

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov Will Visit Tehran in the Coming Days for Talks on the Latest Mutual, Regional and Global Issues, Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Says

# IRAN NEWS

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs Says an Iranian National Will Return Home "Within Hours" After Being Released From Detention in the Netherlands

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### Iran Urges Speeding Up of Legal Processing of Israel's War Crime Cases



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has condemned the Israeli regime's ongoing occupation and crimes across the Palestinian territories, calling on the international community to accelerate legal and criminal proceedings against Israeli officials at international courts for genocide and war crimes.

The call was made by Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi during a phone conversation with Dutch Foreign Minister Caspar Veldkamp.

Reviewing the latest regional and global developments, Araqchi strongly denounced the regime's continued deadly aggression against Palestinians. He urged the international community to take serious action and expedite legal proceedings in international courts against Israeli officials for their involvement in the atrocities.

Last year, the International Criminal Court issued warrants for the arrest of Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the regime's former minister for military affairs Yoav Gallant for crimes against humanity and war crimes in the Gaza Strip, where the regime had been waging a war of genocide since October 2023.

Under pressure from the United States, however, many countries have stopped short of complying with the rulings. Planes carrying Netanyahu around the globe have, meanwhile, been taking detours on several occasions for him to avoid the airspace of the countries that are party to the court's statute.

Also during the phone call, Araqchi emphasized the necessity for all governments to uphold the rule of law in international relations, adhere to the United Nations Charter, and respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations.

### Iraq Denies It Is Resuming Oil Exports From Kurdistan Under U.S. Pressure



BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraqi authorities have rejected reports that they have allowed a resumption of oil exports from the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region because of threats by the U.S. government.

Farhad Alaaldin, a foreign affairs adviser to the Iraqi prime minister, said in a Saturday statement that Baghdad was facing no threats from Washington if oil exports were not resumed from Kurdistan.

"Decisions related to the management of national resources are taken in accordance with Iraqi sovereignty and in a way that serves the country's economic interests," said Alaaldin.

He insisted that Iraq's parliament had already passed a law establishing a price for the oil planned to be exported from Kurdistan.

The statement came after the Reuters news agency claimed in a report that US President Donald Trump's administration has been piling pressure on Iraq to allow Kurdish oil exports to restart or face sanctions.

The report said that the resumption of oil exports from Kurdistan, which will amount to 300,000 barrels per day (bpd), would help to offset a potential fall in Iranian oil exports as a result of Washington's efforts to impose more sanctions on Iran.

Iran is currently supplying up to 1.8 million bpd of oil to international markets despite a harsh regime of US sanctions that imposes heavy penalties on buyers.

The sanctions started seven years ago during Trump's first term in office.

Trump has announced a re-enactment of his so-called "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran.

Iranian authorities have downplayed the threats, saying the country has put in place policies to counter Washington's hostile actions targeting its energy sector.

## President Emphasizes the Role of Universities in Solving Societal Issues



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian stated that universities should be focused on solving societal problems, emphasizing that the individuals who can address the country's challenges are those who truly understand the people's hardships and have the determination to find solutions.

Speaking at the 38th Khwarizmi International Festival and the 26th Khwarizmi Youth Festival on Sunday, February 25, 2025, President Pezeshkian honored the memory of martyr Seyed Hassan Nasrallah and his comrades in Gaza and Lebanon, ahead of their funeral ceremony in Beirut.

The President stressed that there is no issue that humans cannot find a solution for. He explained that problems naturally lead to solutions, provided that there is a genuine concern for them. He urged scientists and academics to take responsibility in finding these solutions.

"Our universities should understand the struggles of society and work towards resolving them. Third- and fourth-generation universities are now society-oriented and focus on problem-solving, while modern universities are transitioning into the fifth generation, integrating science with real-world impact," Pezeshkian added.

Highlighting the interdisciplinary nature of progress, Pezeshkian stated that medicine owes much of its success to fields such as physics, chemistry, mechanics, and electronics. He emphasized that scientific advancements must ultimately serve the people.

The President expressed confidence in Iran's young scholars, scientists, and universities, asserting that solutions to societal challenges are within reach if universities align their objectives with practical problem-solving.

Pezeshkian insisted that with the current academic and intellectual resources, Iran can tackle its economic, social, and industrial problems. He advocated for granting universities greater autonomy, allowing professors and researchers to develop practical solutions.

He called for a transformation in leadership and decision-making, noting that many managers remain stuck in rigid mindsets that hinder progress. "Strategic planning means stepping outside preconceived frameworks and viewing issues from a fresh perspective," he said.

Criticizing inefficiencies in resource utilization, Pezeshkian noted that while humanity is

preparing to settle on the Moon and Mars, Iran still struggles with basic resource management in water, gas, and electricity consumption. He stressed that only innovative thinking and scientific expertise can break these barriers.

The President assured that the government is ready to support universities financially, administratively, and in terms of infrastructure, but emphasized the need for better coordination and focus in research and education to prevent the wastage of national resources.

One of the key concerns Pezeshkian highlighted was that only 10% of global research is practically implemented, with this figure potentially even lower in Iran. He pointed out that scientific findings must translate into real-world applications, benefiting producers, managers, and consumers alike.

He urged university administrators and research directors to develop better frameworks that ensure research is conducted based on the actual needs of society.

Pezeshkian concluded by expressing optimism about the future, emphasizing that belief in progress is essential for achieving it. "Some people do not have a positive outlook on the future, but I believe the future will be what we shape it to be, not what others predict."

He encouraged a culture of determination and belief in success, stating that Iran can achieve greatness by fostering collaboration and planning effectively.

The Khwarizmi International Festival, held annually since May, recognizes outstanding scientific contributions. This year, 500 projects were submitted, with nine finalists reaching the final stage.

The festival awarded cash prizes to the top researchers, with 500 million, 400 million, and 300 million tomans allocated to the top three winners in the main competition. In the Khwarizmi Youth Festival, the top three received 400 million, 300 million, and 250 million tomans, respectively.

The event concluded with a ceremony honoring the festival's winners, attended by President Pezeshkian.

## Concerns Over Currency Fluctuations

TEHRAN - The head of the Iran Chamber of Commerce expressed concerns about the recent fluctuations in the exchange rate, which have raised worries about the supply of raw materials and increased production costs. He also pointed out that exchange rates are being used for political purposes. He called on government officials to take steps to mitigate the impact of currency fluctuations on the supply of essential materials.

