

# IRAN NEWS

Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Political Affairs Majid Takht Ravanchi Says the United States and the Israeli Regime Will Have to Pay a Heavy Price If Make Any Mistake Against Iran

As Part of Efforts to Maintain Full Preparedness, Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Has Kicked Off a Major Drill in the Eastern Province of South Khorasan

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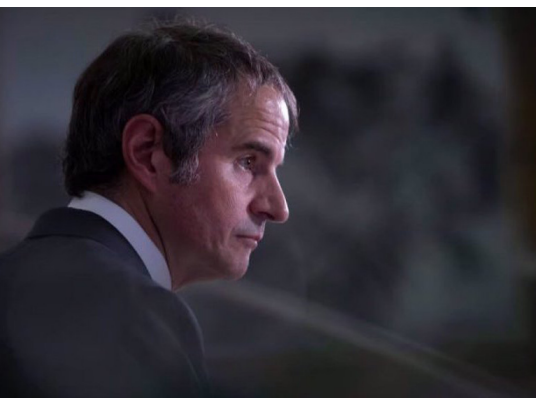


TEHRAN - On Thursday evening, during a visit to the western counties of Tehran province, President Masoud Pezeshkian addressed a gathering of intellectuals and elites in Malard, Shahriar, and Qods counties. Speaking on topics including foreign relations, negotiations, and unity, he emphasized Iran's willingness to engage in dialogue but firmly rejected submitting to pressure or coercion.

"We have said from the beginning that we seek dialogue and negotiation, but not at any cost," Dr. Pezeshkian stated. He criticized scenarios where external powers attempt to dictate terms, saying, "It's illogical for someone to press their hand on our throat and then say, 'Come, let's negotiate.'" He specifically called out former U.S. President Donald Trump's approach, questioning the rationality of accepting demands to disarm and comply while allowing Israel to dominate the region with U.S. backing. "Is it logical that Trump dictates what we should and shouldn't do, tells us to have no weapons or missiles, and then places the Zionist regime over the region to strike us whenever it pleases, with full American support?" he asked.

Pezeshkian condemned the actions of the Israeli regime in Gaza and Palestine, asking, "Which free human with an awake conscience accepts what the Zionist regime has done to the people of Gaza and Palestine?" He criticized the U.S. and Europe for supporting Israel's actions despite their claims of defending human rights, noting that even students and youth in those countries protested these policies. "Yet here in Iran, some seem to be lost in their own delusions," he added.

### Iran Slams IAEA Chief's Political Remarks Serving Pretext to Pressure Tehran



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has warned that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) may risk losing credibility by straying from the path of "neutrality and professionalism," after its head made controversial remarks about the Islamic Republic's peaceful nuclear program.

In politically biased remarks on the sidelines of a press conference in the Japanese capital of Tokyo, IAEA chief Rafael Grossi alleged that Iran is now enriching uranium up to 60 percent, which is nearly "weapons-grade."

He further claimed that Tehran was "not cooperating with the agency as we wish" and that the Islamic Republic must prove that it was not "pursuing nuclear weapons development."

His controversial and provocative remarks prompted the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) to issue a statement, warning IAEA that with such unprofessional and politically biased comments the agency risks losing its credibility.

"As the head of a major international organization, the Director-General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is expected to always speak and act impartially, professionally, and free from political bias.

"Unfortunately, some of Mr. Grossi's statements and positions, particularly his recent ones, lack these qualities, raising concerns that this important international organization, by straying from the path of neutrality and professionalism, may undermine its own credibility," the statement warned.

Grossi's remarks come as Iran has time and again stressed that its nuclear program is purely peaceful, highly cooperating with IAEA in its inspections.

## Leader Puts Premium on Boosting Ties With Neighbors in Meeting With Qatari Emir

TEHRAN - Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei says expanding relations with neighboring countries is the definitive policy of the Islamic Republic.

The Leader made the remarks in a meeting with the visiting Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani in Tehran, describing the Persian Gulf nation as a "friendly and brotherly" country.

Ayatollah Khamenei praised efforts by the administration of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian to strengthen ties with neighboring states, as exemplified by the Qatari Emir's visit.

He expressed hope that the agreements made during the visit would be beneficial for both nations, enabling them to fulfill their neighborly duties more than ever before.

The Leader also addressed US policies toward Iran and the wider region, asserting that "there is no difference between the presidents of the United States."

The Leader pointed to Iran's funds recently unfrozen and transferred from South Korea to Qatar, noting that the US is the main obstacle preventing their return to Iran.

He said the Islamic Republic expected Qatar not to succumb to US pressure. "If we were in Qatar's position, we would ignore pressures from Washington and return the assets. We still expect such an action from Qatar," he stated.

Sheikh Tamim expressed appreciation for Iran's support of the oppressed people around the world, saying that Iran's unwavering backing of the Palestinians "will never be forgotten." He highlighted the difficult conditions in the region, stating that the situation necessitates increased cooperation among regional countries.

The Emir also mentioned agreements between Iran and Qatar, including a contract for the construction of an underwater tunnel connecting the two countries and the activation of their joint commission.

He expressed optimism that the volume of economic exchanges will increase in the near future. Earlier President Masoud Pezeshkian said Tehran and Doha have made significant decisions to deepen relations and open new avenues for cooperation.

Speaking at a press conference alongside Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani after their meeting in Tehran, Pezeshkian said they discussed bilateral issues to secure the interests of both



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countries.

The Qatari Emir underscored the necessity of creating new opportunities for cooperation, the Iranian president said.

Pezeshkian said one of Iran's key policies is to develop comprehensive relations with neighboring and regional countries.

"Iran believes regional countries can, based on good neighborliness, mutual respect, and constructive interaction, take steps towards maintaining regional stability and security and lay the groundwork for creating a joint cooperation framework."

The president said they also discussed the situation in Syria, and that

he emphasized the preservation of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Syria and the participation of all its people in determining their fate.

Pezeshkian hailed Qatar's mediation efforts to achieve a ceasefire in Gaza and the release of oppressed Palestinian abductees.

The Iranian president put a premium on the need for more coherent measures by Islamic countries to reduce the suffering and pain of the people of Gaza.

"We believe that all nations and governments in the region and the world should make efforts based on divine and human values to defend the oppressed people of Palestine, notably Gaza."

Pezeshkian said it was imperative that the Palestinians of Gaza lead a "safe life in their historical land."

The Qatari Emir expressed satisfaction with his visit to Iran, and said such trips can help expand the brotherly and historical relations between the two countries, which are based on good neighborliness.

He said they discussed cooperation in various fields, and underscored the need for creating more opportunities for potential cooperation, especially in the commercial and economic fields.

