

Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the Commander of the IRGC's Aerospace Division, Has Said That Iran "Must Be Ready for War, So That There Is No War"

IRAN NEWS

The Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran Categorically Denies Recent Reports Alleging the Deportation of Iranian Citizens From Lebanon, Describing Them as Unfounded Rumors

2 DOMESTIC



Tehran Expands Trade Presence in Caracas With 3 Retail Stores

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

Russia, U.S. Agree to Work Toward Ending Ukraine War



> SEE PAGE 3

Supreme Leader Dismisses U.S. Displacement Plan for Gaza as "Foolish, Futile"



TEHRAN (PressTV) – Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has dismissed the US-Israeli plan to displace Gazans as "foolish," saying it will fail just like their attempts to eliminate resistance in Gaza.

The Leader made the remarks in a meeting with Ziyad al-Nakhleh, Secretary-General of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement.

"These plans will lead nowhere. Those who vowed to eliminate resistance within a short time a year and a half ago, now receive their prisoners from small groups of resistance fighters in exchange for a big number of Palestinians."

Ayatollah Khamenei praised the victory of Gaza's resistance over Israel and the US, describing it as magnificent.

He emphasized that the great work done by Palestinian resistance leaders and fighters in maintaining unity and cohesion, standing firm against enemies, and navigating the complex process of ceasefire talks, as well as the Gazan people's resilience and patience has made the resistance proud in the region.

"This victory sets a new benchmark for resistance battles," he noted.

Ayatollah Khamenei commended the way resistance handled prisoner exchanges as a testament to its strength before global audiences.

"Currently, international public opinion is in favor of Palestine, and thus no plan can succeed without consent from Gaza's resistance and people," the Leader said.

In this meeting, Nakhleh congratulated Ayatollah Khamenei on Gaza's victory and attributed it to Iran's consistent support and guidance from late Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah.

"The Palestinian resistance was effectively fighting America and the West over the past 18 months and despite the inequality of the balance of power, it could achieve major victories," Nakhleh said.

He highlighted the unity among Palestinian and Lebanese groups on the battlefield and political levels as one of the factors influencing their success in Gaza.

Israel Must Be Held Accountable for Genocide in Gaza



TEHRAN - Iran's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations has strongly condemned the Israeli regime's brutal military attacks against the Palestinian people, particularly in the Gaza Strip, calling for the occupying regime to be held accountable for the genocide in the besieged territory.

Zahra Ershadi made the remarks on Tuesday as she read out a statement on behalf of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) members at a meeting of the Special Committee of the United Nations Charter.

"The Non-Aligned Movement condemns the continuing brutal Israeli military campaign against the defenseless Palestinian people, particularly in the Gaza Strip, and reiterates the demand for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire and protection of the Palestinian people," she said.

Ershadi expressed NAM's grave concern about the warnings by the UN special rapporteurs about the "genocide" in the Gaza Strip, and urged the international community to honor its commitment and take all measures to put an end to the massacre.

In this regard, NAM welcomes the application filed by South Africa on December 29, 2023, instituting proceedings against the Israeli regime at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) regarding violations of commitments under the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, the Iranian envoy stated.

Concerns Raised Over the Impact of Caspian Sea Water Level Decline

TEHRAN - Senior officials and prime ministers from Caspian Sea littoral states expressed concerns over the negative effects of declining water levels in the Caspian Sea during the Third Caspian Economic Forum. In a joint statement issued at the conclusion of the meeting, they emphasized their commitment to deepening cooperation based on mutual interests, expanding trade and economic exchanges, and enhancing joint scientific and research efforts to study the causes of the sea's decreasing water levels.

The Third Caspian Economic Forum was held in the Islamic Republic of Iran on February 17-18, 2025, with the participation of Prime Minister Ali Asadov of Azerbaijan, First Vice President Arif of Iran, Prime Minister Olzhas Bektenov of Kazakhstan, Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk of Russia, and Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers Khojamyrat Geldimyradov of Turkmenistan.

During the discussions, the leaders reviewed various aspects of economic and trade cooperation among the five nations, reaffirming their commitment to strengthening regional partnerships. They expressed their intent to boost mutual investments and trade exchanges while highlighting the necessity of expanding economic collaboration among the Caspian Sea states.

The heads of delegations emphasized their adherence to the decisions made at previous Caspian summits and underscored the importance of the forum as a platform for effective regional cooperation. They welcomed Iran's proposal to host a ministerial meeting on trade, economy, and transportation by the end of 2025, viewing it as a crucial step toward enhanced regional coordination.