In an address at the final meeting of the Iranian Chamber of Commerce's Board of Representatives, Samad Hassanzadeh said: "As we approach spring and the month of Ramadan, we hope to be prepared for the flourishing of the Iranian economy. The year 1403 (2024) has passed, and the Iran Chamber of Commerce, as one of the key players in the governance system, has made it its mission to facilitate private sector activities. This year, we have seen the opening of national dialogues in various areas, the expansion of international activities, and ongoing meetings with foreign ambassadors to form agreements."

He added: "In global relations, many paths remain untrodden, but the achievements of economic activists provide a glimmer of hope for entering the new year with optimism."

Hassanzadeh also noted the increasing visits by government officials to the Iran Chamber of Commerce and emphasized that regular meetings of the Government-Private Sector Dialogue Council, with the presence of the Minister of Economy, have yielded significant results.

In recent months, private sector activists have showcased their capabilities at the "Pioneers of Progress" exhibition, with their achievements being displayed before the Supreme Leader. The exhibition highlighted the importance of connections with Russia and China. Hassanzadeh noted that the Iran Chamber of Commerce is moving towards an operational budget, which is being actively pursued.

He mentioned the exchange of foreign delegations, stating that 26 foreign delegations from neighboring countries, African nations, and Russia had visited Iran this year, while Iranian delegations also visited several of these countries.

Referring to the fluctuations in the exchange rate, Hassanzadeh said: "Recent currency jumps



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

have raised more concerns about securing raw materials and increasing production costs. Furthermore, we see political games being played with the exchange rate. We urge the government to take steps to reduce the impact of the exchange rate on the supply of raw materials. The Currency Committee of the Iran Chamber of Commerce stands firmly alongside the government to navigate these challenging times."

He continued: "For the upcoming year, essential recommendations for improving the business climate could facilitate economic activities and lead to further progress for the private sector. The complexity of administrative processes and the issuance of permits make things difficult for producers and exporters. The use of new technologies to improve this environment will be crucial."

The President of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, in reference to the need for improving Iran's trade relations with other countries, has called on the members of the Expediency Discernment Council to express their support for Iran's accession to the necessary resolutions for membership in the Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

He also emphasized: "Given the current challenges in international relations, we expect the members of the Expediency Discernment Council to show favorable views on accepting FATF."

He added that the Chamber of Commerce had focused on expanding international private sector meetings in pursuit of national dialogue throughout the current year. He also highlighted that expanding Iran's international relations with target countries, foreign ambassadors, and business contracts had been carried out with the cooperation of the government.

The head of the Iran Chamber of Commerce also stressed the importance of strengthening transportation infrastructure, which would enhance global competitiveness.

On the topic of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), he urged members of the Expediency Discernment Council to express their positive stance on Iran's joining FATF.

### Five Operational, Training Flotillas Deployed to Int'l Waters



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN (PressTV) - The commander of Iran's Navy has announced simultaneous deployment of five operational and training flotillas to international waters, underscoring the country's expanding overseas naval presence.

Rear Admiral Shahram Irani revealed that the Iranian naval units were currently stationed in the Strait of Malacca -- which connects the Andaman Sea in the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea in the Pacific Ocean, and near the Gulf of Aden -- off the Yemeni coastline.

The official also affirmed that the Navy maintained a significant presence across elsewhere in the Indian Ocean too with its indigenous military vessels.

Elsewhere in his remarks, the commander addressed the Army's joint Zolfaghar 1403 drills, which are underway across the strategic Makran coastline in southern Iran, the Sea of Oman, and the northern side of the Indian Ocean.

The extensive maneuvers, whose main phase was launched on Saturday, features showcasing of part of the combat capabilities of the Army's Ground Forces, Air Force, Navy, and Air Defense Force as well as the country's Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters.

Irani stated that on the first day of the drills, the Islamic Republic had successfully met its coastal defense objectives, emphasizing that the country's strategic naval forces had demonstrated their capability to provide an impenetrable defense along the coast.

"My fellow servicemen in the Navy have proven that we have reached a level of strength where we can act as a solid fortress along the shores, preventing any potential aggression at sea," he said.

"Our deterrence and power must continuously evolve to match modern threats," the commander said, noting, "The enemy would definitely reconsider its calculations."

### Qalibaf Hails Resistance Strategic, Tactical Victory Against Vulnerable Israel



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Majlis Speaker Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf says the resistance front has achieved a "strategic and tactical" victory against Israel during the regime's 15 months of genocidal war in the Gaza Strip.

Qalibaf made the remarks in a meeting with Ziyad al-Nakhleh, the secretary-general of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad movement, in Tehran.

He praised the resistance of the Palestinian and Lebanese people in the face of the Israeli regime's aggression, stating that the resistance has created a "major epic" in the Muslim world, demonstrating the victory of "blood over the sword."

The top Iranian parliamentarian added that Palestinians have shown "unparalleled resistance against the crimes and aggression of the Zionist regime and its genocide."

Qalibaf said that during his visit to Beirut at the height of the war, he witnessed firsthand how Hezbollah fighters and the Lebanese people were firmly standing up against the Israeli regime, even though Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah had just been assassinated.

He emphasized that in Gaza the Palestinian resistance has proven that the Zionists are vulnerable and that the barriers they have created will never bring them security.

He added that the U.S., the Israeli regime, NATO, and all supporters of Zionism have attempted to establish an air defense system for Israel to prevent any attacks on the occupied territories.

However, the resistance front has demonstrated that all the efforts made by the US, the Israeli regime, NATO, and the Hebrew-Arabic alliance, have failed, he pointed out.

Israel was forced to agree to a ceasefire in Gaza after the regime failed to achieve its objectives of freeing the captives and eliminating Hamas, despite killing at least 48,319 Palestinians, mostly women and children.

# IRAN NEWS



## Lufthansa, Austrian Airlines to Resume Flights to Iran Next Week

TEHRAN (ISNA) - Lufthansa and Austrian Airlines are set to resume their flights to Iran next week, according to the CEO of Imam Khomeini Airport City. Saeid Chalanderi announced that, based on planned schedules, Lufthansa flights will restart on March 1 (Esfand 11), followed by Austrian Airlines on March 2 (Esfand 12). Previously, Chalanderi had stated that both airlines had submitted their flight schedules, with operations expected to begin on March 30 (Farvardin 10). However, there was no confirmation on whether those flights would proceed as planned.

