

# IRAN NEWS

President Masoud Pezeshkian, During His Visit to the Eurasia Expo 2025 in Tehran, Has Emphasized That His Administration Is Determined to Pave the Ground for the Development of Free Trade

Iran's Interest Section in Washington, D.C. Says the Islamic Republic Has Implemented Necessary Measures to Support Iranian Expatriates Who Were Recently Expelled From the U.S. and Transferred to Panama

## 2 DOMESTIC



### Iran Targets \$10b Trade Vision With EAEU

> SEE PAGE 2

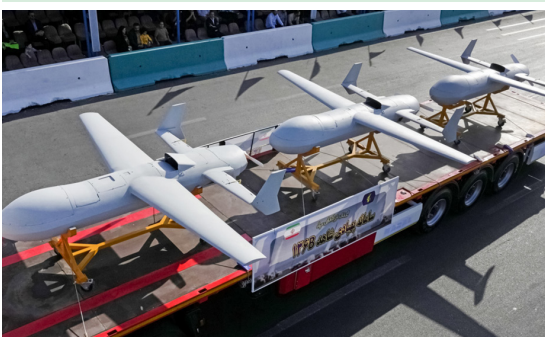
## 3 INTERNATIONAL

### Hamas Releases New Hostage Body After Misidentification of Shiri Bibas

> SEE PAGE 3



### "No Legal Prohibition" on Sale of Shahed Drone



TEHRAN (pressTV) - Iran's permanent mission to the United Nations has stressed that there is "no legal prohibition" on the sale of the country's Shahed drone to other countries after some US reports alleged it was used by Russia in its war on Ukraine.

"The Shahed drone is among the world's most advanced unmanned aerial vehicles, possessing exceptional reconnaissance, surveillance, and operational capabilities while maintaining an extremely cost-effective price," the mission said in a post on X on Friday.

"There is no legal prohibition on its sale. Any country that commits to refraining from using it in acts of aggression against another state is eligible to apply for its purchase," it emphasized.

An Iranian drone, which was allegedly downed in Ukraine, was displayed at the Conservative Political Action Conference, a political conference addressing the purported threat of Iran, in the US state of Maryland this week.

The Shahed-136 drone was allegedly transported with cooperation from Ukrainian and Polish special forces and United Against Nuclear Iran (UANI), a US-based nonprofit headed by Mark Wallace who served as a US ambassador at the UN.

Western sources have claimed that Russia calls the drone Geran-2 and has used it in its war on Ukraine. Under this pretext, the US and European Union have imposed sanctions on Tehran.

Both Iran and Russia have repeatedly denied claims that Tehran has provided Moscow with drones to be used in the Ukraine war.

### Iran Army launches Large-Scale Zolfaqar-1403 Drills



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Islamic Republic of Iran Army has launched a large-scale military exercise in an area along the strategic Makran coastline in the southern part of the country, the Sea of Oman, and the northern tip of the Indian Ocean, extending up to the 10-degree latitude.

The drill, codenamed Zolfaqar-1403, kicked off on Saturday, and various infantry, armored and mechanized units, air defense systems, unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), unmanned surface vessels (USVs) as well as air force strategic bombers for logistical support are participating in it.

Organized under the theme "Stable Security under the Shadow of Self-Reliance, Unity, and Power," the exercise is set to test an array of military capabilities.

Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, deputy chief of the Army for Coordination, and the commander of the joint drill, stated that the primary goal of the exercise is to enhance the defensive and deterrence capabilities of the Iranian Armed Forces in the face of potential aerial, ground and naval threats.

He warned enemies against attempts to harm Iran's territorial integrity and interests, emphasizing that any act of aggression against the Islamic Republic will be met with a crushing response.

The senior military commander noted that the massive exercise also serves as a testing ground for the new tactics that are drawn up and employed by young personnel of the Iranian Army.

## Commitment to Revolutionary Principles Is the Only Solution to Problems

TEHRAN - The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution has stated that one of the key responsibilities of the Intelligence Ministry is to cooperate with the government, ensuring that the administration can effectively manage the country's affairs.

The Leader's remarks were made during a meeting with the Minister, deputies, and senior officials of the Intelligence Ministry, and were later published during the Memorial Ceremony for the Martyrs of the Intelligence Community and the 40th Anniversary of the Ministry's Establishment.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei praised the Intelligence Ministry for maintaining its revolutionary spirit over the years, emphasizing that it remains committed to the ideals of the revolution. He highlighted that just as veteran members of the ministry have upheld revolutionary principles, new personnel are also following the same path, calling this a great blessing.

The Supreme Leader reiterated that the only way to address the country's challenges is by adhering to the principles of the revolution. He emphasized that resolving economic, political, cultural, and social issues requires trust in God, commitment to revolutionary values, and the determined pursuit of existing plans and laws to overcome setbacks.

Ayatollah Khamenei stressed that planning and problem-solving are essential, but the key priority is achieving tangible and effective results. He warned that meetings, plans, and schedules are



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

meaningless unless they produce concrete outcomes, which can only be achieved through persistent follow-ups.

The Leader reaffirmed that the Intelligence Ministry must fully cooperate with all administrations to help them fulfill the challenging task of governing the country. He added that effective intelligence work is essential in this collaboration.

He also underscored the importance of coordination between intelligence agencies at all levels, stressing that intelligence personnel must focus not only on operational effectiveness but also on ethical and spiritual purification.

Ayatollah Khamenei hailed the strong public turnout in the February 11 (Bahman 22) rallies, highlighting the active participation of youth in defending the revolution despite widespread hostility toward the Islamic

system. He described this as a manifestation of divine will for the advancement of Islam within the framework of the Islamic Republic.

As another example of divine intervention, he pointed to anti-Zionist demonstrations across Europe and the U.S., as well as the growing global support for the Palestinian cause.

At the beginning of the meeting, Intelligence Minister Seyyed Esmail Khatib presented a report detailing the ministry's efforts in neutralizing security threats and dealing with hostile espionage services.

## Gov't Prioritizes People's Livelihoods

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian emphasized the importance of accurate data and information management in governance, stating that the primary concern of the government and ruling system is improving people's livelihoods.

Speaking at the National Conference on Taxpayer Systems and Electronic Invoicing on Saturday, President Pezeshkian highlighted that accurate data is essential for ensuring fairness and preventing corruption, bribery, and economic rent-seeking.

Pezeshkian noted that while progress has been made in tax reforms, there is still a long way to go. Recalling his time as a member of Parliament, he mentioned that while laws were enacted to combat corruption and bribery, enforcement remained a challenge.

The Tax Administration has reportedly started tax collection from major taxpayers, which Pezeshkian praised as a positive step. However, he warned against overlooking smaller and hidden financial activities that contribute to corruption at various levels of society.

Comparing the economy to the human body, Pezeshkian stated that overlooking minor financial irregularities weakens the system, just as ignoring small but essential body parts affects overall health. He stressed that corruption is not exclusive to the wealthy, as bribery and misconduct occur even in routine administrative processes.