A significant point of discussion was the adverse impact of the Caspian Sea's declining water levels. The officials stressed the importance of conducting scientific and research studies to understand the reasons behind this phenomenon. They also urged a swift review of the conceptual document prepared by Azerbaijan on water level fluctuations, advocating for the establishment of an expert working group. Additionally, they acknowledged Turkmenistan's initiative to finalize an agreement on scientific cooperation among the Caspian states.

The delegations reaffirmed their commitment to ongoing energy cooperation, particularly in the fields of oil, gas, and renewable energy. They also emphasized the need to expand tourism collaboration by developing infrastructure and necessary conditions to boost the sector within the region.

Recognizing the importance of regional connectivity, the officials called for continued collaboration in the development of transport infrastructure, logistics, and transit networks. Enhancing these sectors, they noted, is crucial for economic growth and integration among Caspian



nations.

The participating delegations expressed their appreciation to Iran for successfully organizing the forum and hosting the discussions. They also welcomed the attendance of Tajikistan's Prime Minister Qohir Rasulzoda as a special guest. The location and date of the Fourth Caspian Economic Forum will be determined through diplomatic channels in due course.

The forum concluded with a strong emphasis on fostering economic cooperation while addressing environmental challenges affecting the Caspian region.

Meanwhile the First Vice President, referring to his informal meetings with officials attending the Caspian Economic Forum, wrote that the Prime Ministers of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia emphasized the need to enhance trade

exchanges with Iran.

Mohammad Reza Aref, on Wednesday, shared a message on Instagram mentioning his informal talks with officials attending the Caspian Economic Forum at the Sa'adabad Tea House. He wrote that the forum provided a good opportunity for informal discussions with the participating officials.

The First Vice President continued: "Before the official start of the summit, I had a chat at the traditional Sa'adabad Tea House with the Prime Ministers of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and the Deputy Prime Minister of Russia. They all emphasized the necessity of enhancing trade exchanges with Iran. They also spoke about the Iranian scientific and technological achievements exhibition, which they had visited. Our country's scientific and technological advancements were of great interest to them."

Aref further mentioned: "The timing of this forum, just before the holy month of Ramadan, provided an opportunity to discuss the religious beliefs of the younger generation in different countries during this brief meeting. Drinking Iranian tea also made this informal gathering enjoyable for the guests."

The third Caspian Economic Forum was held yesterday morning (February 18, 2025), hosted by the First Vice President. It was attended by the Prime Ministers of four Caspian littoral states—Russia, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, and Azerbaijan. The event featured various thematic panels on topics such as prospects for trade and industrial cooperation, banking and customs, transportation, energy, engineering services, climate issues, tourism, health, science, and technology, and was held at Sa'adabad Palace.

National Currency and Gold Reserves Are Stable

TEHRAN - The Governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI) announced that the country's foreign currency and gold reserves are in a stable condition. He also reported that the liquidity growth rate has decreased to 27.4%.

Following a visit by the President to the Central Bank, Mohammadreza Farzin, the bank's governor, outlined key measures taken to stabilize financial markets. These include active intervention in the foreign exchange and gold markets, issuance of gold-backed bonds, monitoring rial transactions to combat speculation and money laundering, and securing foreign exchange financing through \$1.4 billion in bank deposits. Additionally, he highlighted efforts to ensure the supply of essential goods through the commercial foreign exchange market.

Farzin emphasized that the monetary base growth rate has significantly declined from over 40% to approximately 22%. He also acknowledged the challenges faced by the Central Bank during periods of market turbulence, noting that the President's visit boosted morale among staff.

Regarding recent financial instability, Farzin attributed market fluctuations to psychological factors, including comments and decisions by U.S. officials, which he claimed fueled panic in financial markets without a real economic basis. He pointed out that foreign media reports on political and economic issues have exacerbated these speculative trends.

Farzin stated that the Central Bank's intervention in the gold market is not intended to sell gold but to reassure the public. By allowing individuals to purchase coins at previous market rates, the initiative aims to provide a secure investment option for households.

The Central Bank has also introduced gold-backed bonds, with guidelines for their sale



nearing completion. Additional financial instruments are under consideration to help citizens protect their savings against inflation.

To curb speculative trading, the bank has intensified monitoring of high-value transactions. Recently, authorities scrutinized 600 accounts with significant transactions in gold, foreign exchange, and cryptocurrency, resulting in the suspension of several accounts suspected of financial misconduct.

Farzin highlighted the success of the commercial foreign exchange market, which launched in December. Since its inception, over \$3.5 billion has been allocated for currency needs. Initially, the Central Bank provided over 80% of this supply, but recent participation from major industries such as petrochemicals, refineries, and steel producers has increased market depth.

The Central Bank has even repurchased \$200 million in surplus foreign currency, reflecting improved market stability. The governor reaffirmed the commitment to maintaining exchange rate stability, noting that the commercial exchange rate has remained in the 66,000 to 68,000 rials per dollar range over the past two months.