## Iran's Economy Faces Chronic Issues, Says Industry Official



TEHRAN - The Secretary-General of Iran's House of Industry, Mining, and Trade stated that Economy Minister Abdolnasser Hemmati does not have a "magic wand" to solve economic challenges, as some issues require decisions at higher levels of governance.

Amran Khaleqi, in an interview with IRNA, addressed the discussions surrounding the potential impeachment of Minister Hemmati. He pointed out that in Iran, impeachment is often used by parliament to address special circumstances, attract government attention, respond to public pressure, or manage societal tensions.

Khaleqi explained that when a minister is negligent, commits violations, or engages in illegal activities, parliament has the right to question them. However, he emphasized that the minister's share of responsibility in any issue must be carefully considered.

He noted that Hemmati has been in office for less than six months, during which Iran has faced significant challenges, including ongoing sanctions, military tensions, and economic warfare. Additionally, geopolitical shifts in allied countries and foreign efforts to destabilize Iran's economy have created an extremely difficult environment. Despite these challenges, some lawmakers are pushing for the minister's removal.

Khaleqi highlighted that Iran's economic difficulties date back to the first administration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, with the economy continuously declining since then. He pointed out systemic issues, such as energy imbalances, liquidity shortages in the production sector, and persistent double-digit inflation, all of which indicate a chronic economic illness that has yet to be effectively managed.

Despite these structural problems, the focus remains on questioning and potentially impeaching the economy minister. However, Khaleqi suggested that if Hemmati can transparently and courageously address key issues—including Iran's stance on FATF regulations, currency liquidity shortages, high exchange rates, difficulties in international trade, and the impact of sanctions—it could help clarify the nation's economic situation for the public.

## Iran Ranks Second After China in Fastest Strategic Industrial Growth



TEHRAN - Iran has achieved the second-fastest growth in strategic industries after China, particularly in the steel sector, reaching its projected goals for 2025, according to the Minister of Industry, Mining, and Trade.

Speaking at a cooperation agreement ceremony between the Office of the Supreme Leader's Representative in Universities and the Ministry of Industry, Mining, and Trade, Minister Mohammad Atabak emphasized Iran's industrial advancements. He highlighted the importance of conveying the nation's scientific and industrial progress to the younger generation, countering misinformation designed to diminish hope among the youth.

"At every stage of my career in the industry, I have seen that hope is the driving force behind any progress. Enemies of the nation target hope first, particularly among the educated youth. However, the reality is that Iran has made significant strides in numerous sectors compared to the pre-revolution era," Atabak stated.

He noted that the Islamic Republic of Iran has made substantial contributions on the international stage. Many achievements credited to the pre-revolution era actually occurred under the Islamic Republic, yet the government has struggled to effectively communicate these realities to young elites and future leaders.

Atabak stressed the necessity of fostering stronger connections between academia and the industrial sector, encouraging university students and researchers to engage directly with Iran's industrial advancements. He specifically pointed to Iran's progress in the steel industry, stating, "Iran has achieved the second-fastest growth in strategic industries after China, and we have successfully reached our 2025 vision for steel production."

Currently, Iran ranks as the world's tenth-largest steel producer and the second-largest producer of sponge iron. Atabak credited Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's emphasis on mining and the expertise of Iranian specialists in exploration and extraction as key factors in this success.

The minister also touched upon Iran's urban development projects, stating that the Islamic Republic has played a crucial role in major construction initiatives. He mentioned the construction of 12,000 units in Ekbatan Town as an example of the government's efforts, refuting claims that such developments were primarily pre-revolution achievements. He highlighted the challenge of incomplete information dissemination as a major issue in public awareness.

The Head of the Supreme Leader's Representative Office in Universities, Hojatoleslam Mostafa Rostami, emphasized the importance of academic engagement with industry. He described the exposure of young scholars to industrial realities as a two-way benefit: it familiarizes students with national achievements and allows the scientific community to address industry-related challenges effectively.

Rostami noted that Iran has witnessed major transformations across various sectors since the Islamic Revolution. Many of the nation's industrial and economic capacities have been realized under the Ministry of Industry, Mining, and Trade. He urged universities to integrate industrial advancements into their educational frameworks, enhancing both knowledge transfer and economic development.

"Universities have significant potential, and if presented with industrial challenges, they will work towards resolving them. This collaboration will ultimately strengthen the academic sector, enrich the economy, and lead to substantial national benefits," he concluded.

The cooperation agreement titled "Narrative of Progress" was officially signed between the Office of the Supreme Leader's Representative in Universities and the Ministry of Industry, Mining, and Trade on Saturday. This initiative aims to promote and document Iran's scientific and industrial achievements, reinforcing the nation's commitment to continued growth and development.

## Iran Ranks Fifth in Global Copper Reserves, Fifteenth in Production

TEHRAN - Iran is ranked fifth in the world in terms of copper reserves but currently holds the fifteenth position in production. According to Hossein Modarres Khiabani, CEO of the National Iranian Copper Industries Company, efforts are underway to bridge this gap through the Kimia project.

Speaking on the sidelines of the Copper Industry Development Exhibition at Sharif University of Technology, Khiabani highlighted that Iran has defined 70 projects in the mining sector, covering extraction, operational efficiency, smart technologies, and concentrate production. The country's annual copper concentrate production capacity, which was around 1.3 million tons before 2024, has now reached 1.6 million tons, with plans to increase it to 4.3 million tons in the coming years.

Khiabani emphasized the importance of localizing equipment and machinery, stating that one of the concentrate production projects has successfully increased its domestic component share from 38% to 68%. The ultimate goal is to ensure that all necessary machinery and equipment are produced within the country, in collaboration with universities, knowledge-based companies, and local industries.

He also pointed out the strategic partnership between the National Iranian Copper Industries Company and Sharif University of Technology. The exhibition was intentionally held at the university to strengthen ties between academia and industry, leveraging scientific capabilities to develop essential



technologies for the copper sector.

The CEO described the exhibition as a platform to showcase current advancements and future plans aimed at achieving the production target of 800,000 tons of copper cathode, a key objective under Iran's Seventh Development Plan. Various exhibition booths displayed critical aspects required to meet these goals, including water and electricity supply, exploration expansion, machinery development, and localization efforts.