The Qatari Emir said they also emphasized the importance of following up on the results of the recent Joint Economic Commission meetings and increasing the volume of trade exchanges to achieve stated goals.

Sheikh Tamim said they also discussed the difficult conditions the region is facing.

## "Resistance is Unending," Says Iran's National Security Chief

TEHRAN - In a powerful address delivered on Friday morning, Ali Akbar Ahmadian, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, declared that the resistance movement is an unstoppable force growing stronger every day. Speaking at a massive gathering of 20,000 Basij members in Kerman during the 19th Prophet Mohammad military exercise organized by the province's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Ahmadian emphasized that the resilience and vitality of the resistance have left its enemies exhausted and desperate.

The event, held alongside the Martyrs' Cemetery in Kerman, was part of a broader mobilization across the province, with 50,000 participants province-wide. Ahmadian's remarks came as the crowd honored the legacy of resistance, a theme central to the exercise and the region's identity.

"What tires and frustrates the enemy is not just a single victory in one war by the resistance, but its continuous growth," Ahmadian stated. He highlighted how resistance movements, such as those in Palestine, have evolved over time—from refusing compromise to small marches, defending themselves with stones, and eventually developing missile and weapons factories in the tiny Gaza Strip, surpassing the capabilities of many Islamic nations. "The resistance took shape the day the Palestinian people distanced themselves from compromisers, and it will never end—whether it faces defeat or triumph in a single battle," he asserted.

Ahmadian pointed to the past 450 days of atrocities committed by what he called the "brutal Zionist regime," noting that these actions have awakened consciences worldwide. "Not only in the Islamic world and Iran, but across the globe, awakened consciences have joined the resistance front," he said. He cited the surprising rise of pro-Palestinian and pro-resistance sentiments in American universities, which he claimed once sought to turn academic institutions against the movement. "They had to deploy military units inside universities, arresting professors and students, yet they couldn't stop new adherents from joining the resistance," he added, echoing Iran's Supreme Leader by saying, "They've finally found the true direction of history."

The official warned of an enemy plot to conflate the deep-rooted, enduring resistance with mere warfare. "The enemy wants to convince people that if they achieve a small success in one battle, it means they've won and the resistance has lost," he said. However, he argued that even in recent



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conflicts, such as the ceasefire negotiations in Gaza, Zionist forces suffered heavier losses than in previous periods, failing to extinguish the resistance. "They couldn't succeed there, nor against Hezbollah, and now they occupy a defenseless Syria—but the real victory of resistance lies beyond these battlefields," he stressed.

Ahmadian outlined key distinctions between resistance and war. "War can stem from human whims, like World War II, where the West admits to killing over 100 million of its own people, leaving nothing but bitter memories and destruction," he said. "But resistance, rooted in justice, endures in history because it has a righteous foundation." He added that while resistance may involve fighting, it transcends any single conflict, continuously flourishing and confounding its adversaries.

The philosophy of resistance, particularly when grounded in divine principles, was another focus of his speech. "Rejecting tyranny has been a cornerstone of the righteous throughout history," Ahmadian declared. "As long as this rejection of oppression persists in any community—including Iran's Islamic Revolution—the resistance remains alive." He contrasted war's aim of fleeting victory with resistance's pursuit of a grand, divine goal, sustained by its very existence.

Reflecting on Gaza's resilience over the past year, Ahmadian called it a "divine sign," where despite unimaginable hardship, the people showed unwavering patience and defiance. "The enemy tried every satanic trick to break them, but they starved, thirsted, and died without a single protest—leaving the enemy defeated in spirit," he said. He likened this to Iran's eight-year Sacred Defense, where faith in the unseen transformed not just Iran but the global Islamic community.

Ahmadian concluded by framing the ultimate aim of resistance as "relief" (faraj), a concept tied to spiritual awakening and the emergence of a nation aligned with divine justice. "Resistance isn't about one war or skirmish—it's a movement that will never end, and from every occupation, like Syria today, a new front will rise," he predicted.

The event also paid tribute to Kerman's 6,500 martyrs, 22,000 veterans, and figures like General Qassem Soleimani, whose legacy has elevated the province's role in the global resistance narrative. The exercise, dubbed "Epic of the Tharallahians of Kerman," showcased the province's 211 Basij battalions, culminating in a display of strength by 20,000 members at Soleimani's resting place.

### If Enemy Makes Any Mistake, Israel's Peace Will Be at Risk



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's top military commander has warned that any threat to Iran's security would have dire consequences for the Israeli regime and those potentially supporting its likely further acts of military aggression against the Islamic Republic.

"Our Armed Forces are at the peak of their readiness," Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Bagheri said.

"If the enemy makes any mistake, the Zionist regime's peace and that of those involved in its arming and operational planning will be at risk," he added, speaking on the sidelines of the final phase of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) 19 military drills by the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)'s Ground Forces.

Bagheri stressed that Iran's air defense system was in top form, with any minor damage that had been afflicted to it in the past, swiftly repaired.

"Iran's military forces are fully prepared for offensive operations, and missile production is progressing at high volume and quality without interruption," the commander noted.

Bagheri also highlighted Iran's advancements in drone technology, saying, "We have made extensive plans for deployment of microdrones and loitering drones in various military units," he said.

"Mass deployment of these UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles) in both the IRGC Ground Forces and the Army is underway, and we will continue to equip other units based on operational needs."

The commander's comments came against the backdrop of Iran's escalating deterrence strategy against the Israeli regime and its supporters.

Last year, the Islamic Republic demonstrated its military might with Operation True Promise I and II, retaliatory strikes launched in response to Israeli aggression.

### Tehran, Baku Stress Opposition to Foreign Forces in South Caucasus



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran and Azerbaijan have expressed their opposition to any foreign intervention in South Caucasus, saying it would only escalate tensions in the region.

"We do not accept any interference of foreign forces in the region and regional issues should be resolved by the countries of the region," Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf told her Azerbaijani counterpart Sahiba Gafarova in Baku.

Qalibaf suggested that regional issues should be resolved within the "3+3" Regional Cooperation Platform comprising the Caucasian nations of Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan plus Russia, Turkey, and Iran in order to promote peace and stability.

The Iranian parliament speaker has traveled to Baku for his first visit to Azerbaijan to attend the 15th plenary session of the Asian Parliamentary Assembly (APA).

He said new conditions have emerged in the region, citing the Karabakh war in 2020 which resulted in the return of all territories held by Armenian troops since the 1990s to Azerbaijan.

"In difficult days like the Karabakh war, the people and the Leader of the Islamic Republic supported the liberation of the Azerbaijani territories; today the relations must be strong and develop further," Qalibaf said.