Farzin reassured the public that the supply of essential goods continues at a fixed exchange rate of 28,500 rials per dollar, with over \$12 billion allocated for these imports since the beginning of the year.

Looking ahead, the Central Bank aims to maintain liquidity growth within 25% for the year, despite recent political and economic shocks. Farzin emphasized that proactive monetary policies will help meet this target and sustain economic stability.

The Central Bank's measures, he concluded, are designed to restore confidence and ensure the smooth operation of financial markets, ultimately safeguarding the purchasing power of the public.

Tehran Rebukes Washington Plan for Forced Relocation of Gazans



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's permanent ambassador to the United Nations has rebuked the US colonial plan to forcibly displace Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, describing the plot as a flagrant violation of international law and blatant disregard for human rights.

Amir Saïd Iravani made the statement while addressing an open debate of the UN Security Council about "Practicing Multilateralism, Reforming and Improving Global Governance," held in New York on Tuesday.

Stressing that the Gaza Strip is the rightful land of the Palestinian people, Iravani said the Security Council must resolve conflicts through multilateral cooperation and not coercion.

"The Security Council must uphold its mandate to resolve conflicts through multilateral cooperation. However, its current structure fails to reflect global power shifts and the legitimate aspirations of the Global South. To restore its credibility, the Council must become more representative, democratic, and accountable," the envoy said.

The Iranian diplomat censured the United States for abusing its veto power to shield Israel from accountability for its systematic violations of international law during its decades-long crimes against Palestinians.

"Regrettably, certain permanent members have repeatedly exploited the Council to advance ... own political interests. A glaring example is the United States' persistent use of its veto to shield Israel from accountability for its systematic violations of international law and the UN Charter, particularly its genocidal crimes against the Palestinian people and acts of aggression against other nations in the region," Iravani said.

Iran-Russia Strategic Partnership Deal Significant Manifestation of Mutual Cooperation



TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian says the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement signed between Iran and Russia is a significant manifestation of mutual cooperation between the two countries.

Pezeshkian made the remark on Tuesday evening during a meeting with Alexey Overchuk, Deputy Prime Minister of Russia, who traveled to Tehran to attend the third Caspian Economic Forum, a two-day event that aims to enhance economic and commercial cooperation between the Caspian Sea littoral states.

The Iranian president described the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation as one of the most significant manifestations of collaboration between the two countries, stressing that "the implementation of the deal must be seriously pursued by the officials of both nations."

Pezeshkian assessed Iran-Russia bilateral cooperation in the fields of energy, industry, transportation, and trade as highly positive, noting that "regional and international organizations, including the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), have also opened new avenues for joint cooperation."

He also expressed hope that by taking advantage of such opportunities, both nations would reap the benefit.

Overchuk, for his part, conveyed the warm greetings of Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin and Russian President Vladimir Putin to Pezeshkian, expressing appreciation for Iran's successful holding of the Caspian Economic Forum.

Overchuk also expressed Moscow's satisfaction with the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement with Tehran.

He noted that "interactions and cooperation between the two countries have significantly increased since the agreement's signing, with a rise in diplomatic exchanges serving as a key indicator of the development."

IRAN NEWS



IRGC Unveils Portable Air Defense Missile

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps Ground Force unveiled a new air defense missile fired from trucks. The IRGC has launched a new stage of the “Payambar-e Azam (The Great Prophet) 19” war game in Iran’s southwestern regions since Monday.

A series of homegrown arms have been unveiled during the drill, including the ‘Qaem-118’ air defense missiles.

The firing unit of the missile, carried by a truck, is equipped with five launchers.

The air defense missile has a range of 25 kilometers and is guided either by radars or electro-optical and thermal methods.

The fire control radar of the missile system can be connected to several launcher units to hit more targets.

Iran and Russia Plan to Boost Combined Transit via the Caspian Route



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran and Russia have reaffirmed their commitment to increasing combined transit through the Caspian Sea route, facilitating container transportation, and launching a cruise line between Anzali Port and Astrakhan, according to Iran’s government news portal.

During a meeting between Dmitry Azarov, Russia’s Deputy Minister of Transport, and Saeed Rasouli, Iran’s Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development and Acting Head of the Ports and Maritime Organization, both sides emphasized the importance of removing logistical barriers to shipping and port operations in the Caspian region.

Azarov highlighted Russia’s readiness to ease maritime transport issues in the Caspian Sea, ensuring smoother port access and resolving challenges related to vessel scheduling and the handling of perishable goods. He also noted efforts to upgrade and modernize Makhachkala Port to enhance cargo loading and unloading efficiency.

