

Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Esmail Baghaei Censures the Israeli Regime's New Attacks Targeting Multiple Locations in the Syrian Capital Damascus and the Southern Part of the Arab Country

# IRAN NEWS

The U.S. Department of the Treasury Has Announced Fresh Sanctions Targeting an Alleged Procurement Network Behind the Country's Drone Production Program

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### Imported Elements Seeking to Create Chaos in Southeast Iran



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Intelligence Minister Esmail Khatib says the Islamic Republic's enemies are stoking insecurity in the southeastern province of Sistan and Baluchestan through "imported elements" outside the region.

In a major counterterrorism operation on Wednesday, Iranian intelligence forces dismantled a Takfiri terrorist network and seized a large cache of weapons and explosives in the southeastern province.

"Throughout the history of the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Republic, enemies have always attempted to carry out acts of sedition and to plot [against the country]. Today, we also witness that if acts of stoking insecurity occur, these actions are carried out by imported agents who do not belong to this people or this region," Khatib said during a visit to the southeastern province on Friday.

He underlined the importance of public vigilance and unity in the face of adversarial plots, saying, "The enemies exploit every opportunity to create discord and insecurity, but the people of Iran have always stood against these conspiracies with awareness and unity. We must be more watchful than ever and not allow enemies to tap external elements to create chaos."

The Iranian intelligence minister said security and peace in the southeastern province are of paramount importance, calling for strengthening security through cooperation with the public and local authorities, while not allowing enemies to use the region as a base for instigating insecurity.

"The Ministry of Intelligence is thoroughly monitoring and countering any actions that stoke insecurity. We will spare no effort to maintain the security of the country and the peace of the people," he added. "We must preserve the security of the country through cooperation and solidarity, and not allow enemies to achieve their sinister goals."

### Iranian Flotilla Makes Port Call in India With Friendship Message



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Iranian Navy's 100th flotilla of warships has docked at Mumbai Port on the western coast of India as the Islamic Republic is expanding its naval presence in international waters.

The flotilla, comprised of Bushehr replenishment ship and Lavan landing ship, arrived at the port on Thursday and was welcomed by officials from the Consulate General of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Mumbai as well as Indian naval commanders.

The training voyage reportedly aims to convey the message of peace and friendship to the countries along the Indian Ocean, the Sea of Oman and the Persian Gulf; and is meant to educate and transfer expertise to the cadets of Imam Khomeini Naval University of Noshahr in northern Iran.

During their stay at Mumbai Port, Iranian naval officials are scheduled to hold high-level meetings with their Indian counterparts, visit educational, cultural and historical centers, and participate in friendly sports contests.

Rear Admiral Vidyadhar Harkhe, Chief Staff Officer (Operations) at Headquarters of India's Western Naval Command, welcomed the docking of Iranian vessels at Indian ports as a step toward further enhancement of relations between the two nations.

"Iran is a powerful country in the fight against piracy, and has managed to ensure the security of merchant vessels in the Gulf of Aden."

"I hope the presence of your cadets will provide a basis for bilateral cooperation in educational fields and holding joint exercises," he stated.

## Iran Open to Negotiations But Won't Capitulate to Bullies



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian has reiterated Iran's openness to negotiations, but emphasized that the Islamic Republic will not give in to the pressure of bullying powers and won't engage in any negotiations under duress.

"We should not be afraid of sanctions," Pezeshkian said Thursday in reference to U.S. President Donald Trump's National Security Presidential Memorandum 2, which seeks to bring Iran's crude exports to zero.

"Some assert that there is no alternative but to negotiate with them [the United States.] We did not say we would not negotiate, but we are not supposed to capitulate to bullies," he added.

He made the remarks as he addressed a meeting with directors of state bodies in southwestern cities of Tehran Province.

Pezeshkian underscored that Iran won't engage in talks with the parties who bury women and children under bombings whilst claiming to be advocating human rights.

"They tell us not to possess missiles and munitions so that they can bomb them can bomb us whenever they want, leaving us unable to defend ourselves," he said.

The president also said Iran "does not seek conflicts" and wants to live in peace and serenity alongside other Muslim countries in the region.