Referring to Article 169 of the Tax Law, Pezeshkian emphasized that every citizen should be classified as a taxpayer, even if their taxable income is zero. This system, he explained, helps determine each person's financial credibility, income ceiling, and tax obligations.

One of the major challenges in tax collection, he pointed out, is identifying vacant homes for taxation. Despite multiple legislative efforts, enforcement has been hampered by the lack of postal code-based tracking systems.

Highlighting the power of data, Pezeshkian compared it to a doctor's ability to diagnose a patient. Just as physicians require accurate medical records to prescribe treatment, he stressed that the tax system must rely on precise financial data to make informed decisions.

Pezeshkian criticized the current subsidy system, stating that wealthier individuals receive more benefits than the poor. He questioned the fairness of providing subsidies to both the rich and the underprivileged, arguing that government aid should be redirected toward those in genuine need.



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

"The government must take from those who do not need assistance and support those struggling to make ends meet," he said. "Providing affordable housing is a basic right, and while primary residences should be tax-free, additional properties must be taxed at higher rates."

He further pointed out that without proper housing policies, families are forced to spend excessive amounts on rent, which deepens economic hardship. Effective data-driven management is crucial to tackling this issue.

The president stressed that taxation should serve public welfare, helping to secure economic stability and assist the needy. Addressing broader social issues, he called for special attention to poverty, healthcare, environmental concerns, gender equality, and economic growth.

He cited Islamic teachings, emphasizing the moral duty to support the poor, and highlighted that global leaders are increasingly recognizing the need for social welfare programs to reduce inequality.

Pezeshkian reaffirmed the government's responsibility in addressing economic hardships and called for enhanced financial transparency to eliminate corruption and inequality.

"Proper data management prevents corruption and ensures fair taxation," he asserted. "We must allocate resources fairly to

bridge the growing economic divide."

He concluded by emphasizing the need for comprehensive tax oversight to identify and support low-income groups while ensuring wealthy individuals contribute their fair share.

"If we enhance financial transparency, the people will trust the government more, and governance will be based on justice," Pezeshkian stated. "With a properly implemented taxation system, individuals will be assessed based on their financial credibility rather than relying on outdated guarantees, preventing fraudulent practices such as using poor rural women's names to import luxury vehicles."

In his closing remarks, Pezeshkian underscored the importance of data-driven economic governance to combat tax evasion, reduce banking debts, and ensure equitable wealth distribution.

"We are responsible for the welfare of the disadvantaged, and our policies must reflect fairness and social justice," he stated. "By implementing these measures, we can foster national unity and economic stability."

### Russia's Rosatom in "Large-Scale" Talks With Iran to Build Another Power Plant



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - The head of Russia's state-owned atomic energy corporation Rosatom says the company is in talks with Iran to construct another nuclear power plant in the country.

Alexey Likhachev announced at the International Future Technologies Forum in Moscow on Friday that Rosatom is engaged in "large-scale negotiations" with the Iranian government.

"We see Iran's government taking an active stance in advancing nuclear energy. On our end, we are accelerating our efforts and are engaged in large-scale negotiations regarding the next site for nuclear energy development in Iran," Likhachev said.

Stressing that the timeline for the project depends on the Iranian side, the Rosatom CEO said a location for the new nuclear plant has been determined but construction has yet to begin.

"As you understand, we can only proceed at the pace set by the client—the government," he said. "The site has been selected, the approximate location is known, but the start of work is still a long way off."

Providing no further details on the location of the new nuclear power plant in Iran, Likhachev said, "It's a large site."

On the ongoing construction at the Bushehr nuclear power plant, he said that Rosatom is working very actively on the project for the plant's second and third reactor units.

Likhachev pointed to what he claimed to be Iran's "debt" over the construction of the Bushehr power plant and emphasized that it has significantly decreased.

"Of course, debts always exist in the course of project development. That's the nature of business - we carry out construction work, complete various stages and present the results to the customer. The customer reviews them and then makes a payment decision. In this sense, debt always exists until the facility is delivered," he said.

### Iran Determined to Strengthen Ties With African Nations



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has affirmed that the Islamic Republic's will is directed toward strengthening its relations with African nations.

In a message on X (formerly Twitter) on Friday, Esmail Baghaei, spokesman for the ministry, highlighted a meeting on February 20, 2025 between Iranian First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref and the ambassadors of African countries in Tehran.

Baghaei stated that the meeting reflected "Iran's determination to strengthen ties and expand cooperation with African countries in various areas of mutual interest."

During the meeting, Aref noted that the Iranian administration's strategy, under President Masoud Pezeshkian, is aligned with Iran's core policy of enhancing relations with African nations.

He emphasized the goal of bolstering cooperation across bilateral, multilateral, and regional frameworks. "Given the capacities we possess, by synergizing and pooling our resources, we can better contribute to the development of relations and serve our people," Aref remarked.

Baghaei also extended congratulations to the African Union (AU) on the successful conclusion of its 38th Summit, held on 15-16 February 2025 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

He offered his best wishes to Angola, Djibouti, and Algeria, who assumed key leadership roles within the AU.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran, an observer to the African Union, congratulates the successful 38th AU Summit on 15-16 February 2025 and wishes all success to Angola, the new Chair of the African Union, Djibouti, the new Chair of the African Union Commission, and Algeria, the Deputy Chair," Baghaei wrote on X.

The Summit, which centered on the theme "Justice for Africans and People of African Descent Through Reparations," addressed a wide range of critical issues including conflict resolution, economic integration, and sustainable development.

# IRAN NEWS



## Deputy Minister Apologizes for Power Outages

KERMANSHAH (IRNA) - Deputy Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade Hossein Farhidzadeh has apologized to Iranian manufacturers for energy imbalances and resultant power outages earlier this year, which inflicted losses on the industrial sector.

"I do apologize that we have not been able to provide the basic necessary conditions for manufacturers," Farhidzadeh said during a ceremony in the northwestern province of Kermanshah during which the top industrial units of the province were honored.

The deputy minister said this year's power outages had caused more than \$108 million per day in damage to the Iranian industrial sector. Emphasizing that providing sustainable energy is among the primary needs of manufacturers, he admitted that authorities had performed badly as they did not even give advance notice of the outages to industrialists.

## Iran Set to Become a Global Tourism Destination



TEHRAN - Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts stated that with continued strategic cooperation and support for tour guides, Iran is poised to become a global destination in the tourism industry, paving the way for greater success in achieving its long-term international goals.

Seyed Reza Salehi-Amiri issued a message on the occasion of World Tourism Day, which coincides with February 21 (equivalent to Esfand 3 in the Iranian calendar), expressing gratitude to tour guides and recognizing them as ambassadors of Iran's culture and civilization.