He touched on the tripartite communication between Iran, Azerbaijan and Russia through the North-South Corridor, one of the world's biggest international transportation projects.

"The North-South route and transit to Europe and the Far East can be developed with the cooperation of the two countries," Qalibaf said, adding it could open new capacities for all three countries.

The 7,200-km network includes maritime routes, railways, and land routes, and is meant for transportation from India and the Persian Gulf littoral states to Iran, Afghanistan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, Central Asia, and Eastern Europe.

Qalibaf said, "The will of the Islamic Republic of Iran is to expand relations between the two countries in all fields, especially rail and road transportation and energy transit."

# IRAN NEWS



## Iran, Afghanistan Agree to Strengthen Banking and Financial Ties

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The Central Bank of Iran has announced that the governors of the central banks of Iran and Afghanistan have reached an agreement to enhance and strengthen their financial and banking relations. Mohammadreza Farzin, Governor of the Central Bank of Iran, and Noor Ahmad Agha, Governor of the Central Bank of Afghanistan, met on the sidelines of the Banking Technology Conference in Yekaterinburg, Russia. During their meeting, they discussed ways to develop financial and banking cooperation between the two countries. The central bank governors emphasized the significant economic and trade relations between Iran and Afghanistan and underscored the importance of expanding banking and financial collaboration to further boost economic exchanges. This agreement marks a step toward reinforcing economic ties between the two neighboring nations.

## Tehran Hosts Honoring Ceremony for Dr. Mohammadi Sohravardi



By: F. Taherpour

TEHRAN - A prestigious ceremony was held at the National Library of Iran on Tuesday to honor Dr. Ahmad Mohammadi Sohravardi, a distinguished jurist, scholar, linguist, and poet. The event, attended by over 600 prominent figures from academia, literature, calligraphy, and other sectors, celebrated his lifelong contributions to Iranian and global culture.

The ceremony featured speeches from notable scholars, including Dr. Saeed Omrani, Dr. Asghar Dadbeh, Dr. Ali Shams Ardakani, Master Ali Shirazi, Dr. Faramarz Shirvani, Engineer Pejman Alkhani, Master Mehdi Fallah, and Master Ali Ganji. Each speaker highlighted Dr. Sohravardi's extensive impact across various disciplines, emphasizing his role in bridging the fields of law, literature, and linguistics.

Speaking to reporters, Dr. Sohravardi underscored the need for a broader, international approach to cultural heritage.

"To globalize our heritage, we must speak the language of the world, embrace modern discourse, and engage in meaningful interactions," he stated, stressing the role of interdisciplinary dialogue in shaping civilization.

A highlight of the event was a calligraphy exhibition dedicated to Dr. Sohravardi's poetry. Ali Ganji, a master calligrapher and inspector of the Iranian Calligraphers Association, showcased 25 calligraphic pieces featuring diverse styles such as Naskh, Chalipa, and Siah Mashq. The exhibition was widely praised as one of the most notable calligraphy displays in recent years.

As part of the ceremony, the book "I Become Illumination", a collection of Dr. Sohravardi's poetry, was unveiled. Additionally, leading cultural figures and media professionals were recognized for their contributions. Honorees included: Majid Talimi - Senior journalist, public relations expert; Alireza Malahati - Editor-in-chief, Tejarat Ava, Mohammad Ali Azarbarzin - Editor, Tasvir Bazar; Elaheh Si Sattar - Economic editor, Shomanev; Masoud Shariatzadeh - Editor-in-chief, Asr Eqtasad; Gurkan Demir - Tehran bureau chief, Ulusan TV; Hashem Rahimi - Journalist, Aydinlik Newspaper; Navid Sarkhi - Reporter, Turkey Channel 14; Mehdi Rafiei - Correspondent, Al-Eshraq, Erbil; Wisam Asad - Reporter, Al-Nujaba, Iraq; Alireza Asadpour - Reporter, Sahar International Network, Fereydon Taherpour Asl - Editor-in-chief, Iran News Daily; and Sahar International Network and Iran Press News Agency.

The event reinforced Iran's dedication to cultural preservation and intellectual exchange, honoring individuals whose work continues to shape the nation's literary and artistic landscape.

## Minister Says His Duty Is to Neutralize the Pressure of Sanctions

TEHRAN - The Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance, in an extraordinary meeting of the Ministry's Deputy Council, which was unexpectedly attended by the President, emphasized the serious determination of the ministry and the fourteenth government in pursuing their programs for financing economic growth.

Abdolnasser Hemmati stated that currently, 80% of the government's budget is practically financed by the Ministry of Economy. He explained that budget revenues come from taxes, customs revenues, corporate profits, privatization of confiscated assets, and government bonds, all of which fall within the responsibilities of the Ministry of Economy.

Hemmati emphasized that one of the most important duties of the Ministry of Economy is to regulate the country's economic and financial affairs, meaning that all matters related to the country's finances are entrusted to the ministry.

Referring to his recent trip to Saudi Arabia, he noted that Saudi Arabia has three separate ministries for economy, finance, and investment, whereas Iran's Ministry of Economy functions as a super ministry, overseeing all these responsibilities.

The Minister further highlighted the presence of the head of the Planning and Budget Organization in the meeting, explaining the seamless coordination between this organization and the Treasury. He stated that, thanks to the leadership of Mr. Pourmohammadi, government payments, particularly salaries of employees, have faced no issues so far.

Hemmati elaborated on the performance of the Tax Affairs Organization, stressing its commitment to achieving tax justice while expanding the tax base and increasing revenues. He stated that curbing tax evasion is a key objective.

Regarding the organization's performance, Hemmati mentioned that for the first time, Iran's tax revenues have surpassed one quadrillion tomans, a significant figure. He added that the Ministry of Economy had promised the Planning and Budget Organization that this year, tax revenues would reach the 1,250 trillion tomans projected in the 1403 (2024-2025) budget law, and he expressed confidence that this target would be met.

Addressing recent developments regarding Iran's engagement with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), Hemmati mentioned that a letter was sent by the Ministry's Financial Intelligence Center, inquiring about the impact of former U.S. President Trump's stance on FATF's cooperation with Iran. The response indicated that FATF does not act based on the directives of a single individual but makes decisions through collective consensus.

Regarding privatization, Hemmati noted that while the privatization law addresses the empowerment of the private sector, this aspect has largely been overlooked. He stated that previous governments have focused solely on selling state-owned enterprises rather than fostering a robust private sector.



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The Minister of Economy stressed that the government aims to accelerate private sector involvement in the economy through the Privatization Organization, the Business Dialogue Council, and the Chamber of Commerce.

Speaking on government revenue collection, he pointed out that tax collection and other revenues were uncertain for four months at the beginning of the year. However, the government managed to recover from this setback and meet its budgetary revenue targets within six months.