Discussing the Kimia project, which aims to produce one million tons of copper cathode, Khiabani expressed confidence that this goal is achievable through domestic expertise and government support. He emphasized that the project is expected to generate significant foreign exchange revenues for the country, with necessary plans already in place for its phased implementation.

Furthermore, Khiabani reported a remarkable increase in the company's exports in 2024, stating that foreign sales have doubled compared to the previous year. These export revenues are instrumental in acquiring essential machinery and equipment while also playing a crucial role in Iran's economic growth.

The expansion of Iran's copper industry, driven by domestic innovation and strategic planning, is expected to strengthen the country's position in the global market, helping it move up from its current fifteenth-place ranking in production.

## Iran Suspended from Green Card Convention Due to Banking Restrictions



TEHRAN - The Governor of the Central Insurance of Iran has cited banking transaction restrictions as the primary reason for Iran's suspension from the Green Card Convention. He stated that the Green Card Office in Iran has become independent of the Central Insurance and is now managed by the private sector.

According to ISNA, last year, the International Green Card Convention suspended Iran's membership, creating challenges for Iranian drivers abroad, especially transit truck drivers.

Investigations indicate that Iran's suspension was mainly due to sanctions that hindered banking transactions for insurance payments and claims between Iran and foreign entities.

In an interview with ISNA, Parviz Khoshkalam Khosroshahi, the Governor of Central Insurance (Bimeh Markazi), explained the suspension's causes and efforts to resolve the issue. He stated that all member countries of the Green Card Convention must have a local Green Card office to coordinate insurance claims and liaise with the relevant international council. Insurance companies issuing these policies must be linked to the international Green Card Council for cross-border payment coordination.

Initially, Iran's Green Card Office operated within Central Insurance since before the 1979 revolution. However, as Iran faced increasing difficulties in transferring funds, some compensation payments remained unpaid.

"For instance, if an Iranian truck driver was involved in a fatal accident in Turkey, the Turkish Green Card Office would cover the victim's compensation and then seek reimbursement from Iran's Green Card Office," Khosroshahi explained. However, due to banking sanctions, these payments could not be processed, leading to Iran's suspension.

To address the issue, Iranian authorities decided to separate the Green Card Office from the Central Insurance and establish it as an independent non-governmental institution, similar to other countries. This office is now privately managed under the supervision of member insurance companies.

## Iran, Russia Expand Trade Cooperation at Eurasia International Exhibition



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - A delegation comprising economic officials and executives from 15 Russian companies met with 32 Iranian technology and knowledge-based firms on the sidelines of the 3rd Eurasia International Trade Exhibition to discuss export potentials between the two countries.

The trade meeting between Russian and Iranian companies took place on February 22 during the opening of the 3rd Eurasia International Trade Exhibition. The event was inaugurated in the presence of the Iranian President, the Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade, and the President of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce.

A 30-member Russian delegation, including Andrey Belimkov, Head of the Trade Office of the Russian Embassy in Tehran; Khosro Hasan Beigov, Head of the Russian Trade Center in Tehran; and Leonid Lazechko, President of the Iran-Russia Business Council, along with executives from 15 Russian companies based in Moscow, engaged in discussions with Iranian business leaders and company executives.

The meeting, held at the Iran Hall of the International Exhibition, provided an opportunity for 32 Iranian technology and IT firms to interact with their Russian counterparts.

In addition to bilateral (B2B) meetings, participants explored the export capacities of both countries.

Behdad Ghanbarnejad, Moscow Export Center's ambassador in Iran, highlighted the event's quality, stating, "These meetings, which will continue until February 25, have been highly productive and beneficial for both sides."

He further emphasized that the increased presence of Russian and Iranian companies at the exhibition reflects the growing trend of trade relations between the two countries.

## Gas Condensate Exports to Halt for Two Years

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



TEHRAN - The CEO of the Pars Special Economic Zone has announced that gas condensate exports will be halted for the next two years as part of a broader effort to reduce gas flaring and increase domestic processing capacity.

Speaking at a meeting with members of the Iranian Parliament's Special Commission on Production Growth, Sakhavat Asadi revealed that South Pars Gas Complex is implementing a €200 million project aimed at minimizing gas flaring. By the end of 2025, the volume of flared gas is expected to drop below 5 million cubic meters per day.

The Pars Special Economic Zone, spanning 54,000 hectares, is Iran's largest economic zone. It consists of Pars 1 (Asalyeh) and Pars 2 (Kangan), while the development of Pars 3 (Northern Pars) has yet to begin.

Currently, eight refineries and 22 petrochemical plants are operational in Pars 1, while five refineries and 12 petrochemical projects are under construction in Pars 2. One petrochemical plant is already operational in this section.

South Pars is one of the world's largest gas fields, covering 9,700 square kilometers, with one-third of it belonging to Iran and the remaining portion extending into Qatari territory. Iran has now surpassed Qatar in daily production, extracting 716 million cubic meters of gas per day from South Pars platforms.

Asadi reported that over 710,000 barrels of gas condensate are produced daily in South Pars. Of this, 450,000 barrels are transported via a 480-kilometer pipeline to the Persian Gulf Star Refinery in Bandar Abbas for gasoline production.

Since 2017, Iran's gas production from South Pars has exceeded Qatar's, though Qatar retains a higher cumulative extraction due to its earlier start. To date, \$90 billion has been invested in upstream projects at South Pars, with each new phase requiring \$5.6 billion in funding.

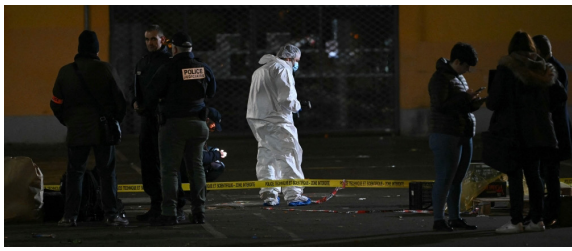
## Hungarian Judges, Court Staff Rally for Judicial Independence

BUDAPEST (Dispatches) - Thousands of Hungarian judges, court staff and supporters marched to the ministry of justice in Budapest on Saturday, demanding judicial independence, freedom of expression for judges and better pay. The independence of Hungary's courts has been a contentious issue, causing a rift between Prime Minister Viktor Orban's nationalist government and the European Union. Judges began to express discontent in November when an agreement was signed between the government and the three main judicial representative bodies that tied salary rises to broad-based reforms. Critics argued that the National Judicial Council, an independent entity with legal capacity and budgetary autonomy, was unduly pressured to sign the document hastily and in secrecy, without proper consultation.