He remarked, "Tour guides, with their expertise and deep knowledge of Iran's history and culture, not only play a vital role in showcasing the country's natural and cultural attractions but also contribute significantly to enhancing Iran's soft power and countering the challenges posed by Iranophobia on the global stage. By providing accurate, scientific, and documented information, they can help correct misconceptions and present Iran as an advanced nation with a rich culture and a proud history."

Highlighting tourism's importance as a pillar of the country's cultural diplomacy, the Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts emphasized, "Tourism is not just an economic industry but also a tool for cultural diplomacy that can play a key role in redefining Iran's position on the international stage. In this context, tour guides can leverage modern tools and communication technologies to offer a comprehensive introduction of Iran to the world."

Salehi-Amiri stressed the need for close collaboration between the government and tour guides, adding, "The government is working to improve infrastructure and remove existing barriers in the tourism industry to facilitate more effective operations for tour guides. Synergy between the government and this community can lead to the sustainable growth of the tourism sector and strengthen Iran's standing in the global tourism arena."

## Iran Targets \$10b Trade Vision With EAEU

TEHRAN - Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade, Seyed Mohammad Atabak, announced that the country's current trade with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) stands at \$3.6 billion, with a vision to expand this figure to \$10 billion in the near future. The statement was made on Friday during the opening ceremony of the Eurasia Exhibition, attended by the President of Iran, highlighting the government's commitment to bolstering foreign trade.

Atabak emphasized that the President's presence at the event underscores the priority given to enhancing commercial ties with neighboring countries. He noted that various presidential visits to regional states have paved the way for actionable trade initiatives within the EAEU framework, bringing tangible benefits to Iran.

Atabak urged economic actors and exporters to seize the opportunities presented by the EAEU, one of the key demands from the business community being the establishment of international agreements to facilitate trade—a goal now realized through this union. He assured that the Ministry of Industry, Mine, and Trade, alongside the Trade Promotion Organization, is fully committed to streamlining trade processes.

The minister highlighted the EAEU's economic significance, boasting a population of 200 million and a GDP of \$5 trillion. Trade volumes within the union have surged by 71 percent, reflecting its growing influence as a major economic bloc. Atabak also pointed to strengthened banking and financial ties between Iran and EAEU countries, with the presence of banks, institutions, and infrastructure at the exhibition signaling the establishment of a robust network for commercial exchanges.

A key development, according to Atabak, is the reduction of tariffs, with 87 percent of commodity tariffs set to drop to zero. This move is expected to heighten competition between Iranian and foreign traders in the vast Eurasian market, fostering a more dynamic trade environment. He added that improved investment conditions with EAEU nations would further boost exports and imports, while the trade pact enhances competitiveness by lowering tariffs.

Beyond economics, Atabak noted that the EAEU agreement would expand scientific and technological cooperation, creating a broader platform for collaboration among member states. With these developments, Iran is positioning itself as a key player in the Eurasian economic landscape, aiming to realize its ambitious \$10 billion trade goal.

Meanwhile the head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization announced that 200 foreign delegations from member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are participating in the Eurasia Trade Exhibition held in Tehran.

Mohammad Ali Dehghan-Dehnavi made the remarks on Friday during the opening ceremony of the exhibition, attended by the Iranian president. He noted that over the past four years, since Iran began trade relations with EAEU member states, the country's trade with the bloc has grown by 2.5 times. However, he acknowledged that there is still a gap to reach the desired level.

Dehghan-Dehnavi added that a trade agreement between Iran and the EAEU has been approved by the Iranian parliament and is awaiting confirmation from



the Guardian Council, underscoring the importance of expanding trade ties.

The official also revealed the establishment of a secretariat for trade with Eurasia, stating that five Iranian commercial centers have been set up in neighboring countries to provide services to traders.

He described the exhibition as an opportunity to explore and assess the capabilities of EAEU member states. Dehghan-Dehnavi highlighted that the third Eurasia Trade Exhibition spans 12,000 square meters and features 180 domestic companies and 160 foreign firms.

He further noted that the event is hosting 230 visiting companies, with hundreds of negotiations and specialized panels scheduled to take place.

The head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization emphasized that trade with EAEU countries represents Iran's most significant trade experience to date. He described the agreement between Iran and the five EAEU member states as brimming with commercial opportunities, adding that one of the priorities for trade development is fostering free trade and deepening relations with neighboring countries.

Meanwhile the chairman of the board of the Iranian Mines and Mining Industries Development and Renovation Organization (IMIDRO) stated that the International Eurasia Trade Exhibition, held on the cusp of the implementation of a free trade agreement, provides an ideal platform for recognizing mutual capacities and enhancing trade exchanges between Iran and the five member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).

Mohammad Aghajanolou made these remarks on Friday evening during a visit to the Iran-Eurasia Trade Exhibition. He explained that the purpose of this international event is to strengthen economic cooperation and showcase the products, services, and commercial achievements of various companies among EAEU countries and beyond.

He noted that the Eurasian Economic Union comprises Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, with Iran holding observer status in the union.

Aghajanolou further highlighted that, in addition to specialized sessions held as side events, face-to-face meetings between representatives of participating companies from various countries will also take place.

Emphasizing the development of economic ties, particularly in the mining and mineral industries sector with EAEU members, he added that the document granting Iran observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union was signed by the leaders of the five member states on December 26, 2024.

He recalled that Iran and the EAEU had previously signed a free trade agreement on December 25, 2023, during a ceremony in St. Petersburg, Russia. Once implemented, this agreement will see both parties eliminate customs tariffs on 87 percent of traded goods.

The exhibition is hosting 230 visiting companies, with hundreds of negotiations and specialized panels scheduled to occur.

## Shahid Beheshti Port in Chabahar Holds Int'l Significance in Communications

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



TEHRAN - The Minister of Roads and Urban Development emphasized that the people of Chabahar should be the first to benefit from the region's development, as Shahid Beheshti Port plays a crucial role in communications and holds international significance.

Speaking on Saturday to Chabahar port officials, Minister Farzaneh Sadegh highlighted the need for strong integration between Shahid Beheshti Port and the city of Chabahar. She stated that as Iran's only oceanic port, Shahid Beheshti possesses numerous international advantages. The expansion and development of its current phases will directly benefit the local population, although care must be taken to ensure that urban development is not adversely affected.

Sadegh announced the launch and operationalization of 12 new projects at Chabahar Port, which are expected to generate around 700 jobs. She stressed that the majority of these positions should be filled by local residents, who will receive necessary training before joining the workforce. This initiative aims to reduce unemployment in the region.

She also underscored the need to improve operational efficiency at Shahid Beheshti Port and called for closer cooperation between the port and the city of Chabahar.

Among the newly launched projects, three were highlighted: Deployment of firefighting vehicles; Installation of new medical equipment in the city's clinic; and Establishment of a logistics corridor.

Although these projects are being implemented by the Ports and Maritime Organization, they are designed to serve the people of Chabahar and strengthen regional development.

Expressing regret over initial design limitations that prevent further expansion of new phases at the port, Sadegh stressed that efforts should be focused on upgrading the current infrastructure and expanding services.