Hemmati highlighted that a key focus of the Ministry of Economy, in line with the Supreme Leader's directives, is supporting production and economic growth. Accordingly, the ministry is mandated by law to finance production.

He emphasized that production financing requires structural reforms, particularly improving the business environment and removing obstacles for producers and economic players, which has also been a recent focus of the Supreme Leader.

Hemmati stated that the government is working to leverage capital markets for production financing and has initiated efforts to establish "project companies." These companies will allow for public participation in financing production projects by selling shares to the public. He suggested that each province should have at least two such project companies.

He also highlighted attracting foreign investment as another strategy for production financing, which the ministry is actively pursuing. He noted that during his recent trip to Saudi Arabia, there was significant interest from regional countries in collaborating with Iran.

Hemmati emphasized that in addition to assisting the Central Bank in monetary and foreign exchange policies and supporting the Planning and Budget Organization in drafting the budget and implementing the Seventh Development Plan, the Ministry of Economy is also advancing its mission to finance production.

He noted that the Seventh Development Plan aims for 8% economic growth, with 2.8% expected from productivity. Achieving this, he argued, requires enhancing economic competitiveness and avoiding price controls.

In conclusion, the Minister of Economy acknowledged the significant pressure that sanctions impose on Iran's economy. He reiterated that the government's responsibility is to neutralize these pressures and strive to achieve the economic growth targets outlined in the Seventh Development Plan. He expressed confidence that these goals are attainable despite external constraints, provided that the private sector is fully engaged.

He emphasized that the government should not position itself as a competitor to the private sector but should instead support and facilitate its growth.

## Radiation Technology to Reduce 40 Million Tons of Agricultural Waste in Iran



TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization announced that radiation treatment of agricultural products could significantly reduce waste by 40 million tons, playing a crucial role in the country's food security.

Speaking at the inauguration of the first radiation processing center in southwest Iran, Mohammad Eslami highlighted the importance of establishing such facilities. He stated that radiation treatment can enhance both production and export processes in the agricultural sector.

Eslami noted that Iran produces approximately 130 million tons of agricultural products annually, but 30%—equivalent to 40 million tons—goes to waste. He emphasized that radiation technology can eliminate pests and pesticide residues, improving food safety and security.

He further pointed out that contamination from pesticides is a major barrier to exporting agricultural products. With the implementation of radiation processing, these issues can be resolved, creating a more efficient value chain for food products.

Eslami also discussed the country's efforts to expand the use of radiation technology in agriculture, in collaboration with the private sector. He mentioned that Iran has already established the necessary infrastructure to process around half a million tons of agricultural products.

Despite economic sanctions, Eslami asserted that Iran remains stable and is one of the few countries without foreign debt. He criticized foreign economic pressure on Iran, particularly the depreciation of the national currency, and stressed the need to safeguard economic stability.

Expressing appreciation for the efforts of officials at the Ahvaz radiation center, Eslami stated that the facility was strategically placed to benefit universities and energy sector professionals. He also acknowledged that Iran was late in adopting radiation technology, while other countries have been using it for decades. To address this, Iran plans to establish more radiation processing centers nationwide.

During his visit to Khuzestan, Eslami is also set to inspect the construction progress of the 300-megawatt Karun nuclear power plant in Darkhovin. His visit, which began this morning via Mahshahr Airport, includes meetings with local officials and an assessment of industrial projects in the province.

## Foreign Sanctions and Domestic Regulations: Two Major Challenges for Carpet Exports



IRAN NEWS/ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - In a specialized meeting held by the Kerman Chamber of Commerce on the carpet industry, experts and officials discussed the sector's challenges and potential solutions for revitalizing Iran's carpet exports. The session was attended by the chairman and vice-chairman of the Carpet Commission of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, the president of the Iranian Handmade Carpet Producers and Exporters Union, and several industry representatives and exporters from Kerman province.

The meeting, organized by the Tourism and Handicrafts Commission of the Kerman Chamber of Commerce, was titled "The Future of Iran's Carpet Exports (Kerman Carpet): Challenges and Opportunities." It took place at the Banoo Bibi Hayati Economic Museum in Kerman.

During the session, the chairman of the Carpet, Art, and Handicrafts Commission of the Iran Chamber of Commerce highlighted Kerman's rich history in carpet production, stating that in recent years, the region's prominence in the sector has diminished. He emphasized the need to boost Kerman's presence in global carpet markets.

Seyed Morteza Haji Agha Miri pointed out that in addition to international sanctions, domestic regulations pose significant challenges, effectively acting as internal sanctions that hinder carpet exporters. He stressed the importance of collaboration at the provincial level to address these internal obstacles.

One major issue affecting carpet exports is the foreign exchange commitment imposed on exporters. He suggested reducing this requirement to 10-20% to ease the burden on the industry.

## Isfahan Welcomes Foreign Tourists as the "City of Peace" in the Middle East

TEHRAN - In a significant move to promote tourism, Isfahan hosted the first-ever international gathering of 100 tour operators from around the world. Officials emphasized the city's rich cultural heritage, historic landmarks, and peaceful coexistence of diverse religious communities, positioning Isfahan as a premier global destination.

Mojgan Izadi, head of the Tourism, Carpet, and Handicrafts Commission of the Isfahan Chamber of Commerce, highlighted Iran's vast tourism potential, stating that many of the country's historical and cultural sites rank among the best in the world. She emphasized the importance of utilizing these assets to attract international visitors.

Speaking at the event's opening ceremony, Izadi expressed gratitude for the cooperation between local government authorities, cultural heritage organizations, the municipality, and the private sector in organizing the gathering. She noted that planning for the event began in June, overcoming multiple challenges to ensure its successful execution.

"We wanted to showcase a different reality than what foreign media portray about Iran. Contrary to the negative image often presented, Isfahan is a city of peace and tranquility, where followers of four different religions live harmoniously," she said. "We hope that when our guests return home, they will become ambassadors of peace, goodwill, and security."

Comparing Isfahan's historical landmarks to famous global sites, Izadi pointed out that while Paris attracts 45 million tourists annually, Isfahan welcomes only 500,000 foreign visitors. She underscored that Khaju Bridge, built over 400 years ago, predates the Eiffel Tower, which is only 136 years old. Likewise, the iconic Champs-Élysées was inspired by Isfahan's Chaharbagh Boulevard.

Amir Keshani, President of the Isfahan Chamber of Commerce, reiterated that Isfahan is not just a city but a living museum of history, art, and culture. Often referred to as "Half of the World,"



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the city boasts architectural wonders such as Naqsh-e Jahan Square, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, and the centuries-old bridges over the Zayandeh River.