# IRAN NEWS

## One Dead, Several Wounded in Knife Attack in France



MULHOUSE (Dispatches) - A man who went on a stabbing rampage in France, killing one and wounding several others in what President Emmanuel Macron called an "Islamist terrorist act," was on a terrorism watchlist and subject to deportation orders, according to authorities.

The knife-wielding suspect, later identified by prosecutors as a 37-year-old Algerian-born man, was arrested at the site of today's attack in the eastern city of Mulhouse.

Local prosecutor Nicolas Heitz said the suspect, who he did not name, was registered on France's terrorist watchlist.

Speaking at the police station, Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau said the man had "a schizophrenic profile" and his act had "a psychiatric dimension."

Retailleau said France had repeatedly attempted to expel him from the country, but Algeria refused to cooperate.

The rampage occurred around 4pm (1500 GMT) near a busy market in Mulhouse, a city of around 110,000 people near the German border. At the time, demonstrators were rallying in support of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A 69-year-old Portuguese man was fatally wounded while parking attendants and police were also hurt.

Two officers were seriously wounded, with one sustaining an injury to a carotid artery, and the other to the upper body, prosecutor Heitz told AFP, adding that the latter officer was able to leave hospital.

Three other officers suffered minor injuries, prosecutors said.

During the attack, the suspect was heard shouting "Allahu Akbar" (God is greatest), according to the national anti-terror prosecutors unit (PNAT).

Witnesses also told AFP they heard the suspect shouting the words several times.

President Macron later said there was "no doubt" that the incident was "a terrorist act," specifically "an Islamist terrorist act."

The government was determined to continue doing "everything to eradicate terrorism on our soil," he added.

Speaking during a visit to France's agriculture fair, Macron offered condolences to the family of the victim and said the "solidarity of the nation" was behind them.

## Israel Delays Palestinian Prisoner Release After Six Gaza Hostages Freed



YEL AVIV (Dispatches) - Israeli authorities delayed the release of Palestinian prisoners due Saturday in exchange for six hostages freed from Gaza, prompting Hamas to accuse Israel of a "blatant violation" of the truce deal.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who in a statement after the six captives were released vowed to "continue acting decisively in order to bring all of our hostages back home", was due to convene a consultation on Saturday evening, two Israeli officials said.

"Once the security consultation concludes, a decision will be made regarding the next steps" of the ceasefire agreement with Hamas, said one official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

In the Israeli-occupied West Bank and in the Gaza Strip, families were waiting for hours for their loved ones to be released from Israeli custody in exchange for the six Israelis taken back home.

People watch from a battle-scarred buildings as Hamas fighters gather at the site of the handover of two Israeli hostages in Rafah, southern Gaza.

The Palestinian Prisoners' Club advocacy group said Israel would free 620 inmates on Saturday, most of them Gazans taken into custody during the war, but their release has stalled into the night.

Hamas spokesman Abdel Latif al-Qanou said in a statement that Israel's "failure to comply with the release... at the agreed-upon time constitutes a blatant violation of the agreement" that has largely halted more than 15 months of devastating fighting in the Gaza Strip.

Qanou called on the truce mediators to pressure Israel to "implement its provisions without delay or obstruction".

The Israeli sources did not provide a clear reason for the delay, which comes after an emotional two days in Israel, where the remains of hostage Shiri Bibas have been identified after the initial handover of a different body.

Netanyahu has said Hamas will pay "the full price" for what he termed a violation of the truce deal over Bibas's return.

Bibas and her two young sons, among dozens taken captive during Hamas's October 7, 2023 attack on Israel that triggered the war, had become symbols of the ordeal suffered by the Israeli hostages.

Six Israelis, some of them dual nationals, were released earlier on Saturday, the last group of living hostages under the truce's first phase.

The first phase of the truce has so far enabled the release of 30 captives and is due to expire in early March.

Under the cold winter rain in Rafah, southern Gaza, militants handed over Tal Shoham, 40, and Avera Mengistu, 38, who both appeared dazed.

Hamas later published a video showing two Israelis still held captive in Gaza watching one of Saturday's ceremonies from a vehicle, pleading for Netanyahu to secure their release. AFP could not confirm the authenticity of the video.

On Thursday, the first transfer of dead hostages under the truce sparked anger in Israel after analysis concluded that Shiri Bibas's remains were not among the four bodies returned.

The family said in a statement she "was murdered in captivity and has now returned home... to rest."

## Austrian Parties Close to Forming Gov't Without Far Right



VIENNA (Dispatches) - The three biggest centrist parties in Austria's parliament on Saturday they were on the verge of agreeing a coalition government, almost five months after an election won by the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ), which is now sidelined.

A deal between the conservative People's Party (ÖVP), Social Democrats (SPÖ) and liberal Neos would bring to an end the longest wait for a new Austrian government since World War Two.

"I am very confident that in the common ground that we have found, we will manage to finalise a coalition government agreement," ÖVP leader Christian Stocker said in a statement to the media alongside his fellow leaders.

There have been tortuous efforts to cobble together a coalition since the FPÖ, led by Herbert Kickl, for the first time won a parliamentary election in September with 29% of the vote, but fell well short of a majority.

A deal would yield Austria's first three-party government since 1949 and likely catapult Stocker into the chancellery weeks after he was hastily handed the ÖVP reins when former party leader and chancellor Karl Nehammer stepped down.

## Trump Says U.S. Wants Return on Ukraine Aid Money

NATIONAL HARBOR (Dispatches) - U.S. President Donald Trump said he was trying to get money back for the billions of dollars sent to support Ukraine's war against Russia.

His comments came as Washington and Kyiv negotiate a mineral resources deal Trump wants as compensation for the wartime aid his predecessor Joe Biden gave Ukraine.

It was the latest twist in a whirlwind first month since he took office, during which he has upended US foreign policy by making diplomatic overtures towards the Kremlin over the heads of Ukraine and Europe.

Trump told delegates at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) near Washington: "I'm trying to get the money back, or secured."

"I want them to give us something for all of the money that we put up. We're asking for rare earth and oil, anything we can get."

"We're going to get our money back because it's just not fair. And we will see, but I think we're pretty close to a deal, and we better be close because that has been a horrible situation."

Hours earlier, a source told AFP that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky was "not ready" to sign such a deal, despite growing US pressure.