Additionally, she announced that dredging operations are underway at Chabahar's fishing dock to ensure sustainable livelihoods for local fishermen.

## Fifth Pars South Refinery Localizes 384 Strategic Equipment Items



TEHRAN - The manager of the Fifth Pars South Refinery announced that over 384 strategic equipment items have been indigenously developed and implemented by the refinery's staff and experts, leveraging the creative and innovative talents of domestic specialists.

Kambiz Saffi stated, "In the current circumstances, the people of our country look to the Pars South workforce with hope. We are all soldiers on the front lines of the economic battle, responsible for achieving the lofty goals of the system. In this context, implementing key objectives and programs at Pars South is a significant step aligned with the nation's prosperity."

He emphasized that since the beginning of the year, the refinery's employees and specialists, relying on the expertise of local manufacturers and knowledge-based companies, have utilized over 384 domestically produced strategic equipment items in the maintenance of various refinery units. "As a result, more than 52 million cubic meters of gas are sweetened daily at this refinery," Saffi noted.

The manager of the Fifth Pars South Refinery also highlighted that in 2024, amidst peak gas consumption and dropping temperatures across the country, the Pars South Gas Complex has set multiple records for gas production and delivery to the national grid. "Gas production at the Pars South Gas Complex has now reached between 595 and 600 million cubic meters per day. This increase in output has enabled us to supply gas to various sectors, including households, commercial entities, power plants, and industries," Saffi added.

He described this achievement as a testament to the strong determination and resolve of the workforce at this major national gas complex.

## Uzbekistan Ambassador Visits Ancient Nushijan Citadel in Malayer

TEHRAN - During a one-day visit to Malayer County, Uzbekistan's Ambassador to Iran, Fariddin Nasriyev, toured the historic Nushijan Citadel, an ancient archaeological site in the region.

The head of Malayer's Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts Department, Ebrahim Jalili, spoke during the visit on Thursday, highlighting the significance of the site. He described Nushijan as one of the oldest mud-brick temples in the world, dating back to the first millennium BCE. "Nushijan is a structure from the Median era, renowned for its unique architecture, making it one of Iran's most important archaeological sites," Jalili stated.

He elaborated that the citadel encompasses three distinct settlement periods, with remnants from the Median, Achaemenid, and Parthian eras identified within the complex. "The Nushijan temple fortress boasts exceptional mud-brick architecture and comprises various sections, including a pillared hall, a central temple, storage rooms, entrances, and ritual spaces," Jalili explained. He emphasized its dual religious and defensive roles during the Median period, noting that it stands as a prime example of Iran's mud-brick architectural heritage.

Jalili further remarked that the ambassador's visit aimed to foster cultural and economic collaboration between Iran and Uzbekistan. He pointed out that Malayer and the Uzbek city of Khujand share a sister-city relationship due to their mutual tradition of woodcarving artistry.

The Nushijan Citadel, located 15 kilometers northwest of Malayer opposite Shushab village, is one of the county's most



significant historical landmarks. It was registered on Iran's National Heritage List on February 22, 1968. Scientific excavations at the site began in 1962 under the supervision of archaeologist Stronach, revealing three cultural layers. The earliest layer, linked to the Median settlement, indicates their presence from the mid-8th to mid-6th century BCE, based on architectural finds and other artifacts.

The discoveries from the first layer of the Nushijan mound include key Median architectural features: nine structures on the western side of the hill, including the earliest fire temple, the pillared Apadana hall, a second central temple, as well as rooms, storage areas, tunnels, and the fortress's defensive walls. These elements underscore Nushijan's status as the most important Median temple and a foundational example of Iranian architecture on the Iranian plateau, regarded as one of the country's most unique and valuable historical treasures.

With a history spanning 7,000 years, the citadel's hilltop location suggests that around 4,000 years ago, the surrounding area was submerged underwater, leaving only this fortress above the surface, according to records from Malayer's Cultural Heritage Department.

The ambassador's visit to this ancient site highlights its cultural significance and strengthens ties between Iran and Uzbekistan, aligning with broader efforts to promote heritage tourism and bilateral relations.

## Iran and Armenia to Expand Trade Cooperation



TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO) has emphasized the necessity of expanding trade cooperation between Iran and Armenia during a meeting with Armenia's Deputy Minister of Economy.

According to a report from the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran, Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi met with Armenian Minister of Economy Edgar Zakaryan and Armenian Ambassador Grigor Hovhannisyian. Dehnavi highlighted the deep-rooted friendship between the two nations and expressed Iran's keen interest in strengthening bilateral trade relations.

The head of Iran's TPO stated that the trade volume between Iran and Armenia has been targeted at \$3 billion, but there is still a significant gap to reach this goal. He emphasized ongoing efforts to achieve this objective.

Dehnavi underscored the importance of dispatching trade delegations and participating in business events of both countries. He noted that the presence of merchants, traders, and economic actors at exhibitions and commercial events would facilitate trade growth.

Furthermore, Iran's Deputy Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade (IMT) expressed a desire to expand trade relations with member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). He also encouraged strong participation from Armenian businesses in the international Eurasian trade exhibition.

During the meeting, Armenian Deputy Minister of Economy Edgar Zakaryan reaffirmed the strong friendship between the Iranian and Armenian people. He emphasized that this bond could play a crucial role in shaping the economic programs of both nations.

Zakaryan stated that Armenia is prepared to cooperate with Iran in various sectors to enhance mutual trade relations. He pointed out that there are numerous economic opportunities between the two countries, and by utilizing these capacities, the set trade targets can be achieved.

## Trump Fires Top U.S. General in Unprecedented Pentagon Shakeup

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Donald Trump on Friday fired the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Air Force General C.Q. Brown, and pushed out five other admirals and generals in an unprecedented shake-up of U.S. military leadership. Trump said in a post on Truth Social that he would nominate former Lieutenant General Dan "Razin" Caine to succeed Brown, breaking with tradition by pulling someone out of retirement for the first time to become the top military officer. The president will also replace the head of the U.S. Navy, a position held by Admiral Lisa Franchetti, the first woman to lead a military service, as well as the air force vice chief of staff, the Pentagon said. He is also removing the judge advocates general for the Army, Navy and Air Force, critical positions that ensure enforcement of military justice.



## Australia Says No Live Firing Seen or Heard From Chinese Ships



SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Australia says it detected no live firing from Chinese naval ships off its east coast, despite the vessels broadcasting a warning that forced commercial flights to detour.

Australia and close ally New Zealand have been monitoring three Chinese navy vessels — a frigate, a cruiser and a supply tanker — since they were spotted in international waters last week.

The Chinese ships broadcast a verbal live fire warning yesterday that was picked up by commercial planes over the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand, Canberra said.

"This was very disconcerting for the planes," which had to change course, Australian Defence Minister Richard Marles said hours after the incident.

China had abided by international law but did not follow best practice of giving 12-24 hours' notice, and Canberra had raised the lack of notice with Beijing, Marles said.