"Iran has not generated tensions in the region. Israel is directly accountable. It is the Zionist regime which carries out acts of aggression anywhere and is not afraid of anybody due to US support," Pezeshkian said.

He lashed out at Americans for ramping up anti-Iran sanctions and claiming to be ready for talks at the same time.

"They have intensified all the sanctions and now they are saying that let's talk to each other. First prove that you are open to dialogue and then we can talk to each other."

The president called upon all sections of the Iranian society to join forces to overcome the existing crises, and strive to get to the vision set out by Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

The Iranian president also stressed strengthening economic relations with neighboring countries in order to dispense with the need to bypass sanctions.

## Operation "True Promise 3" Will Be Carried Out on Time

TEHRAN - The Deputy Coordinator of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) announced that while operations "True Promise 1" and "True Promise 2" have already been carried out, "True Promise 3" will also be conducted on schedule.

Brigadier General Ali Fazli made this statement on Thursday evening during a national ceremony honoring the martyrs, including commanders Martyr Haj Hossein Kharrazi and Martyr Abdolrasoul Zarin, as well as commemorating the victims of the terrorist attack on the Khash-Zahedan road.

General Fazli praised Martyr Kharrazi as a great man from Isfahan, a devoted and selfless individual, a courageous warrior, and a scholar who remained committed to his faith. He noted that Kharrazi, who had memorized the Quran and Nahj al-Balagha, never wavered in his jihad from before the Islamic Revolution until his martyrdom.

The IRGC official highlighted Kharrazi's contributions, from the early days of the Islamic Revolution in Kurdistan to his key role in the Iran-Iraq War in southern battlefronts. He emphasized the significant efforts of people from Isfahan in defending the revolution, from Sistan and Baluchestan to Kurdistan, and throughout the Sacred Defense period.

General Fazli pointed out that Kharrazi was one of the first individuals assigned to establish a military brigade, which later evolved into multiple brigades, strengthening the country's defense infrastructure. These efforts led to remarkable achievements in operations such as Fath al-Mobin, exceeding expectations.

He further explained that Iran's defense capabilities matured during the war, enabling the



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

planning and execution of major operations like Beit al-Moqaddas. In this operation, despite the Iraqi military's capability to create a wall of fire at the push of a button, Iranian forces managed to disrupt their electronic systems.

As a result of this strategic operation, the Iranian flag was raised over the minaret of Khorramshahr's Grand Mosque after 19 months. General Fazli revealed that out of 14,000 Iraqi soldiers, over 11,000 surrendered, an outcome attributed to the ingenuity of Martyrs Kharrazi and Kazemi.

He stressed that without divine support, piety, and the strategic mindset of Iranian fighters, Khorramshahr could not have been liberated. He recalled that Khorramshahr had fallen three times throughout history, but only in the third instance was it retaken by the forces loyal to the Islamic leadership without territorial compromise.

Quoting the Supreme Leader's famous statement, "More Khorramshahrs lie ahead," General Fazli highlighted the widespread resistance movement from Yemen to Gaza as a testament to the ongoing fight in defense of faith. He emphasized that the school of thought upheld by figures like Martyr Qasem Soleimani, which inspired resistance fighters like Martyr Hojaji, continues to shape the battlefield.

He also echoed Imam Khomeini's view that the liberation of Khorramshahr was not merely a territorial victory but a triumph of Islamic values. Finally, he reiterated that True Promise 1 and 2 have been executed, and True Promise 3 will proceed as scheduled.

### President Advocates Stronger Ties Among Muslim Nations



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian says the promotion of convergence and relations among Muslim countries, including Iran and Malaysia, is among the necessities in the current global situation.

Pezeshkian made the remark in a meeting with Malaysian Minister of Foreign Affairs Dato' Seri Utama Haji Mohamad Bin Haji Hasan in Tehran.

"The Zionist regime (Israel) currently dares to commit acts of crimes and aggression in the region because Muslims are indifferent to each other," he said.

He added that fostering synergy among officials and politicians of the Muslim world would play a very important role in removing differences, misunderstanding and poverty in the Muslim states.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran is prepared and emphasizes the expansion of communications with Muslim countries, including Malaysia, in all fields," he said.