"Visitors strolling through the historic bazaars of Chaharbagh or crossing our ancient bridges experience a journey through time," Keshani said. "Here, Muslims, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians coexist peacefully, and history has never recorded any religious conflicts in this city. This is why Isfahan is a symbol of mutual respect and harmony."

He encouraged international tour operators to introduce Isfahan

to the world, emphasizing its unique combination of history, exquisite handicrafts, and warm hospitality. "If your travelers seek an unforgettable cultural experience, Isfahan is the perfect destination," he added.

Mehdi Jamali-Nejad, Governor of Isfahan, also underscored the province's extensive tourism potential, noting that Isfahan is home to over 4,500 handicraft workshops and has served as Iran's capital three times throughout history. With 15 sister cities and memberships in various international organizations, the city plays a vital role in global cultural exchanges.

"Isfahan province boasts 22,000 natural, historical, and spiritual attractions, making it one of Iran's top tourism destinations," Jamali-Nejad said. "Within Isfahan city alone, there are 1,200 historically significant sites. It was even recognized as the Islamic Capital of Culture in 2006."

The governor also announced that in 2025, Isfahan will be named the "Tourism Capital of Asian Cities," further solidifying its status as a leading cultural and historical destination.

With a unique blend of historical grandeur, artistic excellence, and peaceful coexistence, Isfahan continues to position itself as a must-visit location for travelers seeking an authentic and enriching experience in the heart of the Middle East.

## Iran Expected to Import \$3b in Gasoline by Yearend Amid Decline in CNG Usage



TEHRAN - The head of the CNG Association, Mohsen Johari, has warned that Iran's growing dependence on gasoline is increasing the country's need for fuel imports, with projections indicating that gasoline imports will rise to \$3 billion by the end of this year.

Speaking at a press conference, Johari highlighted that Iran imported approximately \$2 billion worth of gasoline in 2023, and this figure is expected to grow due to declining consumption of compressed natural gas (CNG). He criticized the government's lack of support for the CNG industry, which he believes has led to a reversal in fuel policy and an increasing reliance on gasoline.

Johari pointed out that in the early 2000s, Iran pursued policies aimed at increasing the share of CNG in the fuel mix for light vehicles, successfully curbing the uncontrolled rise in gasoline consumption. However, in recent years, these efforts have been abandoned, leading to a steady decline in CNG's share in the country's fuel market.

One of the main reasons for this trend, Johari explained, is the sharp decrease in the production of dual-fuel vehicles by domestic automakers. Previously, a significant portion of Iranian vehicles were manufactured to run on both gasoline and CNG, but production of such cars has almost completely stopped, driving up gasoline consumption.

## Venezuelan Migrants Fly Home From Guantanamo Via Honduras

CARACAS (Dispatches) - The U.S. government and a Venezuelan state airline flew 177 Venezuelan migrants from Guantanamo Bay to Honduras and on to Venezuela on Thursday, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Department of Homeland Security said.

Venezuelan Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello was at the airport outside Caracas when the plane landed at around 10 p.m. (0200 GMT) and went aboard to greet the migrants.

All those returning would be subject to health checks and any with pending criminal charges would be placed in the hands of the courts, Cabello said on state television. The return of the Venezuelan migrants from Guantanamo was "an effort of negotiation", he said.



## Mexico Not to Accept U.S. Invasion in Fight Against Cartels



MEXICO CITY (Dispatches) - Mexico's president warned the United States against US gunmakers after Washington designated cartels as terrorist organisations.

The remarks were the latest in a series hitting back at the administration of President Donald Trump, which has ramped up pressure on its southern neighbour to curb illegal flows of drugs and migrants.

Mexico is trying to avoid the sweeping 25-percent tariffs threatened by Trump by increasing cooperation in the fight against narcotics trafficked by the cartels in his sights.

The eight Latin American drug trafficking groups designated as terrorist organisations include Mexican gangs such as the Jalisco New Generation and Sinaloa cartels - two of the country's most powerful and violent criminal organisations.

But the designation "cannot be an opportunity for the US to invade our sovereignty," President Claudia Sheinbaum told a news conference.

"They can call them (the cartels) whatever they want, but with Mexico, it is collaboration and coordination, never subordination or interventionism, and even less invasion."

In an interview broadcast late yesterday on the social media platform X, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio attempted to allay those concerns.

"In the case of Mexico, the preference always is to work in conjunction with our partners in Mexico, and we can provide them a lot of information about who they are and where they're located," he said, referring to the newly designated criminal gangs.

Sheinbaum said Mexico would expand its legal action against US gun manufacturers, which her government accuses of negligence in the sale of weapons that end up in the hands of drug traffickers.

The lawsuit could lead to a new charge of alleged "complicity" with terrorist groups, she said.

Trump signed an executive order on his first day back in the White House last month saying that the cartels "constitute a national security threat beyond that posed by traditional organised crime."

## Morales Runs for President Again, Defying Term Limit



LA PAZ (Dispatches) - Bolivian ex-president Evo Morales launched a fresh election bid Thursday ahead of polls in August, in defiance of a constitutional term limit and pending criminal charges.

"We will win," Morales told reporters in his political fiefdom of Cochabamba in central Bolivia in announcing his run.

Morales, 65, claims to be the victim of a campaign to sideline him politically, led by incumbent President Luis Arce who was once an ally but now his main rival.

Morales is the subject of an arrest warrant in an ongoing investigation into claims he had a sexual relationship with a teenage girl while in office from 2006 to 2019.

Rising from dire poverty to become Bolivia's first-ever Indigenous president, he retains a large following in the South American country.

His refusal to give up power in 2019 led to a tumultuous exit that cast a shadow over nearly 14 years of economic progress and poverty reduction.

Courts have since upheld Bolivia's constitutional two-term limit, which Morales had previously managed to evade due to a change to the rules during his first term.

He said Thursday he would seek re-election with a party other than the left-wing MAS he and Arce have both represented.

# Zelensky Calls for Strong Ties With U.S., Musk Slams Ukraine's Leader

KYIV (Dispatches) - Volodymyr Zelensky called for "strong" ties with Washington on Thursday, as he met US envoy Keith Kellogg in Kyiv a day after Donald Trump branded the Ukrainian leader a "dictator."

Tensions between Zelensky and Trump over the U.S. President's outreach to Moscow have exploded this week in a series of escalating barbs traded in press conferences and on social media.

The United States is Ukraine's most important financial and military backer, but the U.S. president has rattled Kyiv and its European backers by opening talks with Moscow they fear could end the war on terms that reward Vladimir Putin.

The spat has turned personal with Trump falsely stating Zelensky is hugely unpopular among his own people and the Ukrainian leader in turn saying Trump had succumbed to Russian "disinformation".