Rasouli stressed that Iran seeks to enhance rail-port and road-port integration with Russia through a joint action plan. He emphasized the need for unified port tariffs, streamlined transit through the Caspian Sea, and more efficient container movement between the two countries.

“Iran is fully prepared to hold a specialized maritime meeting with Russia to develop a comprehensive roadmap for maritime transport and joint action plans,” Rasouli said.

During the meeting, Jalil Eslami, Iran’s Deputy for Port and Economic Affairs, reported a 128% increase in maritime transit through Iranian ports over the past year, with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan being the primary contributors.

Eslami also pointed out key challenges faced by Iranian shipping companies at Russian ports, including inefficient scheduling, lack of adequate port services, and strict inspection measures that hinder the movement of hazardous and perishable goods.

Tehran Expands Trade Presence in Caracas With 3 Retail Stores



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - In a significant move to strengthen economic ties between Iran and Venezuela, three large Iranian retail stores have been established in Caracas, offering a diverse selection of 5,000 Iranian and Venezuelan products. The initiative is part of a broader strategy to enhance bilateral trade and economic cooperation between the two nations.

Ahmad Firoozi, Director General for Europe and the Americas at Iran’s Trade Promotion Organization, highlighted key measures that have facilitated trade between Iran and Venezuela. These include the establishment of a direct flight route between Tehran and Caracas, the removal of visa requirements for travelers and businesspeople, and the operation of a direct shipping line between the two countries, which has significantly reduced transportation costs. Additionally, a joint Iran-Venezuela bank is now operational to further ease trade transactions.

Firoozi emphasized the necessity of revitalizing the Iran-Venezuela Free Trade Agreement, originally signed in 2004 and ratified in 2006. He noted that recent negotiations have focused on updating product lists and trade regulations to streamline business exchanges and reduce costs for traders.

Over the first nine months of 2024, trade between Iran and Venezuela exceeded \$40 million. Iranian exports to Venezuela included pipes and profiles, motor vehicles, tractors, vehicle components, pharmaceuticals, infant formula, and dialysis machines. Conversely, Venezuela’s exports to Iran consisted primarily of aircraft engine parts, green mung beans, petroleum coke, and automobile tires.

According to Firoozi, Iran and Venezuela have complementary economies, allowing them to leverage their political alliance to overcome U.S. sanctions and enhance trade relations. By capitalizing on these economic synergies, both nations aim to expand trade to its maximum potential.

Venezuela remains an attractive market for major global economies. In 2023, leading exporters to Venezuela included China (\$3.4 billion), the United States (\$2.5 billion), Brazil (\$1.15 billion), Panama (\$990 million),

Colombia (\$670 million), and Turkey (\$365 million). In the same year, Iran ranked 14th among Venezuela’s top exporters, with exports valued at \$132 million.

On the other hand, Venezuela’s primary export destinations were the United States (\$3.8 billion), China (\$700 million), Spain (\$670 million), Brazil (\$412 million), and Turkey (\$360 million). However, its exports to Iran were significantly lower, amounting to only \$10,000, placing Iran 34th among Venezuela’s export partners.

Firoozi pointed out that over 65% of Venezuela’s GDP depends on foreign trade, with oil accounting for 90% of its exports. As a result, Venezuela has relied on key partners like China, Russia, and Turkey to sustain its economy. China has played a particularly crucial role, exporting \$3.01 billion worth of goods to Venezuela in 2022, up from \$1.75 billion in 2017. The most significant Chinese exports included tires (\$131 million), air conditioners (\$90.1 million), and motorcycles and bicycles (\$87 million). China has also provided substantial economic assistance to Venezuela during its financial crisis.

Turkey has similarly sought to strengthen its presence in Latin America through investments and trade agreements. Ankara has focused on expanding cooperation with Venezuela in agriculture, pharmaceuticals, transportation, aviation, and renewable energy sectors. Turkish investors have also been actively involved in various economic projects in Venezuela.

Despite geographical distance, Iran and Venezuela have continued to enhance their economic relations by establishing trade infrastructure, including direct flights, shipping routes, and financial institutions. With the expansion of trade agreements and ongoing diplomatic efforts, the two countries aim to further boost economic cooperation in the coming years.

This growing partnership reflects Iran’s broader strategy of deepening trade ties with Latin America, positioning itself as a key player in Venezuela’s economic landscape.

Caspian Sea Nations Strengthen Oil and Gas Cooperation



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Deputy Minister of International Affairs and Commerce at Iran’s Oil Ministry has emphasized the readiness of Iranian oil and gas companies to collaborate on major projects with Caspian Sea neighboring countries under international standards and highly competitive costs. He called for enhanced cooperation among these nations in the oil and gas sector.