Australia's Department of Defence issued a statement late yesterday saying any live firing by the People's Liberation Army-Navy (PLA-N) has "most likely ceased."

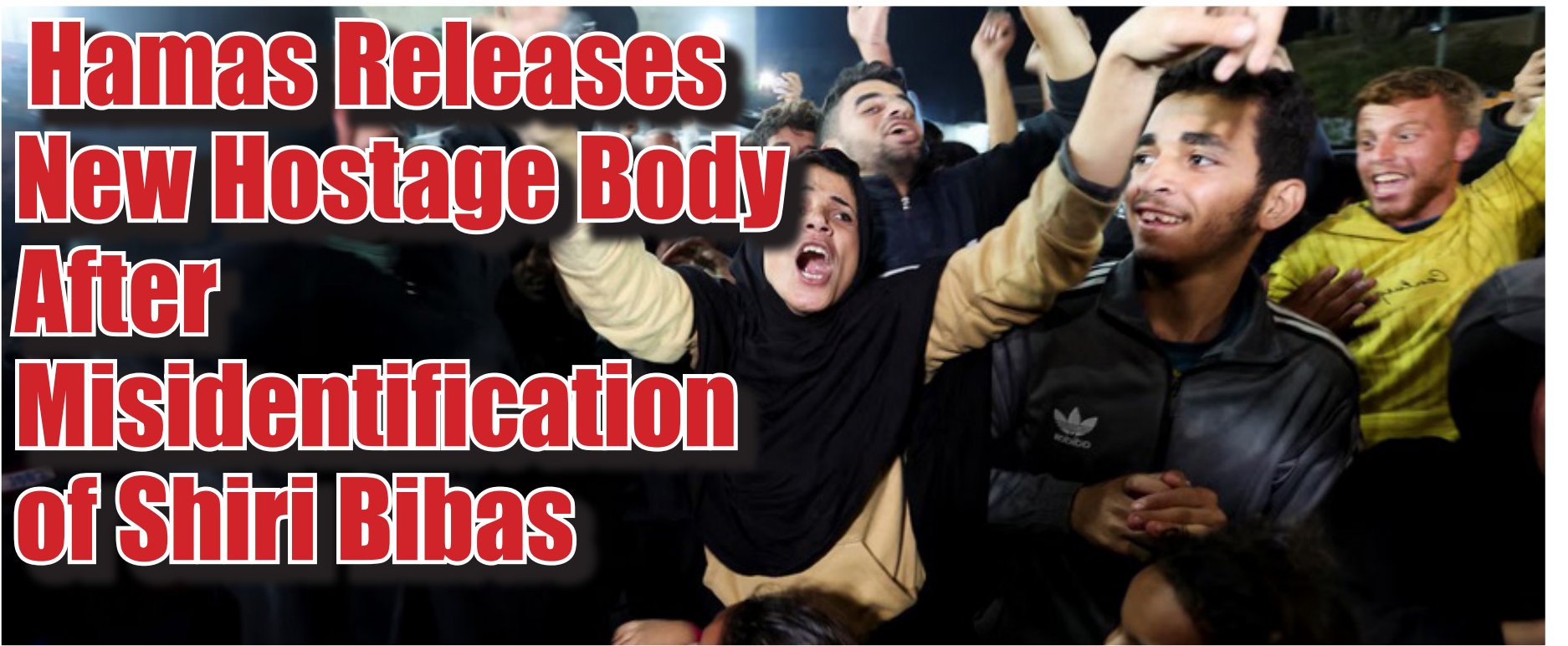
"No weapon firings were heard or seen, however, a floating surface firing target was deployed by the PLA-N and subsequently recovered."

Australian forces would monitor the Chinese ships while they remain near the country's "maritime approaches," the department said.

New Zealand is working with Australia to monitor the task force and it, too, has no confirmation live firing actually occurred, said the country's defence minister, Judith Collins.

Beijing described the manoeuvres as training exercises that were "safe, standard and professional" and in line with international law, without commenting on whether live ammunition was used.

## Hamas Releases New Hostage Body After Misidentification of Shiri Bibas



CAIRO (Dispatches) - Hamas released a body on Friday it claimed to be that of Israeli hostage Shiri Bibas, whose misidentification in a handover this week threatened to derail the fragile Gaza ceasefire deal. Israeli medical authorities said forensic teams were preparing to examine the body, which Hamas transferred via the Red Cross, and confirm its identity.

The Palestinian militant group had agreed to hand over the bodies of Shiri Bibas and her two young sons Kfir and Ariel along with the remains of a fourth hostage on Thursday under the ceasefire that has halted fighting in Gaza since last month.

Four bodies were delivered and the identities of the Bibas boys and the other hostage, Oded Lifshitz, were confirmed.

But Israeli specialists said the fourth body was that of an unidentified woman and not Shiri Bibas, who was kidnapped along with her sons and her husband, Yarden, during the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023.

Basem Naim, a member of the Hamas political bureau, said "unfortunate mistakes" could occur, especially as Israeli bombing had mixed the bodies of Israeli hostages and Palestinians, thousands of whom were still buried in the rubble.

"We confirm that it is not in our values or our interest to keep any bodies or not to abide by the covenants and agreements that we sign," he said in a statement.

The failure to hand over the correct body and the staged public handover of the four coffins on Thursday caused outrage in Israel and drew a threat of retaliation from Netanyahu.

"We will act with determination to bring Shiri home along with all our hostages - both living and dead - and ensure Hamas pays the full price for this cruel and evil violation of the agreement," he said in a video statement.

Hamas said in November 2023 that the children and their mother had been killed in an Israeli air strike. Ismail Al-Thawabta, director of the Hamas-run Gaza government media office, said Netanyahu "bears full responsibility for killing her and her children."

But the Israeli military said intelligence assessments and forensic analysis of the bodies of the Bibas children indicated that they were deliberately killed by their captors. Chief military spokesperson Daniel Hagari said the boys were killed by the militants "with their bare hands," but gave no details.

The U.N. Human Rights Office said it had no information of its own on the hostage deaths and called for an effective investigation into the causes.

"The return of the remains of the deceased is a basic humanitarian goal," the office said.

The incident underscored the fragility of the ceasefire agreement reached with U.S. backing and with the help of Qatari and Egyptian mediators last month.

Six living hostages were due for release on Saturday in exchange for 602 Palestinian prisoners and detainees, according to Hamas, and the start of negotiations for a second phase of the ceasefire was expected in the coming days.

"Hamas must return the hostages as agreed in the ceasefire - the living and the deceased," Israeli military spokesperson Nadav Shoshani said in a statement on social media platform X. "They have to bring Shiri back, and they have to release the 6 living hostages expected tomorrow."

Netanyahu's office confirmed it had been officially informed of the names of the six hostages to be released, which Hamas sources said was expected at around 8:30 a.m. (0630 GMT).