Amid the war of words, Zelensky said Thursday he had held a "productive meeting" with Kellogg.

"We had a detailed conversation about the battlefield situation, how to return our prisoners of war, and effective security guarantees," Zelensky said on social media after the meeting.

"Strong Ukraine-U.S. relations benefit the entire world," he added.

However, there was no joint press conference or statements after the discussions, as would typically be expected for a visiting foreign envoy.

Gulliver Cragg reports from Kyiv following US envoy's meeting with Ukraine's Zelensky

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In the United States, some of Trump's team doubled down on their attacks on Zelensky.

In a post on his X social media site, Elon Musk said Zelensky was "despised by the people of Ukraine."

Trump's National Security Advisor Mike Waltz told Fox News that Kyiv's criticism of the US president was "unacceptable" and urged Zelensky to sign a deal giving preferential access to Ukraine's critical minerals and natural resources.

"We're getting all this pushback... they need to tone it down and take a hard look and sign that deal," he said.

Trump is calling for Kyiv to hand over access to its mineral wealth as compensation for tens of billions of dollars in US aid delivered under his predecessor Joe Biden.

Zelensky rejected a deal proposed by Trump as it did not include "security guarantees" - Kyiv's key demand from its Western



Trump next week after European leaders held emergency summits in recent days over how to deal with Trump's threats to overhaul decades of transatlantic security ties.

The Kremlin, buoyed by its rapprochement with Washington, has hailed Trump's comments.

Russia, which for years has railed against the US military presence in Europe, wants a reorganisation of the continent's security framework as part of any deal to end the Ukraine fighting.

Putin said Wednesday that US allies "only have themselves to blame for what's happening," suggesting they were paying the price for opposing Trump's return to the White House.

China came out in support of US President Donald Trump's bid to strike a deal with Russia to end the war in Ukraine, at a G20 meeting in South Africa on Thursday, while U.S. allies rallied around Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

"China supports all efforts conducive to peace (in Ukraine), including the recent consensus reached between the United States and Russia," Wang Yi told other G20 foreign ministers gathered in Johannesburg, according to a statement from his ministry.

# Israeli Military Claims Body Released by Hamas Is Not of a Hostage

TEL AVIV (Dispatches) - The Israeli military said on Friday that one of the bodies released by Hamas did not belong to any of the hostages held in Gaza, accusing Hamas of violating an already shaking ceasefire.

Two of the bodies were identified as infant Kfir Bibas and his four-year-old brother Ariel, while a third body that was supposed to be their mother, Shiri, was found not to match with any hostage and remained unidentified, the military said.

"This is a violation of utmost severity by the Hamas terrorist organization, which is obliged under the agreement to return four deceased hostages," the military said, in a statement, demanding the return of Shiri and all hostages.

The family of hostage Oded Lifshitz, said in a statement that his body had been formally identified.

There was no immediate reaction from Hamas.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu earlier vowed revenge on Hamas after the group released the remains of what it said were four hostages, including that of Kfir and Ariel, the youngest of those abducted during the October 7, 2023, attack.

Palestinian militants handed over four black coffins in a carefully orchestrated public display as a crowd of Palestinians and dozens of armed Hamas militants watched, creating a spectacle which was condemned by U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

The purported remains of the boys, their mother and Lifshitz, were handed over under the Gaza ceasefire agreement reached last month with the backing of the United States and the mediation of Qatar and Egypt.

Israelis lined the road in the rain near the Gaza border to pay their respects as



the convoy carrying the coffins drove by.

"We stand here together, with a broken heart. The sky is also crying with us and we pray to see better days," said one woman, who gave her name only as Efrat.

In Tel Aviv, people gathered, some weeping, in a public square opposite Israel's defence headquarters that has come to be known as Hostages Square. "Agony. Pain. There are no words. Our hearts - the hearts of an entire nation - lie in tatters," said President Isaac Herzog.

In a recorded address released after the remains of the hostages were handed over, Netanyahu vowed to eliminate Hamas, saying "the four coffins" obliged Israel to ensure "more than ever" that there was no repeat of the October 7

attack.

"Our loved ones' blood is shouting at us from the soil and is obliging us to settle the score with the despicable murderers, and we will," he said.

Over the course of the 16-month-old conflict, Israeli officials have repeatedly asserted that Hamas would be destroyed and the roughly 250 hostages abducted during the October 2023 Hamas-led attack on Israel would be returned home.

During Thursday's handover, one militant stood beside a poster showing coffins wrapped in Israeli flags. It read "The Return of the War = The Return of your Prisoners in Coffins".

U.N. chief Guterres condemned "the parading of bodies and displaying of the coffins of the deceased hostages in the manner seen this morning, which is abhorrent and appalling," his spokesperson, Stephane Dujarric, said.

He said international law required remains to be handed over in a way that ensures "respect for the dignity of the deceased and their families."

Hamas said in November 2023 that the boys and their mother had been killed in an Israeli airstrike, but their deaths were not confirmed by Israeli authorities.

The handover marked the first return of dead bodies during the current agreement.

The military said that the Bibas children had been murdered in captivity in November 2023 by "terrorists". The prime minister's office earlier said that Lifshitz was murdered in captivity by Islamic Jihad, another militant group in Gaza.

# Trump Seeks to Reshape Asia's Energy Supplies With U.S. Gas

TOKYO (Dispatches) - When President Donald Trump sat down to lunch with his Japanese counterpart this month, talk turned quickly to how Tokyo could help realise a decades-old proposal to unlock gas in Alaska and ship it to U.S. allies in Asia.

Trump and his energy tsar Doug Burgum framed the venture as a way for Japan to replace Middle East energy shipments and address its trade imbalance with the U.S., according to two officials briefed on the closed-door talks.

Japanese premier Shigeru Ishiba - eager to ensure a positive first meeting and stave off damaging U.S. tariffs - struck an optimistic note about the Alaska LNG project despite Tokyo's doubts about its viability.

Ishiba told Trump and Burgum that he hoped Japan could participate in the \$44 billion project, said the officials, granted anonymity due to the sensitivity of the talks.

Trump repeatedly mentioned the project in his public remarks after the lunch. Ishiba did not, and there was no reference to it in the official readout of the talks.

Reuters interviews with more than a dozen people, including current and former U.S. and Asian officials, show how the Trump administration is moving to recast economic relations with East Asia by binding regional allies to Washington through increased investment in American fossil fuels, particularly LNG.

The U.S. sales pitch seeks to tap into concerns in Asian capitals about tariffs and the security of sea lanes that carry their energy imports, Reuters found. Details of the behind-the-scenes exchanges and specifics of the U.S. approach have not been



previously reported.