Seyed Ali-Mohammad Mousavi stated at a specialized energy session during the Caspian Economic Forum that Caspian Sea countries share deep cultural and historical ties, as well as long-standing economic and political relations. He highlighted that these nations, positioned within a key global energy corridor, are endowed with significant oil and gas reserves.

Mousavi noted that Caspian Sea nations can capitalize on their unique capabilities to expand cooperation in various oil and gas industries. He outlined the distinct advantages each country brings: Russia’s technological expertise and financial investment in the oil and gas sector, Turkmenistan’s role in natural gas supply and exports, Kazakhstan’s advancements in oil industries and cutting-edge technology, and Azerbaijan’s integrated oil and gas development strategies.

He stressed the importance of sharing technical expertise and resources, which could drive regional development and mutual benefits.

The Iranian official underscored the necessity of cooperation along north-south and east-west energy corridors to bolster international energy security. He urged stronger collaboration in oil and gas connectivity, as well as the integration of electricity networks.

Mousavi also highlighted the potential for expanding maritime trade in the Caspian Sea, providing opportunities for transporting crude oil and petroleum products. He pointed out the possibility of using coastal infrastructure to facilitate oil shipments to major markets in the Indian subcontinent, Eastern Europe, and the Persian Gulf. However, he warned that the declining water levels of the Caspian Sea pose a significant challenge that requires joint efforts to resolve.

Mousavi proposed establishing a regional center to exchange knowledge and technology among experts, engineers, and industry leaders. He announced Iran’s willingness to host a secretariat dedicated to advancing oil and gas technology cooperation among Caspian nations.

Foreign Tour Operators to Become Ambassadors of Iranian Tourism



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Isfahan is set to host one of the largest international tourism gatherings since the Iranian Revolution, as 100 tour operators from around the world arrive in the city, known as “Half of the World.” This initiative aims to promote Iran as a safe and attractive travel destination despite negative portrayals in foreign media.

The event, titled “100 World Tour Operators in Half of the World,” officially begins today and brings together key figures from the global tourism industry. Mojgan Izadi, head of the Tourism, Carpet, and Handicrafts Commission of the Isfahan Chamber of Commerce, emphasized the significance of this gathering in countering international misconceptions about Iran’s safety and stability.

“The United Nations has designated this year’s theme as ‘Tourism for Peace,’ and through this event, we want to showcase Iran’s security, tranquility, and cultural richness to international tour operators,” Izadi stated. She expressed confidence that these industry professionals would become ambassadors for Iranian tourism in their respective countries.

Tour operators from more than 22 countries, including Greece, Norway, Vietnam, Indonesia, Turkey, Russia, China, Brazil, and Mexico, are taking part in this gathering. Originally scheduled for November, the event was postponed to March due to regional conditions and travel restrictions. Izadi also noted that American tour operators were excluded from participation due to the sensitivities surrounding the event.

This marks the first time that such a large-scale tourism event has been held in Iran. While foreign tour groups have previously visited Isfahan and other Iranian cities, the presence of 100 tour operators at once is unprecedented. The five-day specialized event is expected to facilitate and encourage international tours to Iran.

Izadi highlighted that the event provides a crucial opportunity for global travel experts to experience Iran’s cultural and historical attractions firsthand. “Isfahan, with its 22,000 registered historical sites, is the beating heart of Iran’s tourism industry and a symbol of the nation’s rich heritage and civilization,” she stated. She emphasized that showcasing Isfahan’s lesser-known attractions will contribute to increasing Iran’s global tourism share.

Iran Expands Trade with Arab Markets Through Iraq

TEHRAN - Iraq is emerging as a crucial trade bridge for Iran to access Arab markets, with plans for industrial zones along the shared border set to strengthen Iran’s presence in the region.

Jahanbakhsh Sanjabi Shirazi, Secretary-General of the Iran-Iraq Joint Chamber of Commerce, stated that Iran’s exports to Iraq surpassed \$10 billion in the past 10 months, while imports from Iraq stood at \$446 million. This results in a 95% trade surplus in favor of Iran. Despite a decline in energy exports, including electricity and gas, Iran’s trade growth with Iraq remains strong.

One of the key developments in trade relations is Iraq’s recent approval for the establishment of an industrial zone on the border.

According to Sanjabi, the special industrial zone in Zurbatiyah has been approved by Iraq’s parliament and government. He emphasized that this initiative is significant as Iraq is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Arab League, which are working toward unified trade, standards, and financial regulations.

“The industrial zone at the zero-border point will encourage joint Iranian-Iraqi investments, focusing on products in high demand in the Iraqi market,” Sanjabi explained. He noted that raw materials and intermediary goods for these industries will be supplied from Iran, ensuring that much of the added value remains within Iranian territory.