Trump's special envoy Keith Kellogg, who met Zelensky this week, said the Ukrainian president understood signing a deal with the United States was "critical."

But the Ukrainian source told AFP that Kyiv needed assurances first.

"In the form in which the draft is now, the president is not ready to accept, we are still trying to make changes and add constructiveness," the source close to the matter said.

Ukraine wants any agreement signed with the United States to include security guarantees as it battles Russia's nearly three-year invasion.

The negotiations between the two countries come amid a deepening war of



words between Trump and Zelensky that has raised alarm in Kyiv and Europe.

On Wednesday, Trump branded his Ukrainian counterpart a "dictator" and called for him to "move fast" to end the war, a day after Russian and US officials held talks in Saudi Arabia without Kyiv.

Washington has proposed a United Nations resolution on the Ukraine conflict that omitted any mention of Kyiv's territory occupied by Russia, diplomatic sources told AFP.

Trump has asked for "\$500 billion worth" of rare earth minerals to make up for aid given to Kyiv — a price tag Ukraine has balked at and which is much higher than published US aid figures.

"There are no American obligations in the agreement regarding guarantees or investments, everything about them is very vague, and they want to extract \$500 billion from us," the Ukrainian source told AFP.

"What kind of partnership is this? And why do we have to give \$500 billion, there is no answer," the source said, adding that Ukraine had proposed changes.

The United States has given Ukraine more than \$60 billion in military aid since Russia's invasion, according to official figures — the largest such contribution among Kyiv's allies but substantially lower than Trump's figures.

The Kiel Institute, a German economic research body, said that from 2022 until the end of 2024, the United States gave a total of 114.2 billion euros (\$119.8 billion) in financial, humanitarian and military aid.

A senior Ukrainian official told AFP that despite the tensions, talks on a possible agreement were "ongoing."

The row comes as Ukraine is set to mark the third anniversary of Russia's invasion on Monday, and as Kyiv's forces are slowly ceding ground on the front line.

Moscow's defence ministry earlier yesterday claimed the capture of Novolyubivka in the eastern Lugansk region, which is now largely under Russian control.

In a call with Zelensky yesterday, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer pledged the "UK's ironclad support for Ukraine."

Zelensky, in response, praised the United Kingdom for showing "leadership" on the war with Russia.

Starmer also said it was in the "interests" of both Britain and the United States to "stand by" Ukraine, which needed a seat at the negotiating table and "strong security guarantees so the peace will last," writing in a column for The Sun published late yesterday.

Foreign Secretary David Lammy announced that Britain will unveil a significant package of sanctions against Russia on Monday.

In London, thousands of people marched in support of Ukraine, and polls in Britain suggest strong support for Kyiv.

France's Defense Minister Sebastien Lecornu said that Paris was looking at increasing the number of its frigates and Rafale fighter jets, and stepping up production of drones.

The measures were being taken to improve France's defense capabilities because of threats related to the Ukraine conflict, he was quoted as saying in today's edition of Le Parisien newspaper.

## Pope Remains in Critical Condition After Respiratory Attack

ROME (Dispatches) - Pope Francis's condition "continues to be critical", the Vatican said, saying the 88-year-old was alert but had suffered a respiratory attack that required "high-flow oxygen", and also blood transfusions.

"At the moment the prognosis is reserved," it said, as the head of the Catholic Church prepared to spend his ninth night in Rome's Gemelli hospital, where he was diagnosed this week with double pneumonia.

"The Holy Father's condition continues to be critical, therefore, as explained yesterday, the pope is not out of danger," the Vatican said in its regular early evening update.

"This morning Pope Francis presented a prolonged asthmatic respiratory crisis, which also required the application of high-flow oxygen," it said.

Daily blood tests "showed thrombocytopenia, associated with anaemia, which required the administration of blood transfusions", it added.

"The Holy Father continues to be alert and spent the day in an armchair even if he was suffering more than yesterday."

The Vatican earlier confirmed the Argentine pontiff would not deliver his usual weekly Angelus prayer on Sunday, saying the text would be published, as it was last weekend.

Francis has been head of the Catholic Church since 2013, but has suffered numerous health issues in recent years, and underwent major surgery in 2021 and 2023.

This latest hospitalization has cast doubt over his ability to continue as leader of world's almost 1.4 billion Catholics, fuelling speculation over his potential resignation -- and who might take over.

Vatican Secretary of State Pietro Parolin told Italy's Corriere della Sera daily that such



discussion was normal but said he would not enter into "useless speculation".

"Now we are thinking about the health of the Holy Father, his recovery, his return to the Vatican: these are the only things that matter," the cardinal said.

A group of nuns and priests from around the world gathered Saturday outside the entrance to the Gemelli hospital, where Francis is staying in a special papal suite on the 10th floor, to pray for him.

"We are praying today for the Holy Father, Pope Francis, and our hope is that he will recover well in the Grace of God," Brazilian priest Don Wellison told AFP.

Francis has been moving between his bed, a chair and an adjacent chapel where he prays and has also been doing some work, the Vatican says.

Professor Sergio Alfieri, who leads the pope's medical team at the Gemelli, said Friday the pontiff's condition has been slightly improving, allowing doctors to incrementally lower the amount of medication he is taking.

But he made clear then that the situation was very serious, noting the pontiff's age and general condition of health.

"Is the pope out of danger? No, the pope is not out of danger," Alfieri said, but added: "If you then ask whether he is in danger of dying at this moment, the answer is still no."

Francis has said the papacy is a job for life, but has also left the door open to resigning like his predecessor Benedict XVI.

He has often joked about the scheming his health woes inevitably prompt, particularly among those who oppose his attempts at reform.



## Arsenal Suffer Title Blow Against West Ham

LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal suffered a potentially mortal blow in their title quest as West Ham United condemned them to a first Premier League home defeat of the season.

Jarrod Bowen's header ensured a 1-0 victory for West Ham as Arsenal squandered the chance to cut Liverpool's lead to five points ahead of their Sunday clash at Manchester City.

Aston Villa roared back from a goal down to beat Chelsea 2-1 at Villa Park, while Manchester United recovered from a dreadful first-half display at Goodison Park to draw 2-2 with Everton as they survived a controversial late penalty call.

Tottenham Hotspur's improved form continued when they claimed a third successive league win, increasing Ipswich Town's relegation fears with a 4-1 victory at Portman Road.