As the tension over the Gaza ceasefire rose, Netanyahu ordered the Israeli military to intensify operations in another Palestinian territory, the occupied West Bank, after a number of explosions blew up buses standing empty in their depots near Tel Aviv.

No casualties were reported but the explosions were a reminder of the campaign of suicide attacks on public transport that killed hundreds of Israeli civilians during the Second Intifada in the early 2000s.

Both Israel and Hamas have repeatedly accused the other of ceasefire violations, with Hamas threatening to delay the release of hostages over what it said was Israel's refusal to allow housing materials and other aid into Gaza, a charge Israel denied.

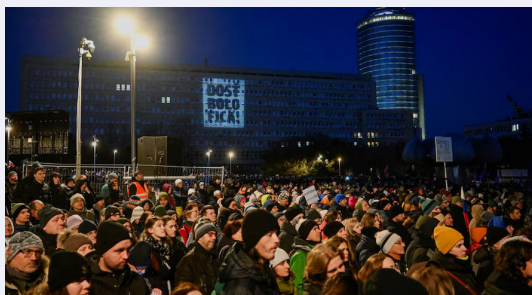
The Red Cross told Reuters it was "concerned and unsatisfied" that the handover of the bodies had not been conducted privately and in a dignified manner.

"It's like they make a joke of us," said 75-year-old Israeli Ilana Caspi. "We are so in grief and this is even more."

One of the main groups representing hostage families said it was "horrified and devastated" by the news that Shiri Bibas' body had not been returned, but called for the ceasefire to continue to bring back all 70 hostages still in Gaza.

"Save them from this nightmare," the Hostages and Missing Families Forum said in a statement.

## Slovaks Keep Up Protests Against Fico



BRATISLAVA (Dispatches) - Thousands rallied in Bratislava and other Slovak cities on Friday calling for Prime Minister Robert Fico to resign and keeping up protests against a foreign policy that critics say pulls the country closer to Russia.

Protests have happened every other week since early January, sparked by a December meeting between Fico and Russian President Vladimir Putin, a rare visit to Moscow by a European Union member since Russia's invasion of Ukraine three years ago.

"Slovakia is Europe," crowds in Bratislava chanted, along with cries of "Enough of Fico".

Dennik N news website cited a security expert estimating up to 12,000 people protested in the capital, down from more than 40,000 two weeks ago. Rallies were held in over 40 other cities.

The rallies on Friday also marked seven years since the murder of investigative journalist Jan Kuciak, whose killing set off weeks of mass protests against perceived public corruption that led to Fico's resignation as prime minister at the time.

Fico returned to power with a 2023 election victory and his leftist-nationalist government has raised worries among the progressive opposition and others due to moves to change criminal codes and revamp the public broadcaster.

Fico ended state military aid to Ukraine and is in dispute with Kyiv over the end of Russian gas transit this year. He defends his foreign policy by saying it reaches all directions.

BERLIN (Dispatches) - Germany's mainstream political parties lost support while the far-right AfD gained ground in one of the last polls published before the election on Sunday, pointing to likely tricky coalition building that could drag on for months.

The vote comes at an awkward moment, leaving a leadership vacuum at the heart of Europe just as it seeks to tackle a confrontational U.S. Donald Trump whose apparent desire to disengage from the region and mend ties with Russia raises questions about the solidity of the western alliance.

Election frontrunner Friedrich Merz, the head of the conservative CDU/CSU bloc, warned on Friday that while Germany's future lay in the West, it was not clear that the West would include the United States anymore.

"But even without Americans, our place remains in the centre of Europe, not alongside Putin and not isolated on the way to the right-wing populist sidelines," he wrote in a letter to supporters on Friday.

"For Europe to continue to succeed in the future, Germany must be prepared to take on leadership responsibility."

The CDU/CSU which has consistently led polls for months dropped one percentage point to 29% in the survey by Forsa, while the Alternative for Germany (AfD) gained one point to 21%.

Chancellor Olaf Scholz's Social Democrats dropped one point to 15% while the Greens and the pro-market Free Democrats (FDP) were steady on 13% and 5% respectively. The far-left Left party inched up one point to 8%.

## Germany Set for Tricky Coalition Building



With all parties refusing to work with the AfD in a country scarred by its Nazi past, the latest poll suggests it will be near impossible for any two of the other parties to form a majority.

Carsten Linnemann, general secretary of Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party, Social Democratic Party (SPD) General Secretary Matthias Miersch, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock of the Greens party, Free Democratic Party (FDP) leader Christian Lindner, Co-leader of the German left-wing party The Left (Die Linke) Jan van... Purchase Licensing Rights, opens new tab Read more

Instead, frontrunner Merz will likely have to form a three-way coalition with either the SPD and Greens or SPD and FDP, according to the poll, making

negotiations all the trickier.

Coalition talks could therefore take longer, leaving Scholz in a caretaker role but unable to take major decisions on the future of Europe's largest economy.

It also suggests the next coalition might be as incohesive and difficult to govern as the three-way alliance led by Scholz that collapsed last November after just three years in power.

Scholz's was the first such three-way coalition in decades at a national level - but such coalitions are set to become more frequent given the rise of the AfD and the decline of the erstwhile big-tent parties.

Still, the tone of the campaign has softened in the past week in a sign parties are preparing the path for talks.

Asked in a television debate if he would get into the boat of keen oarsman Scholz, Merz replied "Ja" (yes). Likewise, Scholz affirmed he would take a plane with hobby pilot Merz. "I assume he was given his pilot permit for a reason."

The moment of camaraderie belied the tensions that had erupted between the leaders in recent weeks over migration policy, however, and in particular Merz's decision to attempt to push through a crackdown on migration with support from the AfD.

Merz had previously vowed not to rely on AfD lawmakers to get measures through parliament. Scholz and others said they could no longer trust him after his turnaround.

## Trump Says Ukraine's Leaders Don't Have Any Cards in Negotiations

KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky faced pressure on Friday to sign a deal to hand the United States preferential access to Ukraine's mineral deposits following harsh criticism from US President Donald Trump.

Trump wants Ukraine to give US companies access as compensation for the tens of billions of dollars of aid delivered under his predecessor Joe Biden.

But Ukraine is seeking security guarantees from the United States in exchange for signing away precious rights to vast amounts of its natural resources and critical minerals.

Mike Waltz, Trump's national security adviser, on Friday predicted that Zelensky would sign the deal soon.

"Look, here's the bottom line, President Zelensky is going to sign that deal, and you will see that in the very short term, and that is good for Ukraine," Waltz told a conference on the outskirts of Washington.

Forbes Ukraine in April 2023 estimated that Ukraine's mineral resources amounted to 111 billion tonnes, worth \$14.8 trillion - mostly coal and iron ore.

But more than 70 percent of these resources were in Donetsk and Luhansk - regions partly controlled by Russia - and Dnipropetrovsk, where Moscow's forces are approaching.

Trump's top advisers have doubled down on their attacks on Zelensky in recent days, after Trump branded him a "dictator" and falsely claimed Ukraine had "started" the war with Russia.