By establishing this industrial zone, Iranian products could gain access to a broader market of over 480 million people across the Arab world, thanks to Iraq’s trade alliances. Sanjabi also suggested that if the zone is designated as a free trade area,



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

border restrictions will be further eased, facilitating increased exports.

However, he cautioned that Iraq’s long-term strategy aims for economic self-sufficiency. “Iraq will not remain a consumer of Iranian goods forever. With rising oil revenues and improved economic stability, Iraq is striving to boost domestic production and reduce reliance on imports,” he said. Many sectors have already reached self-sufficiency, leading Iraq to impose tariffs or outright bans on certain imports.

Sanjabi stressed that Iranian businesses must adapt by investing in Iraqi industrial zones. This would secure Iran’s long-term presence in the Iraqi market and make it difficult for Iran to be displaced, as many industries in these joint zones would rely on Iranian raw materials. Additionally, the initiative would provide Iran with a gateway to larger Arab markets in Southwest Asia and North Africa.

Regarding Iranian rice exports to Iraq, Sanjabi confirmed that Iranian rice is in demand but is not exported in large quantities due to market regulations and seasonal restrictions. Since Iran itself is a rice importer, exports are mainly conducted through small-scale cross-border trade and passenger shipments.

This industrial collaboration signals a strategic shift in Iran-Iraq trade relations, reinforcing Iran’s foothold in the Arab market while adapting to Iraq’s economic policies.

Iran Moves to Remove Investment Barriers in Tourism Sector



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Seyed Reza Salehi Amiri, has announced ongoing efforts to amend laws and remove obstacles to tourism investment. Speaking at a meeting held on Monday, February 18, at the ministry’s Fajr Hall, Salehi Amiri emphasized the importance of raising awareness, persuasion, and consensus-building in tourism development.

Highlighting various factors affecting the tourism sector, Salehi Amiri revealed that negotiations are underway with different government bodies to eliminate barriers and promote industry growth. “Our determination is to identify challenges and solve problems, and we have defined multiple projects in this regard,” he stated.

He stressed the necessity of legal reforms and confirmed that his ministry is actively working with Iran’s Parliament to pass a law aimed at removing investment obstacles. This legislation would grant tourism authorities the necessary powers to enhance sector development.

Salehi Amiri also announced ongoing discussions with neighboring countries, including Tajikistan, Georgia, and Armenia, to facilitate tourist exchanges. Additionally, negotiations have been held with European ambassadors from Switzerland, Italy, and Spain to strengthen international tourism ties.

To further support tourism infrastructure, he mentioned ongoing talks with Iran’s Central Bank to attract financial resources and improve sector-related facilities.

Bayern Edge Out Celtic to Reach Champions League Last 16

PARIS (Dispatches) - Bayern Munich needed a stoppage-time goal to see off Celtic and secure a place in the last 16 of the Champions League on Tuesday, while AC Milan were dumped out by Feyenoord and both Club Brugge and Benfica also advanced.

In Germany, Bayern were defending a 2-1 lead over Celtic in their play-off tie from last week's first leg but the Bundesliga leaders were unable to put the tie to bed, with Harry Kane hitting the bar before half-time.

Instead it was Celtic who went ahead on the night on 63 minutes thanks to Nicolas Kuehn, the former Bayern player, who slotted low into the net after a failed attempt to win the ball by Kim Min-jae.

That meant the tie was heading for extra time, but Bayern ultimately would not need to go that far as they scored in the fourth minute of injury time.

Alphonso Davies bundled the ball in from close range to make the score 1-1 on the night and clinch the tie for six-time European champions Bayern 3-2 on aggregate.

Vincent Kompany's team will find out their last-16 opponents when the draw is made on Friday, but it will be either German rivals Bayer Leverkusen or Atletico Madrid.

"Of course, we always want to dominate and be much better than the opponent, especially here. But the result is always the most important thing," Kompany told Uefa.com

It was a heartbreaking way for Celtic to go out but the Scottish champions will take heart from their performance over the two legs.

"It never looked like we were going to concede the goal that we did and sadly for us, we did. I can only take immense pride from the performance and the guys gave everything," said Celtic manager Brendan Rodgers.

Earlier, seven-time European Cup winners Milan were eliminated by Feyenoord, a 1-1 draw at San Siro taking the Dutch club through 2-1 on aggregate.

Santiago Gimenez, playing against the club he left just last month, had put Milan ahead on the night from close range in the first minute to level the tie on aggregate.

However, Milan had Theo Hernandez sent off early in the second half for a second booking, and



Feyenoord levelled on the night through Julian Carranza on 73 minutes.

The visitors had Givairo Read shown a red card at the end of the game after they had held on to win the tie.