Further in his remarks, Pezeshkian noted that the 8th Iran-Malaysia joint commission meeting was held in Tehran earlier on Wednesday after a 17-year hiatus.

"It is necessary to use the capacity of the joint commission to facilitate permanent exchanges among traders and merchants, intercultural communications and the transfer of experience in various economic, scientific and technological fields to create common interests," the Iranian president emphasized.

He expressed hope that the exchange of meetings between the two countries would lead to the establishment of bilateral constructive interactions.

For his part, the Malaysian foreign minister said ties between Tehran and Kuala Lumpur are based on understanding and fraternity.

He expressed Malaysia's willingness to boost ties with Iran and make use of the Islamic Republic's capacities in the scientific, technological, academic, foodstuff and agricultural areas.

### Iran's FTA With Eurasian Countries to Be Implemented in May



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade announced that the country's free trade agreement with the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has been approved by the Iranian Parliament and is expected to be implemented in April or early May.

Seyyed Mohammad Atabak made the announcement on Thursday during the 23rd National Consumer Rights Protection Conference. He stated that the five Eurasian member countries—Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan—have finalized the agreement, bringing Iran closer to its execution stage after parliamentary approval.

Atabak emphasized that international trade agreements create a competitive environment for manufacturers. He highlighted that the Eurasian economic pact is one of the most significant trade agreements, reducing 87% of tariffs to zero. Additionally, he noted that the 240-million-strong Eurasian market presents a great opportunity for Iran.

The minister stressed that domestically produced goods must meet international quality standards to be eligible for export to these countries. He further clarified that the government's focus is not on imposing restrictions but rather on supporting both producers and consumers.

Atabak also pointed out that fairness and justice stem from economic support, and any regulatory measures should target exploitative sectors within production. He mentioned that forums like the consumer rights conference help assess domestic production and bring industry challenges to the government's attention for resolution.



# IRAN NEWS



## Iran Ready for Active Participation in Expo 2027

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Seyed Sattar Hashemi, delivered a message from President Masoud Pezeshkian to Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić, expressing Iran's readiness to collaborate and actively participate in Expo 2027 in Belgrade.

Hashemi presented the message during a meeting with Vučić in Belgrade. President Pezeshkian's message reaffirmed Iran's commitment to working with Serbia for the global event. It stated, "I was delighted to receive your invitation for Iran to participate in Expo 2027 Belgrade. The Islamic Republic of Iran previously supported Belgrade's candidacy at the General Assembly of the International Exhibitions Bureau (BIE), confident in Serbia's ability to host this event. We now emphasize our readiness to cooperate and engage actively in this international occasion."

## Iran's Non-Oil Exports Surge 18% to \$48b



TEHRAN - Iran's non-oil export revenues reached \$48 billion in the current year, marking an 18% increase compared to the same period last year, according to Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, Deputy Minister of Industry, Mines, and Trade and Head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization. The statement was made on Wednesday evening.

Dehghan Dehnavi reported that over the same period, Iran imported goods worth approximately \$56 billion. Of this, \$6.4 billion consisted of gold imports, which he noted are primarily used to settle foreign exchange obligations rather than being classified as consumer goods imports. Excluding gold imports, the country's non-oil trade balance stands at a deficit of \$2 billion—a significant improvement from last year's \$12 billion deficit.

"When factoring in oil exports, Iran's overall trade balance becomes overwhelmingly positive, demonstrating sufficient foreign currency reserves to meet all of the country's import needs," Dehghan Dehnavi emphasized.

Highlighting Iran's trade potential, the official pointed to the opportunities presented by the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) agreement. He noted that the deal will eliminate import tariffs on 87% of Iranian goods in the five EAEU member states, creating a major trade opportunity. "This allows Iranian traders to export their products with greater competitiveness and lower costs, enabling them to capture larger markets in the Eurasian region," he said.

Dehghan Dehnavi also addressed challenges faced by producers in Iran, particularly in Yazd province, acknowledging their legitimate concerns. He identified regulatory hurdles, cumbersome laws, and processes as key obstacles that hinder agility and the implementation of development programs. "We must address these issues in both exports and imports by removing barriers, simplifying regulations, and streamlining oversight processes," he stated.