However, Wolverhampton Wanderers eased away from the drop zone with a surprise 1-0 win at 10-man Bournemouth who missed out on the chance to move into the top four.

Brighton & Hove Albion thrashed bottom club Southampton 4-0 away while Crystal Palace won 2-0 at London rivals Fulham.

Arsenal were without a recognised striker, with injuries hitting them hard, and they could have few complaints as West Ham claimed only a second league win in six since new manager Graham Potter took charge.

Mikel Arteta's side managed only two shots on target and to make matters worse they had substitute Myles Lewis-Skelly sent off in the 73rd minute after hauling down Mohammed Kudus.

"Very disappointed. Obviously very angry as well. You have to congratulate West Ham for the victory," Arteta said after Arsenal's first home league loss for 10 months.

"(The title race) is not in our hands."  
 Villa's Marco Asensio bagged a double and fellow newcomer Marcus Rashford had two assists as their side roared back from a goal down to beat Chelsea.

Enzo Fernandez slotted home in the ninth minute before Asensio levelled in the 57th. Asensio scored the winner in the 89th minute when Chelsea goalkeeper Filip Jorgensen allowed the Spaniard's shot to slip under his body and into the net.

Villa climbed to seventh in the league table on 42 points, one point behind both Chelsea, who fell to sixth, and fifth-placed Bournemouth.

Manchester United manager Ruben Amorim said his side "did not exist" as they trailed 2-0 at Everton for whom striker Beto and Abdoulaye Doucoure were on target in the first half.

The visitors did improve after the break and captain Bruno Fernandes pulled back a goal from a free kick before Manuel Ugarte slammed home a superb equaliser 10 minutes from time.

It looked like all being in vain for United though as referee Andrew Madley pointed to the spot in stoppage time after Everton's Ashley Young went down having seemingly been pulled back by Harry Maguire as he tried to reach a rebound.

But after a long VAR check Madley went to the screen and changed his original decision.

Tottenham winger Brennan Johnson scored twice in the first half before goals from Djed Spence and Dejan Kulusevski wrapped up their victory at Ipswich.

The win left Ange Postecoglou's team in 12th spot with 33 points from 26 games, while Ipswich remained third from bottom on 17, five points adrift of the safety zone.

Bournemouth's surging run towards a European place was stalled as they lost to Wolves -- only their second defeat in their last 14 league games.

Matheus Cunha's 14th goal of the season secured the points for 17th-placed Wolves who are now five points clear of Ipswich.

The winner came five minutes after Bournemouth defender Illia Zabarnyi made a reckless challenge on Rayan Ait-Nouri and was sent off in the 31st minute.

Zabarnyi was initially shown a yellow card but it was upgraded to red after a VAR intervention.

Andoni Iraola's Bournemouth remained in fifth place on 43 points.

A first-half own goal by Fulham defender Joachim Andersen and a second-half rocket from Daniel Munoz gave Palace the points at Fulham.

Brighton maintained their European qualification hopes as they put another nail in Southampton's relegation coffin.

Brazilian Joao Pedro gave Brighton the lead and Georginio Rutter doubled the lead before Kaoru Mitoma and Jack Hinshelwood sealed Southampton's eighth successive home league loss.

Saints remain rooted to the bottom of the table with nine points from 26 matches.

## Barca Battle to Keep Liga Lead as Atletico Apply Pressure



BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Barcelona were below par but earned a 2-0 win at Las Palmas to move back top of La Liga.

After Atletico Madrid beat Valencia 3-0 to temporarily take pole position, the Catalans replaced them with a narrow victory on the road and sit one point ahead of the Rojiblancos.

Substitute Dani Olmo produced a fine finish before Ferran Torres drilled home to settle the game and earn Barca revenge for a shock home defeat by Las Palmas earlier in the season.

Champions Real Madrid, third, can pull level on points with Barcelona if they beat Girona at home yesterday.

"We scored two goals, we took three points and the three-and-a-half hour flight back is much better with these three points," Barca coach Flick told reporters.

"(Olmo) scored the first goal and this goal was very important for us.

"In the first half we missed 5-10 per cent, maybe more (from our best level)... the players are also not happy with the performance but they are happy with the three points."

Barca were inaccurate in attack in a tight first half, unable to find the quality they needed to unpick the hosts' defence.

Flick took action at the break and brought on playmaker Olmo in place of the quiet Ferrn Lopez.

The Spain international's first contribution was a sloppy pass that flew out of play but he quickly found his focus.

Lamine Yamal skipped forward and slipped the ball to Olmo, who showed good footwork to find space in the box and finish.

Olmo has not featured a great deal since the club's financial problems forced him to be unregistered at the start of the year, until Spain's national sports council granted a temporary measure which allowed him to play again.

The former RB Leipzig star missed some games with a calf strain in January.

Las Palmas appealed for a penalty when a shot struck the back of Eric Garcia's arm in the box but VAR showed there was an offside in the build-up.

Eight minutes of stoppage time were added on which gave Las Palmas heart but instead it was Barcelona who struck.

A loose pass at the back was picked up by Raphinha, who fed Torres to rifle past Jasper Cillessen and seal Barcelona's win.

Defeat leaves Las Palmas 17th, level on points with Valencia, 18th, in the relegation zone.

Julian Alvarez bagged a brace as Atletico were able to climb to the top of the pile for a couple of hours.

The Argentina international reached nine league goals for the season with his first half double before Angel Correa steered home the third late on.

## Rublev Downs Draper to Win Qatar Open

DOHA (Dispatches) - Russian Andrey Rublev was given a tough test early on, but finished in style to beat Britain's eight seed Jack Draper 7-5 5-7 6-1 and win the Qatar Open.

Fifth seed Rublev, who also won the title in 2020, claimed his first tournament win since his triumph at the Madrid Open last April, but was made to battle in the opening two sets.

"It feels amazing. It's the first time I've won the same title twice," a delighted Rublev said.

"I'm really happy. I don't know what else to say."

The opener went with serve for the first 11 games, with Rublev serving to love on four occasions and Draper twice doing likewise, before the Russian finally broke the Briton to take the first set.

The second set appeared to heading towards a tiebreak when Draper managed to break for a 6-5 lead and served out to level the match.

Draper had never beaten Rublev in their three previous meetings, and went into the deciding set with the wind in his sails, but Rublev showed no mercy.

Rublev broke twice early on to storm into a 5-0 lead and while Draper managed to avoid a bagel, the Russian fired down two aces to wrap up the win.