They could now come back to San Siro in the next round, with Inter Milan and Arsenal their two possible opponents.

In Lisbon, Benfica drew 3-3 at home with Monaco to win their play-off tie 4-3 on aggregate and go through to play either Barcelona or Liverpool next.

Having won 1-0 in Monaco last week, the Portuguese giants extended their aggregate lead when Kerem Akturkoglu opened the scoring on the night midway through the first half.

Monaco came roaring back with Takumi Minamino and Eliesse Ben Seghir netting either side of half-time to level the tie on aggregate.

Vangelis Pavlidis scored a penalty, his seventh goal in his last six Champions League games, to make it 2-2 on the night, only for substitute George Ilenikhena to hit back for Monaco.

However, the tie swung decisively back towards Benfica as Orkun Kokcu made it 3-3 on the night on 84 minutes.

"It was a tough night, we knew Monaco would put pressure on us from the start and we felt it, we didn't play our best game," Kokcu told broadcaster SportTV.

"Still, we're happy to have progressed to the last 16. I'm happy to have contributed to the result."

Teenage starlet Chemsidine Talbi scored twice as Club Brugge claimed a 3-1 victory away to Atalanta in Italy to win their tie 5-2 on aggregate.

Talbi's brace was followed by a superb Ferran Jutgla strike as the Belgians built on their 2-1 win at home in last week's first leg and advanced to a last 16 tie against either Lille or Aston Villa.

Atalanta had 29 attempts on goal but were punished on the break by the Belgians and Ademola Lookman's reply at the start of the second half was scant consolation.

Lookman also had a penalty saved while Atalanta captain Rafael Tolo was sent off late on, as last season's Europa League winners bowed out.

Verstappen Eyes Fifth Straight F1 Title



LONDON (Dispatches) - Max Verstappen believes the knowledge Red Bull gained from a hard-fought 2024 Formula One season could help him in his quest to win a record-equalling fifth successive drivers' world championship.

The Dutchman claimed his fourth straight title in Las Vegas in November, becoming just the fifth driver in Formula One history to achieve that feat.

Were he to keep hold of his crown in 2025, — Formula One's 75th anniversary season — Verstappen would join an even more exclusive club by drawing level with Michael Schumacher's record of five championships in a row.

While Verstappen eventually won the 2024 title by 63 points from Lando Norris, it was Norris's McLaren team who deprived Red Bull of a hat-trick of constructors' championships.

"If we are competitive as a team, then I'm sure that we can win it again," Verstappen told reporters during the 2025 Formula One Season launch at London's O2 Arena on Tuesday.

"We are very experienced and I think we showed that also last year that it was a bit tougher for us, we were still maximising our results. And that's, I think, the big strength of the team."

Verstappen said with pre-season testing in Bahrain still to take place ahead of the opening Australian Grand Prix in Melbourne on March 16, it was hard to assess Red Bull's prospects.

"I don't know where we are at the moment," he said. "I think no one knows that. And in a few weeks we'll know."

The 27-year-old Dutchman added: "I've not driven my car, no-one has seen the other cars, so you can speculate about it, but it's just a waste of energy to think about that yet. It's good for the sport if it's exciting, but I don't know at the moment."

Last month, Britain's Daily Mail reported that Aston Martin were prepared to make an audacious £1 billion (RMS 6 billion) bid to lure Verstappen away to a team that finished fifth — and a colossal 495 points adrift of Red Bull — last year.

Berrettini Ends Djokovic Comeback at Qatar Open

DOHA (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic's comeback came to a crashing halt as he lost 7-6 (7/4), 6-2 to Matteo Berrettini in the second round of the Qatar Open.

Djokovic, who was seeded third and received a first-round bye, was playing his first match since limping out of his Australian Open semi-final in January.

But the Serb said that while he was not 100 per cent, fitness was not the issue.

"I was outplayed by just a better player today," he said.

"Yes, I wasn't at my desired level, and it could be that I'm still not moving the way I want to move, but I played without pain, so there is no excuse in that."

"I think he played a masterclass match to be honest, tactically, and served very well, so just a very deserved win from his side."

It was only Berrettini's second win this year and his first over a player in the top 10 since 2023.

It was also the Italian's first ever win over Djokovic. Their previous encounters included victories for the Serb in the Wimbledon final and Roland Garros quarterfinals both in 2021.

"Something I've been looking to do for a long time. I've played against him in the most important tournaments on tour," the 28-year-old Italian said on court after the victory. "I wish I could have won



one of those matches."

Berrettini has struggled with injuries over the last 18 months but won three tournaments after returning to court last year.

"Really happy with my performance," he said. "Really happy because I enjoyed my time out there, which is the most important thing."