Elections have been suspended in Ukraine since Zelensky declared martial law



following Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022.

The war of words has stunned Kyiv and European capitals, a sign of just how rapidly Trump is overhauling Washington's long-standing support for Ukraine as he opens talks with Moscow on a settlement to the conflict.

Trump told a gathering of US governors at the White House he had "very good talks" with his Russian counterpart, while adding Ukrainian leaders "don't have any cards, but they play it tough".

A senior Ukrainian official earlier Friday told AFP that despite the tensions between Zelensky and Trump, talks on a possible agreement were "ongoing".

"There is a constant exchange of drafts, we sent another one yesterday," the Kyiv source said, adding that Ukraine was now waiting for a US response.

Kyiv had rejected a first attempt by Trump's team to strike a deal for Ukraine's natural resources, saying the proposal did not include security guarantees for Kyiv - a move that infuriated Trump.

Ukraine is pressing for NATO membership or for the deployment of Western troops and masses of advanced equipment as part of any wider ceasefire agreement with Russia.

Zelensky said earlier this week he would not "sell" Ukraine in any deal with the United States.

The spat risks undermining Western support for Kyiv at a critical juncture in the conflict, ahead of the three-year anniversary of Russia's invasion on Sunday.

Russia's army on Friday said it had captured two more villages in eastern Ukraine.

## Rublev Beats Auger-Aliassime to Meet Draper in Qatar Open Final



DOHA (Dispatches) - Former winner Andrey Rublev reached the final of the Qatar Open with a 7-5 4-6 7-6(5) win over Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime, and will meet Jack Draper in the decider after the Briton beat Czech Jiri Lehecka.

Rublev, winner in 2020, took the opening set with a break in the final game, before Auger-Aliassime broke the Russian fifth seed's serve early in the second set and hit three aces in the final game to serve out for the set.

Auger-Aliassime fired 21 aces over the course of the match, compared to Rublev's eight, but the Canadian went out after the deciding set went to a tiebreak. The Russian gained an early mini-break to lead 2-1 and that proved to be decisive.

"It was super tough today. I felt like there was not much I can do if he is serving like that," Rublev said. "He was serving well and I was just saying, okay, I cannot do much, this is one of the best servers on Tour. I just need to try to guess and when I have a moment, just go for it."

Draper will bid to win his third ATP title after his 3-6 7-6(2) 6-3 win over Lehecka, having triumphed in Stuttgart and Vienna last year.

The Czech, who beat top seed Carlos Alcaraz in the quarter-finals, took the opening set but after they traded breaks of serve in the second, eighth seed Draper came out on top in the tiebreak.

Draper broke to take a 4-3 lead in the final set, and then broke again to wrap up the semi-final win and will now face Rublev for the fourth time. The Briton has lost all three of their previous meetings.

"I'm definitely a different player since I last played him," said Draper, who last faced the Russian at the 2023 U.S. Open.

"Someone I respect massively. Someone who's been top 10 for many years now. He's going to come out and play incredibly well. I watched him play here this week. He's there every ball. So I'll be ready for that one."

Meanwhile Russian teenage sensation Mirra Andreeva continued her giant-slaying exploits at the Dubai

Tennis Championships by upsetting Kazakhstani sixth seed Elena Rybakina 6-4 4-6 6-3 in the semi-finals.

Denmark's Clara Tauson set up a final showdown with Andreeva after overcoming Karolina Muchova 6-4 6-7(4) 6-3.

Andreeva, who had stunned five-times Grand Slam champion Iga Swiatek in the quarters and former Wimbledon winner Marketa Vondrousova in the round of 32, is the youngest player to reach a WTA 1000 Final.

The 17-year-old French Open semi-finalist also becomes the youngest player to beat three Grand Slam winners at a single event since compatriot Maria Sharapova in 2004.

Wimbledon 2022 champion Rybakina, ranked seventh in the world, let a slender 2-1 lead slip in a tight opening set as momentum swung back and forth before Andreeva came out on top.

However, Rybakina forced a decider following a close second set where she had built a 4-3 lead and just as she looked to run away with the win after racing to a 3-1 lead in the final set, Andreeva roared back to win five successive games.

With the victory, world number 14 Andreeva also avenged her 2023 Beijing round of 16 defeat against Rybakina.

"Last time we played it was a really tough match... She went for her shots and killed me in the end. This time I knew she'd hit hard. I tried to fight for every point and kept believing," Andreeva said.

Tauson, who knocked out world number one Aryna Sabalenka in the last 16, reached her first WTA 1000 final by topping 14th seed Muchova.

The 22-year-old won all four points in the 10th game to take the opening set.

Czech Muchova fought back in the second to force a decider, but Tauson gained the decisive break for a 5-3 lead in the third set before finally clinching victory in a battle that lasted almost three hours.

"Muchova is such a great player. I don't know what to say. I don't know how I won today, I just tried to keep my cool and play good tennis," the world number 38 said.

## Tyler Herro, Heat End Slide With OT Win Over Raptors

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Tyler Herro scored 28 points and dished out seven assists as the visiting Miami Heat defeated the Toronto Raptors 120-111 in overtime.

Bam Adebayo produced 19 points and 12 rebounds as the Heat ended a four-game losing streak.

Andrew Wiggins added 25 points, former Raptor Davion Mitchell scored 16 and Duncan Robinson had 14 points for Miami, which took the season series 3-1.

RJ Barrett scored 29 points for the Raptors, who have lost six of seven. Immanuel Quickley added 23 points, and Scottie Barnes put up 13.

Former Heat center Orlando Robinson made his first start as a Raptor and logged nine points, five rebounds and four assists. Grady Dick had nine points and 10 rebounds.

Barrett tied the game with a 3-pointer with 3:48 left in regulation and gave Toronto a one-point lead on a 12-footer with 3:14 to go. Toronto led by three after Barrett's layup with 53.3 seconds left. Wiggins tied the game at 107 by sinking three free throws with 45.6 seconds left.

Both teams then missed shots to force overtime.



Herro's three-point play gave Miami a five-point lead with 2:45 left in overtime. Adebayo added a jumper to bump the lead to seven. The Raptors showed some rust coming out of the All-Star break in the first quarter as they committed seven turnovers that led to uncontested layups and 11 points as Miami took a 30-19 lead.

Barnes limped to the locker room with 1:16 left in the first quarter favoring his right ankle following a play under the defensive basket. He returned after the ankle was retaped.

Toronto looked sharper to start the second quarter and used an 8-0 run to cut the deficit to five points with 9:04 to play. Herro fed Mitchell, who made a 24-foot 3-pointer from near the left sideline to give Miami a 12-point lead with 4:06 left. Miami led 57-48 at halftime.

Toronto chipped away, and when Robinson stuffed in an offensive rebound, the lead was reduced to one with 5:06 left in the third quarter.