While the Alaska LNG proposal faces cost and logistical hurdles, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and others are buying into the idea of increasing U.S. gas imports more broadly, which could bolster the U.S. economy and blunt the influence of China and Russia.

Japan's participation in Trump's emerging strategy would be critical: It is the world's No.2 LNG buyer, a major investor in energy infrastructure, and a trading hub with a glut of LNG that could help open new markets for U.S. gas in Southeast Asia.

"If the Trump administration were to have its way, U.S. LNG would flow in massive quantities to Japan and South Korea and then would flow downstream...so that Southeast Asia would become economically dependent on the United States," said Kenneth Weinstein, Japan chair at Hudson Institute, a conservative think tank. "It's redrawing the map of energy dependence."

In a joint statement with U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio on Saturday, Japanese and South Korean foreign ministers agreed to strengthen energy security by "unleashing" America's "affordable and reliable energy", particularly LNG. They did not mention Alaska.

White House National Security Spokesman Brian Hughes told Reuters the U.S. "produces some of the cleanest LNG in the world and we believe the Japanese can play an even bigger role in purchasing America's abundant oil and gas".

## Lehecka Stuns Carlos Alcaraz in Doha Quarters



DOHA (Dispatches) - Jiri Lehecka knocked off top-seeded Spaniard Carlos Alcaraz on Thursday to advance to the semifinals of the Qatar ExxonMobil Open in Doha.

The 23-year-old Czech trailed 4-2 in the third set before rallying to win 6-3, 3-6, 6-4. Lehecka struck eight aces and converted 4 of 8 break chances to secure the first Top 3 win of his career. Lehecka will play eighth-seeded Jack Draper of Great Britain, who rallied past Italy's Matteo Berrettini 4-6, 6-4, 6-3.

Also advancing was No. 5 seed Andrey Rublev of Russia, a 6-1, 3-6, 7-6 (8) winner over No. 2 seed Alex de Minaur of Australia, who will face Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime. Auger-Aliassime won the first set 6-3 when No. 4 seed Daniil Medvedev of Russia retired due to what he said was food poisoning.

Fourth-seeded Francisco Cerundolo of Argentina prevailed in a rematch from last week, beating Italy's Luciano Darderi 6-7 (1), 6-3, 6-2 in the second round at Rio de Janeiro.

When the same two players faced off last week in Buenos Aires, Cerundolo prevailed 6-4, 6-4 en route to an appearance in the tournament final. This time, Cerundolo was able to turn the match around by facing just one break point in each of the final two sets and saving both.

In other second-round action, France's Alexandre Muller topped eighth-seeded Tomas Martin Etcheverry of Argentina 7-5, 7-6 (5); Argentina's Camilo Ugo Carabelli eliminated Bosnia's Damir Dzumhur 6-4, 6-4; and Portugal's Jaime Faria defeated Spain's Jaume Munar 6-4, 2-6, 6-3.

Meanwhile Dubai Police detained a tourist who had engaged in behavior that caused Emma Raducanu distress during her match at the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships, the Government of Dubai said on Thursday.

Britain's Raducanu was visibly distressed and reduced to tears early in her match against Karolina Muchova as she stood behind the umpire's chair while a spectator was escorted away by security personnel.

The individual was seated in the first few rows during Raducanu's match. The Women's Tennis Association (WTA) later said the individual was ejected and banned from all WTA events pending a threat assessment.

"Following Raducanu's complaint, Dubai Police detained a tourist who approached her, left her a note, took her photograph and engaged in behavior that caused her distress during the Dubai Duty Free Tennis Championships," the government of Dubai said.

"While Raducanu later chose to drop the charges, the individual signed a formal undertaking to maintain distance from her and has been banned from future tournaments."

The government did not say if the individual had been released. Former U.S. Open champion Raducanu lost the match 7-6(6) 6-4 but later said she was proud of how she responded after the "difficult experience".

## Mbappe's Man City Destruction Just the Start for Real Madrid Superstar



MADRID (Dispatches) - Kylian Mbappé's hat-trick against Manchester City propelled Real Madrid into the Champions League last 16 today and him to a new personal high with Los Blancos.

This was the kind of night the French superstar dreamed of, both as a boy in his bedroom surrounded by Cristiano Ronaldo posters and in his past few seasons at Paris Saint-Germain.

As PSG came up short year after year in Europe, Mbappé watched on as Madrid extended their power over the European game, reaching a record 15 European Cup triumphs.

With Madrid's poor start to the current campaign — in part due to Mbappé's teething problems — leaving the Spanish and European champions in the play-off round against City, they needed the forward to deliver.

With three lethal finishes he did just that to help Carlo Ancelotti's rampant Madrid seal a 3-1 win on the night and a 6-3 aggregate triumph.

"Everyone gave it their all today," said Mbappé. "People told me about these nights and now I can see it with my own eyes and I want to live through many more of them."

After years of speculation and failed attempts to sign him, Mbappé finally arrived in the Spanish capital last summer.

However, his first few months brought problems, an apparent lack of confidence and erratic form.

Missed penalties against Liverpool and Athletic Bilbao highlighted the concerns around him, but Mbappé drew a line under it and pledged to show his character.

With 18 goals in his last 18 matches, he has done just that and his best performance in a Madrid shirt came at the adoring Santiago Bernabéu against City.

## Roma Reach Europa League Last 16

PARIS (Dispatches) - Paulo Dybala scored twice as Roma beat Porto to clinch a place in the last 16 of the Europa League, while Ajax clawed through in extra time despite playing a man down for 95 minutes.

Spanish forward Samu Aghehowa gave Porto the lead against Roma after a 1-1 draw in Portugal last week, but two quick-fire goals from Dybala turned the tie in favour of the 2023 runners-up.

Porto were reduced to 10 men when Canada midfielder Stephen Eustaquio was sent off early in the second half, and Niccolò Pisilli struck what proved to be the crucial third goal for Claudio Ranieri's men.

Devyne Rensch turned into his own net deep into added time as Roma progressed 4-3 on aggregate.

"Having a champion like Dybala means a lot. He's extraordinary, he says very little, but he is a leader and always says the right things," Ranieri told Sky Sport.

Roma will find out whether they play Athletic Bilbao or city rivals Lazio in the next round when the draw for the last 16 is conducted today.

"We have a huge opportunity in Europe. This competition can give us a lot this year," said Dybala.

Four-time European champions Ajax survived a huge scare against close neighbours Union Saint-Gilloise of Belgium, nearly squandering a 2-0 advantage from a week ago.

Kevin Mac Allister's header halved the deficit and Promise David



tucked away a penalty after Ajax captain Davy Klaassen was dismissed in the 25th minute for a deliberate handball.