He urged exporters to actively pursue opportunities in target markets, emphasizing that resolving these challenges will empower them to strengthen their development efforts and expand their presence in international markets.

## Iran Signals Readiness to Elevate Strategic Cooperation with Serbia



TEHRAN - Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Seyed Sattar Hashemi, affirmed Iran's willingness to elevate bilateral cooperation with Serbia to a strategic level during an official meeting with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić on Thursday. The meeting took place on the third day of Hashemi's official visit to Serbia, as reported by Iran's Ministry of Communications and Information Technology.

The discussions, held as part of Iran's 14th government's technology-focused diplomacy agenda, aimed to strengthen ties between the two nations. Hashemi delivered an official message from Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian to Vučić, emphasizing Iran's commitment to deepening collaboration in communications, information technology, cutting-edge technologies, and artificial intelligence (AI).

"Iran and Serbia have long enjoyed robust relations, and today presents an opportune moment to further solidify this bond by advancing cooperation in diverse fields, particularly IT, communications, and AI," Hashemi stated. He highlighted Iran's readiness to expand partnerships in cybersecurity, e-governance, digital infrastructure, data transmission, and related areas to the highest level.

Addressing Vučić, Hashemi underscored Iran's capabilities in AI, fifth-generation (5G) networks, digital infrastructure, and tech-driven startups, expressing Iran's desire to forge a strategic partnership with Serbia. "By establishing joint research labs and sharing technical expertise, we can take significant steps toward technological advancement in the region," he added. Hashemi also pointed to Iran's vibrant startup ecosystem and knowledge-based companies, noting their potential to contribute to smart city projects and digital

transformation initiatives.

Iran, he assured, is prepared to collaborate on training specialized workforces and sharing expertise in AI and cybersecurity. "We are confident that through knowledge exchange, joint meetings, and mutual support, we can unlock our latent potential for the sustainable development of both nations," Hashemi concluded.

In response, President Vučić expressed gratitude for the message from President Pezeshkian and extended warm regards to his Iranian counterpart. "Iran is an influential and key player in Asia and the Middle East, and Serbia welcomes the expansion of relations with Tehran, particularly in communications and IT," Vučić said. He revealed that he has tasked Serbia's Minister of Information and Telecommunications with exploring cooperation with Iran in areas such as data transmission.

Vučić praised Iran's advancements in space telecommunications, commending its achievements in designing, building, and launching remote-sensing and communication satellites. He welcomed the prospect of Serbia benefiting from Iran's technical know-how in these fields. Additionally, noting Iran's expertise in establishing fiber optic factories in several countries, Vučić expressed interest in leveraging this capacity for Serbia.

During the meeting, Hashemi also presented President Vučić with Pezeshkian's message, which included Iran's pledge to participate in the Expo 2027 event in Belgrade.

The meeting underscored both nations' commitment to deepening ties, with technology and innovation at the forefront of their burgeoning strategic partnership.

## Iran's Presidency of TRACECA: A Chance to Lead Regional Transit Hub



TEHRAN - The head of the International Affairs Center at Iran's Ministry of Roads and Urban Development announced that the Islamic Republic of Iran has assumed the presidency of TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia) for one year starting today. This role provides Iran with an opportunity to advance its programs and initiatives to establish itself as a central transit hub in the region.

Amin Taraffo, speaking on Wednesday at the summit of the Intergovernmental Commission of the Europe-Caucasus-Asia Corridor (TRACECA) held at the Espinas Palace Hotel, told reporters: "Yesterday and today, we witnessed the 17th TRACECA summit, attended by 14 member states from Eastern Europe, the Caucasus region, Turkey, Iran, and Central Asia. TRACECA's corridor members connect Asia to Europe and vice versa through their transportation networks."

Highlighting the significance of the event, Taraffo said: "Iran's one-year presidency of TRACECA, starting today, allows the country to focus on its activities, programs, and initiatives in this field to take a leading role in regional transit." He added that the presence of TRACECA members in Iran offers a chance to foster new developments and initiatives through mutually beneficial partnerships, describing this as undoubtedly the greatest achievement of such meetings.