The first set went with serve but Berrettini took two points off Djokovic's serve to win the tiebreak. The Italian then broke to love in the second game of the second set.

Djokovic had broken Berrettini 27 times in their four previous encounters but the Italian was comfortable on serve until the final game before finally winning on his second match point.

"A champion like Novak is always ready to come back," Berrettini said. "You don't have to think about match point. You have to think about the next point."

Djokovic said that Andy Murray had agreed to continue as his coach "indefinitely" but said that he did not plan to overhaul his style.

"I am trying to improve my game, like everybody else. But my game is not going to change now drastically," Djokovic said. "My game is what it is, the core is going to be the same."

"There are more injuries. Things are not the same as 10 years ago, 15 years ago. I still try to take care of my body on a daily basis, and it's more challenging now, no doubt. I still try to do my very best, given the circumstances."

Alex de Minaur celebrated his birthday by beating Russian Roman Safullin 6-1, 7-5, even though the Australian did not enjoy the weather.

World No.6 Daniil Medvedev eliminated compatriot and defending champion Karen Khachanov 4-6, 7-5, 6-3.

Brisbane 2032 Venue Decision to Be Announced in Late March



SYDNEY (Dispatches) - The venue plan for the 2032 Brisbane Olympics will be unveiled late next month, the Queensland government said on Tuesday, finally bringing to an end a couple of years of flip-flopping over one of the most important planning elements of a Summer Games.

Brisbane was awarded the Games in 2021 but political rows, particularly over the main stadium and the venue for the athletics, have resulted in continuing uncertainty over the final plans.

A panel appointed by Queensland State Premier David Crisafulli last November to conduct a second review of the venue options will report on March 8 and their findings revealed to the public, along with the government's response, on March 25.

"Our delivery plan will provide a new way forward and get the Games back on track," Deputy Premier Jarrod Bleijie told the state parliament on Tuesday.

"Queenslanders no longer want to be embarrassed on the world stage. We will deliver a 2032 Olympic and Paralympic Games our state can be proud of and showcase what makes us a great state on the world stage."

Australian Olympic Committee Chief Executive Matt Carroll warned earlier this month that a final decision on the main venues needed to be made before the end of June.

Crisafulli's predecessor as premier, Steven Miles, had rejected a plan for a \$2.7 billion (\$1.72 billion) revamp of Brisbane's Gabba cricket ground as well as a proposed new \$3.4 billion Olympic stadium in the inner city's Victoria Park.

Miles' solution was to use the Lang Park rugby stadium to host the opening and closing ceremonies with the athletics taking place in the ageing QJAC venue in southern suburbs of the city.

That plan was described as an "embarrassment" by a group of local Olympic champions, while Australian athletics great Raelene Boyle feared it would make Brisbane 2032 look like a "cheapskate" Olympics.

Crisafulli is also on record as being against the construction of a brand new showpiece stadium but he softened his position in an interview at the weekend.

Gauff Knocked Out in Dubai by Compatriot Kessler

DUBAI (Dispatches) - World No.3 Coco Gauff crashed out in the second round of the WTA 1000 tournament in Dubai when she was beaten 6-4, 7-5 by fellow American McCartney Kessler.

The world No.53, who beat Doha champion Amanda Anisimova in the first round, broke Gauff's serve three times and saved five of the six break points she faced.

The only time she slipped up came when she tried to serve out the match for the first time at 5-4 in the second set.

It is the first time that Kessler, 25, has beaten a top 10 player although she has won the first two titles of her career in the last six months - in Cleveland in August 2024 and then in Hobart at the beginning of January.

She is through to the third round of a WTA 1000 for the first time in her career, and will face No.14 seed Karolina Muchova who beat 2021 US Open winner Emma Raducanu 7-6 (8/6), 6-4.

Gauff made a good start to the year winning all her matches for the United States as they won the United Cup and reaching the quarter-finals at the Australian Open.



However, she lost in the second round of the Doha WTA 1000 last Tuesday, also in two sets, to Ukrainian Marta Kostyuk and has now fallen to world No.53 Kessler.

There were no such problems for the top two seeds. World No.1 Aryna Sabalenka picked up her first win since the Australian Open semifinals with a 6-3, 6-4 victory over qualifier Veronika Kudermetova.

"It's always like a roller coaster of a game with (Kudermetova)," said Sabalenka.

"That's why I'm happy with the way I stayed focused today. No matter how she played, I was there fighting, trying to stay focused on myself and on my game."

Iga Swiatek crushed Victoria Azarenka 6-0, 6-2. Jasmine Paolini kicked off her title defence with a win although the rain made her wait.

The Italian reached match point before rain forced the players off the court. Over four hours later, the world No.4 returned to win the final point, beating German qualifier Eva Lys 6-2, 7-5.