far ahead of the other athletes in the world that Golden State Warriors guard Stephen Curry, who is second on the list, earned \$153.8 million in comparison -- more than \$100 million short

of the five-times Ballon d'Or winner.

British boxer Tyson Fury, who lost to Ukraine's Oleksandr Usyk in a heavyweight clash in December, is third on the list at \$147 million.

The top five are rounded out by Inter Miami's Argentina captain Lionel Messi (\$135 million) and Los Angeles Lakers forward LeBron James (\$133.2 million) -- the only 40-year-old currently playing in the NBA.

The top 100 is made up of athletes from eight sports and hailing from 27 countries.

While American Gauff, who is only 20, could climb up the list in the years to come, there have been other women athletes who would have cracked the list in the past.

Business magazine Forbes said Japan's four-times Grand Slam tennis champion Naomi Osaka was the world's highest-paid female athlete in 2022 after she pulled in \$57.3 million in prize money and endorsements.

Retired tennis great Serena Williams, who won 23 singles majors, earned \$41.8 million in 2021 according to Forbes. The American retired from the sport in 2022 at the U.S. Open.