Taraffo, who also serves as the head of international affairs at the ministry, emphasized that TRACECA's cooperation framework aims to enhance intergovernmental collaboration to develop corridors by integrating transportation infrastructure, digitizing systems, and streamlining processes. This, he noted, would enable the private sector in member states to transport goods more cheaply and efficiently.

He stressed: "The more we address obstacles and bottlenecks in Iran and other member countries, the greater the increase in transit activity across Iran and the region." Taraffo also pointed to ongoing railway projects, including the Shalamcheh-Basra and Khaf-Herat lines. "Goods are already moving through the Khaf-Herat route, though a section in Afghanistan remains incomplete, and an international consortium is currently working on it," he explained.

## Iran and Brazil to Enhance Monetary and Banking Relations



TEHRAN - In a meeting between the Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of Iran and Brazil's Deputy Finance Minister, who also chairs the BRICS Deputy Central Bank Governors and Finance Ministers' Summit, both sides agreed to expand bilateral relations, utilize national currencies in trade, and leverage the banking infrastructures of the two countries for economic interactions.

According to a report from the Central Bank of Iran, Brazil, as the current chair of BRICS, emphasized during the Cape Town summit in South Africa that strengthening monetary, banking, and trade relations among BRICS member states using national currencies would benefit all members.

Asghar Abolhasani, Deputy Governor of the Central Bank of the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Tatiana Rosito, Brazil's Deputy Finance Minister, highlighted the numerous opportunities for financial and commercial cooperation between Iran and Brazil. They prioritized enhancing bilateral and multilateral monetary and banking collaboration, particularly through mechanisms that could be developed within the BRICS framework.

Abolhasani stated during the meeting, "The commercial and trade capacities of Iran, Brazil, and other BRICS members in economic relations demonstrate that by increasing banking and monetary cooperation among members, trade between these countries can be boosted in the short term."

Tatiana Rosito, who also serves as the chair of the BRICS Deputy Central Bank Governors and Finance Ministers' Summit, underscored the need to deepen bilateral cooperation with Iran in specialized fields. She proposed leveraging the BRICS group's potential to establish innovative mechanisms for monetary and banking collaboration, especially in light of upcoming transformations in the banking and international arenas.

On the sidelines of the BRICS Deputy Central Bank Governors' technical summit in Cape Town, South Africa, Abolhasani also held separate meetings with representatives from other BRICS member states, including officials from the central banks of Russia, India, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates, emphasizing the expansion of bilateral and multilateral monetary and banking cooperation.

## Indians to Remain in Chabahar Port as Sanctions Fail to Disrupt Transit

TEHRAN - Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Farzaneh Sadegh, announced that the partnership between Iran and India at Chabahar's Shahid Beheshti Port remains intact and unaffected despite external pressures. The statement came during the 17th annual meeting of the Intergovernmental Commission of TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia), held in Tehran.

Sadegh addressed concerns about whether the Indian operator at Shahid Beheshti Port would stay amid reported pressure from the United States. She affirmed, "The relationship between Iran and India at Chabahar's Shahid Beheshti Port is firmly established, and no disruptions will affect it."

When asked whether intensified sanctions could impact Iran's transit corridors and overall transit volumes, the minister dismissed the notion, citing the presence of international delegates at the TRACECA summit as evidence. "We are hosting the 17th TRACECA annual meeting in Tehran today. These unjust and unilateral sanctions have no bearing on Iran's initiatives, its leadership in this summit, or its central role in transit and transportation connectivity. The attendance of TRACECA members in Tehran substantiates this claim," she said.

Sadegh highlighted the significance of hosting the TRACECA summit, noting that Iran is welcoming representatives from 12 of the corridor's 14 member states, which span Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. "Expert-level discussions began yesterday, and the first official session took place today. For the first time, Tehran is hosting TRACECA, and starting today, Iran will assume the presidency of TRACECA for the next year," she added.

Key topics discussed at the summit, according to Sadegh, included integrating TRACECA's infrastructure, streamlining transportation processes, and digitizing these operations. "These



efforts will boost transit among member states and promote regional development," she explained, emphasizing Iran's proactive role in hosting such events in recent years. "Iran has positioned itself at the heart of regional transit strategies, and the presence of TRACECA members here, along with Iran's upcoming presidency, provides an

ideal platform to showcase and implement our initiatives for enhancing regional connectivity and transit."