The Raptors took a one-point lead with 3:19 remaining in the third after Jonathan Mogbo's block set up a fastbreak that finished with Dick making a 3-pointer that bounced around the rim before dropping. The Heat rallied to lead 84-80 after three quarters.

Toronto's Jakob Poeltl (hip pointer) missed his sixth straight game. Meanwhile Kyrie Irving scored a game-high 35 points and the host Dallas Mavericks came to life at the start of the fourth quarter on the way to a 111-103 victory over the New Orleans Pelicans.

## Brignone Wins Sestriere Giant Slalom, Shiffrin Returns in 25th Spot



LONDON (Dispatches) - Italian Federica Brignone won a women's World Cup giant slalom on home snow in Sestriere as U.S. ski great Mikaela Shiffrin finished 25th on her return to the discipline after a crash in Vermont last November.

New Zealand's Alice Robinson was second, after setting the fastest time in the first run, and Thea Louise Stjernesund of Norway finished third. The top two was the same as at this month's world championships.

Shiffrin did not race the giant slalom at those championships in Saalbach, Austria, after deciding she was not mentally ready.

Still chasing a record-extending 100th World Cup win, the American suffered a puncture wound in her abdomen in the accident in Killington.

"For the rest of the season I feel my goal is sort of fighting for some points, basically try to stay in the top 30 in GS which is a very different position from the last many years when I was fighting for podiums," Shiffrin told Eurosport.

"That's not where I am right now, and that's OK. To reach my max potential right now it's to collect points and today was some points." Shiffrin said the big step on Friday had been pushing out of the start gate.

"That's a big step from not racing at all," she said. "Sometimes when you're used to being in the position to fight for top 10s, top fives, podiums it doesn't feel like such a big step as it actually is."

The win was a career 33rd in the World Cup for 'Snow Tiger' Brignone, and 15th in giant, at the age of 34 and after suffering a recent bout of sickness.

"I am feeling better since yesterday, I knew it was possible to make two good runs and this is what I tried today," said the Italian.

## Leicester Hit Historic Low in Brentford Rout



LEICESTER (Dispatches) - Leicester's bid to avoid relegation from the Premier League hit a historic low as Brentford cruised to a 4-0 win at the King Power Stadium.

Ruud van Nistelrooy's side would have moved out of the relegation zone with a victory, but instead they remain two points from safety.

Yoane Wissa, Bryan Mbeumo and Christian Norgaard all scored for Brentford in a wretched first half for second-bottom Leicester.

Fabio Carvalho netted in the closing stages, and the Foxes were booted off after a 10th defeat in their last 11 league games that added to the pressure on the under-fire Van Nistelrooy.

Underlining the depth of their struggles, Leicester made unwanted history as the first team in the Premier League era to lose six successive home games without scoring in any of them.

With just 12 games left to avoid relegation, Leicester are in severe danger of an immediate return to the Championship.

Enzo Maresca quit to take charge of Chelsea after masterminding Leicester's promotion last season, and the club's Thai owners have failed to find an adequate replacement for the Italian.

Steve Cooper was sacked after just five months in charge, and former Manchester United striker Van Nistelrooy has fared no better.

Leicester have won just four of their 26 league games this season, with Van Nistelrooy contributing only two of those victories in 15 matches.

Van Nistelrooy was waiting to officially take charge of Leicester when they were thrashed at Brentford while he watched from the stands in November.

If he could be forgiven for the result on that occasion, there were no excuses for the Dutchman this time.

Jamie Vardy needs two goals to reach 200 in all competitions for Leicester, and the veteran striker nearly moved closer to that milestone in the opening moments.

Bursting into the Brentford area, Vardy was denied by Mark Flekken's fine save.

But Wissa's 13th goal this season put 10th-placed Brentford ahead at the climax of an eye-catching raid in the 17th minute.

Kevin Schade's back-heel reached Mikkel Damsgaard on the edge of the area, and he clipped a perfect pass towards Wissa, whose close-range strike bounced awkwardly past wrong-footed Leicester keeper Mads Hermansen.

## Liverpool Draw PSG, Madrid Clubs Clash in Champions League Last 16

PARIS (Dispatches) - Liverpool will take on Paris Saint-Germain in the last 16 of this season's Champions League while the draw also threw up a showdown between reigning champions Real Madrid and their city rivals Atletico.

Arne Slot's Liverpool finished first in the 36-team league phase of the competition to qualify directly for this stage, while PSG finished 15th and had to come through a two-legged play-off tie in which they crushed fellow French side Brest 10-0 on aggregate.

The first leg will take place at the Parc des Princes in Paris on Mar 5, with the return at Anfield six days later, on Mar 11.

The clubs last met in the Champions League in the group stage in 2018/19, when PSG won 2-1 at home after Liverpool triumphed 3-2 in England.

The only previous knockout tie between the sides came in the semi-finals of the now defunct Cup Winners' Cup in 1997, when PSG won 3-2 on aggregate before losing the final to Barcelona.

Liverpool are currently eight points clear of Arsenal at the top of the English Premier League having played a game more than their closest rivals, while Luis Enrique's PSG are unbeaten in Ligue 1 this season and sit 10 points clear at the summit.

With the draw being made up to and including the semi-finals, PSG and Liverpool know the winner of their tie will face either Club Brugge or Aston Villa in the last eight.

That raises the possibility of an all-English quarter-final between the teams who succeeded each other as European Cup winners in the



early 1980s. Villa will face Club Brugge seeking revenge for their 1-0 defeat against the same opponents in Belgium in the league phase in November.

Real, fresh from eliminating Manchester City in the play-offs, will be at home in the first leg against Atletico on Mar 4.

The rivals from the Spanish capital met in the competition in four straight seasons in the last decade, with Real coming out on top every time.

They won the finals of 2014 and 2016, as well as in the quarter-finals in 2015 and in the semi-finals in 2017.

"It's an amazing tie, and we are ready for it," insisted Atletico coach

Diego Simeone, who was in charge for all of the past Champions League meetings between the sides.

"We have to play two magnificent games because of the quality of our opponents, but we have full confidence in our players and their ability to overcome all difficulties," said Emilio Butragueno, the former Real player who is now the club's director of institutional relations.

The winners of that tie will progress to a last-eight clash against either PSV Eindhoven or Arsenal.

The Gunners, who came third in the league phase, will be coming up against a club they faced in the group stage of last season's Champions League—Mikel Arteta's team won 4-0 at home before drawing 1-1 in the Netherlands.

"We've played against them, they are a really good team. We have experienced it and it will be really difficult," Arteta said of the reigning Dutch champions.

"We know what we are facing. When you are at this stage every team is really, really good. When the time comes we will be ready for it."

Another standout tie will see Bayern Munich, the current Bundesliga leaders, take on reigning German champions Bayer Leverkusen.

Leverkusen, coached by former Bayern midfielder Xabi Alonso, are unbeaten in the last six meetings of the clubs, including a 1-0 win in the German Cup earlier this season. The teams have never previously met in a European tie.