"I really like Jack as a person and I really like his game. He has a really, really great career and future ahead. He will win many great things," Rublev said.



Draper failed in his bid to win his third ATP title after winning in Stuttgart and Vienna last year, but the 23-year-old's run to the final will lift him to a career-high 12th in the rankings.

"I want to congratulate Andrey. He was too good today. Outlasted me," Draper said.

"We played some really tough matches this week. In the third set he was a bit too strong for me."

Meanwhile defending champion Sebastian Baez rallied from a set down to defeat fellow Argentine Camilo Ugo Carabelli 3-6 6-1 6-1 in the semi-finals of the Rio Open.

The 24-year-old Baez, who is looking to become the first two-time

Rio Open champion, will take on Alexandre Muller after the Frenchman beat Francisco Comesana 7-5 6-7(3) 6-3 in a marathon battle.

Despite an impressive opening set from lucky loser Carabelli, Baez found his pace to claim victory, winning 12 of the next 14 games and dropping just four service points in both the second and third sets.

"I'm so proud, because the last weeks were a little tough for me," fifth seed Baez said. "I didn't feel very well this week, so I am happy to have recovered my body, my mind, my tennis."

"It's always difficult to play some guys you have known since we were kids. (Carabelli) is doing a very good job, so congrats to him and to his team. I'm happy with my level today, this week."

In the later semi-final, Muller needed almost three hours to overcome Argentine Comesana, who had stunned world number two Alexander Zverev in Friday's quarter-finals.

A month and a half after winning the first title of his career at the Hong Kong Open, Muller secured his first ATP 500 final and could become the first Frenchman to claim the title in Brazil.

The 28-year-old seeks to cap a great run this week, having defeated rising Brazilian teenager Joao Fonseca - newly crowned at the Buenos Aires Open - and the top-ranked Argentine Francisco Cerundolo.

## Nets Extend Sixers' Skid With Buzzer-Beating Tip-In

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Nic Claxton put in an offensive rebound at the buzzer as the Brooklyn Nets slipped past the host Philadelphia 76ers 105-103.

After Tyrese Maxey tied it with a 3-pointer, the Nets opted not to call timeout. Brooklyn's Keon Johnson missed a 3-pointer from the wing with two seconds remaining, but Claxton hustled to the rebound, caught it in mid-air along the left side of the lane and shot it in as the horn sounded.

Cameron Johnson led Brooklyn with 23 points, although he shot just 1-of-9 from 3-point range. Trendon Watford chipped in with 16 points off the bench and Claxton added 16 points, nine rebounds and three blocks for the Nets, who have won seven of their last nine.

Maxey paced the Sixers with 31 points, while Quentin Grimes pitched in with 16 points. Joel Embiid had 14 points on 4-of-13 shooting from the field as Philadelphia lost its seventh in a row.

The Nets led by 17 early in the third quarter before the Sixers eventually got within 83-76 heading into the fourth.

Watford scored nine points in the first seven minutes of the fourth, helping Brooklyn lead 94-88 with 5:40 to play. However, Philadelphia responded with nine straight points, capped by Grimes' go-ahead 3-pointer and Kelly Oubre Jr.'s follow slam shortly thereafter for a 97-94 lead with 3 1/2 minutes left.

Maxey's 3-pointer snapped a tie with about three minutes left, but



Keon Johnson's 3-pointer about a minute later gave the Nets a 102-100 lead. Maxey's transition 3-pointer with 23 seconds remaining tied it at 103-103, setting up the exciting finish.

Brooklyn shot a blistering 75 percent (15 of 20 from the field in the first quarter en route to a 40-30 lead after 12 minutes.

The Nets led by double digits for most of the second quarter, going ahead by as many as 17 before settling for a 63-52 lead at the break. Maxey led all scorers with 15 first-half points. Cameron Johnson had 12 for Brooklyn.

Meanwhile Devin Booker scored 29 points, Kevin Durant added 27 points and 11 rebounds, and the visiting Phoenix Suns snapped a four-

game skid by beating the Chicago Bulls 121-117.

Bradley Beal added 25 points in his return to the starting lineup for Phoenix, which took its first lead late in the second quarter and never trailed in the second half. Nick Richards added 15 points and nine rebounds, and Mason Plumlee had 10 points.

Chicago lost its season-high sixth straight game despite mounting a late rally in the fourth quarter. The Bulls trailed by eight before using a 10-2 run to tie the game at 111 with 2:22 left in regulation.

Durant made four foul shots and Booker's trey put Phoenix ahead 118-111 with 1:08 remaining. Chicago responded with four straight points to make it a one-possession game before Beal drained a 3-pointer with 13.4 seconds left to seal the victory.

Josh Giddey led the Bulls with 24 points, 10 assists and eight rebounds. Coby White scored 20 points and added eight assists, Nikola Vucevic had 16 points and 11 rebounds, Matas Buzelis scored 15 points, and Kevin Hueter added 14 off the bench.

Phoenix won its 10th straight meeting against Chicago, which shot 18 of 53 (34 percent) from 3-point range. The Suns were 10 of 30 (33.3 percent) from beyond the arc.

Making his first start since being replaced in the lineup by Tyus Jones on Jan. 6, Beal finished 10-of-19 shooting with six rebounds and four assists.



RIYADH (Dispatches) - Former France striker Karim Benzema was delighted to help Al-Ittihad secure a 4-1 victory over Al-Hilal in a top-of-the-table clash on Saturday, maintaining their dominance in the Saudi Pro League.

Benzema sealed Ittihad's victory with a stunning goal four minutes before the final whistle, giving coach Laurent Blanc's team a seven-point lead over the champions, who sit in second place.

"It was an important match, and we played seriously against a strong opponent," Benzema told SSC Sports.

"The support from the fans gave us a boost, and we gave everything in the game, scoring four goals, with all the players putting in a great performance from the start.

Benzema, who has provided seven assists, tops the Saudi league scoring chart with 16 goals. He is level with former Real Madrid teammate Cristiano Ronaldo, who has netted 16 times for Al-Nassr.

"I am delighted because I am helping my team, and all the goals I score are to help my teammates. My teammates are always passing to me... and we are working together," the 37-year-old said.

Despite Ittihad's lead on top of the standings, Benzema remained cautious about the team's chances of securing the title with 13 matches remaining.

"There are many matches left, and we have to keep working and looking ahead" he added.