Looking ahead to Iran's one-year TRACECA presidency, Sadegh outlined key priorities: completing transit infrastructure within the country, strengthening ties among member states, and facilitating transportation through digitization. "Given Iran's pivotal position, these steps will significantly enhance transit outcomes," she noted.

On the critical North-South Corridor, Sadegh remarked, "TRACECA member states serve as gateways connecting Europe to Asia and vice versa. Everything related to the transit of goods and passengers happens within these countries. Completing the North-South and East-West corridors in Iran will undoubtedly amplify our role in these transit networks." She stressed that Iran's geopolitical position makes it a preferred route for many countries, adding, "Affordable and efficient transit through our corridors is a top priority, and completing these corridors will further elevate our prominence."

Regarding the latest updates on the North-South Corridor, the minister confirmed that the project remains in progress, with ongoing implementation efforts.

The TRACECA summit underscores Iran's growing influence in regional transit, with European delegates in Tehran today signaling the ineffectiveness of sanctions in hindering Iran's ambitions.

## Iran's Direct Exports to Qatar Face Clearance Restrictions



### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Vice President of the Iran-Qatar Joint Chamber of Commerce, Khorshid Gazderazi, stated that while Doha has imposed no bans on Iran's agricultural products, direct exports of Iranian goods to Qatar's Al Ruwais port are encountering clearance restrictions and prohibitions.

Gazderazi addressed the reasons behind the ban on goods entering Qatar from Iran, as well as the prolonged delays and spoilage of products at Qatari ports. He noted, "These obstacles persist even though Iranian export goods entering via the UAE face no clearance restrictions or prohibitions and reach target markets in the shortest possible time."

Gazderazi highlighted one of Iran's key export challenges as the clearance restrictions at Qatar's Al Ruwais port, explaining that Iranian goods face delays there, with some exports being rerouted through the UAE. He added, "However, Qatar imposes restrictions on importing Iran's field-grown crops, such as tomatoes, from December to March each year to support its domestic producers." As a result, Iranian exporters reduce shipments to Qatar during this period.

Gazderazi explained that the spoilage of Iran's agricultural products at Al Ruwais port stems from strict clearance procedures and the transfer of goods from Iranian containers to Qatari ones, which significantly prolongs their stay at the port. "This extended duration sometimes leads to spoilage," he said, adding that the prolonged delays diminish the quality of goods by the time they reach consumers.

He noted that Iran's primary exports to Qatar include greenhouse-grown field crops such as lettuce, cabbage, cucumbers, potatoes, onions, tomatoes, apples, watermelons, melons, oranges, and various leafy greens.



### Mexico Extradites Cartel Kingpins

MEXICO CITY (Dispatches) - Mexico extradited some of its most notorious imprisoned drug lords to the United States in a bid to avert sweeping tariffs, including a cartel kingpin wanted for decades over the murder of a U.S. undercover agent.

Rafael Caro Quintero, who allegedly ordered the kidnap, torture and killing of DEA special agent Enrique "Kiki" Camarena in the 1980s, and several other top gang figures were among 29 suspects handed over.

Caro Quintero was on the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation's list of 10 most-wanted fugitives until his capture in 2022.

If convicted, he and several others could face the death penalty, the US Department of Justice said, adding that prosecutors would also consider terrorism charges.

The surprise extraditions come as Mexico scrambles to seal a deal with Washington to avoid being hit with trade duties that Trump has linked to illegal migration and drug flows.

Trump has designated eight Latin American drug trafficking organisations — including six Mexican cartels — terrorist organisations.



### Negotiations on Gaza Ceasefire's Second Phase Have Begun



CAIRO (Dispatches) - Negotiations between Israel and Hamas on the next phase of the Gaza ceasefire began Thursday in the Egyptian capital, Egypt said, averting a collapse ahead of Saturday's expiration of the agreement's first phase.

Officials from Israel, Qatar and the United States started "intensive discussions" on the ceasefire accord's second phase in Cairo, Egypt's state information service said in a statement.