But Kenneth Taylor's spot-kick in extra time was enough to put Ajax through 3-2 on aggregate.

José Mourinho, a former winner of the competition with Porto and Manchester United, saw his Fenerbahçe side go through 5-2 overall after a 2-2 draw away to Anderlecht in a match that was delayed in the first half by crowd trouble.

Real Sociedad thrashed Midtjylland 7-3 on aggregate after a 5-2 win in San Sebastián. The Spaniards will take on United or Tottenham in the last 16.

Norwegian champions Bodo/Glimt overturned a first-leg deficit against Dutch side Twente with a dramatic 5-2 win after extra time

in the Arctic Circle to progress 6-4 on aggregate.

The hosts were heading out before striking twice in second-half stoppage time, but Twente then levelled the tie and forced extra time with a last-gasp equaliser.

Sondre Brunstad Fet put Bodo/Glimt back ahead in the 111th minute, with a second own goal of the night from Twente sealing qualification for their opponents.

Robbie Keane's Ferencváros slid to a 3-0 loss at Viktoria Plzeň, falling short after their 1-0 win last Thursday.

AZ Alkmaar eased past Galatasaray 6-3 on aggregate despite conceding a two-goal lead in a 2-2 draw in Turkey, while Romanians FCSB won 2-0 in Bucharest to complete a 4-1 aggregate win over PAOK of Greece.

In the Conference League, Real Betis moved into the last 16 despite a 1-0 loss in the return leg at home to Gent.

Barcelona loanee Vitor Roque saw red before English defender Archie Brown's late winner for Gent, but Betis went through 3-1 on aggregate.

The Spaniards will next take on Chelsea or Vitória Guimarães, with the draw for the latter stages of the third-tier European competition also set for today.

Copenhagen, who are other possible opponents for Chelsea, knocked out Heidenheim 4-3 over two legs after winning the return fixture 3-1 in Germany after extra time.

## Liverpool's Title Charge Dented by Aston Villa Draw



BIRMINGHAM (Dispatches) - Liverpool's Premier League title charge was slowed by Aston Villa after a pulsating 2-2 draw today left neither side satisfied.

Arne Slot's men open up an eight-point lead at the top of the table over second-placed Arsenal, but the Gunners now have a game in hand over the Reds.

Liverpool led through Mohamed Salah but were also forced to come from behind after Youri Tielemans and Ollie Watkins swung momentum in Villa's favour.

Trent Alexander-Arnold's deflected shot secured a point for the visitors, but it should have been more as substitute Darwin Núñez missed a glorious chance to snatch victory.

"You can understand there is one person in the dressing room who feels quite down," said Slot on Núñez's late miss.

"If you watch the game back we created far more chances than them, we did everything we needed to do. The only thing that wasn't perfect was conceding from a set-piece."

Villa, though, could also have won it in stoppage time as Morgan Rogers and Donyell Malen went close.

A point does little for Villa's hope of returning to the Champions League next season as they remain in ninth.

"A draw I think is fair for both teams because they had also chances to score," said Villa boss Unai Emery.

Liverpool are now 22 Premier League games unbeaten, but after conceding at the death against local rivals Everton, a second 2-2 draw in eight days offers Arsenal hope in the title race.

Slot's men also face a tough trip to Manchester City tomorrow.

"We're happy where we are," added Slot. "A bit too much now we played games where we deserve more than we got."

"We want to achieve something together this season and we have all the ingredients for it but still 12 games to go."

Marcus Rashford and Marco Asensio were handed their first Villa starts by Emery as he reacted to a disappointing 1-1 draw against 10-man Ipswich yesterday.

Rashford nearly had a hand in the opening goal but had strayed offside before his cross was turned into his own net by Virgil van Dijk.

Villa were masters of their own downfall when the opener did arrive on 29 minutes.

Andres Garcia's backpass went straight to Diogo Jota, who unselfishly squared for Salah to fire in his 29th goal of the season.

## LeBron James Pours in 40 as Lakers Down Blazers

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - LeBron James scored 40 points for the second time since turning 40 and also grabbed eight rebounds while leading the Los Angeles Lakers to a 110-102 victory over the host Portland Trail Blazers on Thursday.

Austin Reaves added 32 points and seven assists as the Lakers bounced back from a dreary 100-97 home loss to the Charlotte Hornets one night earlier. Dorian Finney-Smith had 10 points for Los Angeles.

Lakers guard Luka Doncic (calf) was rested in the second of a back-to-back games.

Deni Avdija had 28 points and five assists and Toumani Camara registered 19 points, seven rebounds and five steals for Portland. Scoot Henderson added 12 points and Shaedon Sharpe had 11 for the Trail Blazers, who lost their fourth consecutive contest.

James matched his career worst of 11 turnovers, part of Los Angeles' season-high 24 giveaways.

Gabe Vincent made two free throws with 16.7 seconds left to give the Lakers a 108-102 lead. Reaves then knocked the ball out of Jerami Grant's hands to end Portland's hopes.

James sank two free throws with 5.2 seconds left to sew up the 40-point effort. His first since turning 40 in December came when he



had 42 against the Golden State Warriors on Feb. 6.

Michael Jordan is the only other player to score 40 points in an NBA game after turning 40. He scored 43 for the Washington Wizards against the then-New Jersey Nets on Feb. 21, 2003, four days after his 40th birthday.

Los Angeles shot 47.6 percent from the field, including 9 of 32 (28.1 percent) from 3-point range, while beating Portland for the sixth straight time.

The Trail Blazers connected on 44.2 percent of their shots and were 12 of 37 (32.4 percent) from behind the arc.

Portland was down by 11 in the third quarter before Avdija went on a personal 9-0 run to pull the Trail Blazers within 66-64 with 6:03 left in the period.

Portland climbed within 78-77 after Camara's trey with 6.2 seconds left in the third quarter.

Early in the final period, Portland's Anfernee Simons drove for a layup to tie it at 81 with 10:40 remaining.

The Lakers responded with eight straight points, the last six on two 3-pointers by James.

Reaves' steal and dash for a layup gave Los Angeles a 93-84 advantage with 7:07 remaining.

Reaves later buried a 3-pointer with 3:26 left before Camara scored four straight points to pull the Trail Blazers within 102-98 with 2:44 to go.

Reaves had 19 points and James had 16 as the Lakers held a 55-47 halftime lead. Avdija topped the Trail Blazers with 10 points prior to the break.

Meanwhile Donovan Mitchell and the Cleveland Cavaliers look to continue their dominating ways on Friday when they host the New York Knicks.

Mitchell scored 26 points on Thursday as Cleveland posted its fifth win in a row and ninth in the last 10 games, a 110-97 decision against the Brooklyn Nets in New York.