"The mediators are also discussing ways to enhance the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip, as part of efforts to alleviate the suffering of the population and support stability in the region," it said.

Phase 2 talks are meant to negotiate an end to the war, including the return of all remaining hostages in Gaza who are alive, and the withdrawal of all Israeli troops from the territory. Return of remaining deceased hostages would happen in Phase 3.

According to Israel, there are 59 remaining hostages — 24 of whom are still believed to be alive.

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It will be difficult to reconcile a deal with the war objectives of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has called for dismantling Hamas's governing and military capabilities. After suffering heavy losses in the war, Hamas has nonetheless emerged intact during the ceasefire, and the group says it will not give up its weapons.

Hours before talks began, an Israeli official said the country would not withdraw from a strategic corridor in the Gaza Strip as called for under the ceasefire, a refusal that could severely complicate negotiations with Hamas and key mediator Egypt at a sensitive moment for the fragile truce.

Overnight, Hamas released the remains of four hostages in exchange for over 600 Palestinian prisoners, the last planned swap of the ceasefire's first phase.

US President Donald Trump's Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff, was expected in the region in the coming days.

# Jailed Kurdish Militant Leader Calls for End to Conflict With Turkey

ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - Turkey's jailed militant leader Abdullah Ocalan called on his Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) to disarm and disband on Thursday, a move that could end its 40-year conflict with Ankara and have far-reaching political and security consequences for the region.

If the PKK leadership heeds its founder's call to lay down its arms, which is not guaranteed, President Tayyip Erdogan would gain a historic opportunity to pacify and develop southeastern Turkey, where violence has killed thousands of people and devastated the regional economy.

Meanwhile, Ocalan himself, now 75, could see his dream of peace during his life time realised after having been imprisoned on an island near Istanbul in near-total isolation since 1999.

In neighbouring Syria, the new administration could assert greater control over its Kurdish north as it seeks to rebuild a nation fractured by civil war, while peace would also remove a constant flashpoint in Kurdish-run, oil-rich northern Iraq, where the PKK set up its base two decades ago.

"I am making a call for the laying down of arms, and I take on the historical responsibility of this call," Ocalan said in a letter made public by Turkey's pro-Kurdish DEM Party members.

Ocalan wants his party to hold a congress and to formally agree to dissolve itself, they quoted him as saying.



Ocalan might be released if he made such a call.

In his message on Thursday, Ocalan said the armed struggle had "run its course", though he also urged Turkey to show respect for ethnic minorities, freedom of expression and the right to democratic self-organization.

The pro-Kurdish political movement, the target of a years-long judicial crackdown, will hope Ocalan's move helps usher in democratic reforms and cultural and language rights in Turkey.

For Ankara, a peace deal would relieve a burden on its security forces, ease social tensions and boost the mainly Kurdish southeast's under-developed economy. It would also be a major coup for Erdogan, who has taken some steps during his two decades in power to resolve the issue.

The PKK insurgency largely centered on the southeast but also involved deadly attacks in Istanbul and other Turkish cities. Most of those killed in the conflict were PKK militants.

Some analysts said growing regional instability had prompted the government's abrupt turnaround on Ocalan. It allowed the opposition DEM Party to meet him first in late December, shortly after the fall of Bashar Al-Assad.

Erdogan has said he believes "ultimately brotherhood, unity, togetherness and peace will win". But if this path is blocked, he said: "We will not hesitate to use the iron fist of our state wrapped in a velvet glove."

The precarious situation of Kurdish forces in Syria, where Islamist rebels ousted Assad after 13 years of civil war, as well as uncertainty about Turkey's intentions have left many Kurds anxious about the way ahead.

While Erdogan has voiced support for Bahçeli's initiative, Turkish military action against the PKK in Iraq and what it regards as its affiliate in northern Syria, the YPG, has continued unabated.

The United States deems the PKK terrorists but it has been allied with the YPG's umbrella group in the fight against Islamic State in Syria. However, there is uncertainty over how long this may continue under President Donald Trump, and with an Ankara-friendly administration in Damascus.

Mazloum Abdi, the commander of Syrian Kurdish-led forces, said Ocalan's call applied only to the PKK and was "not related to us in Syria". After Assad's fall, he had said fighters who came to Syria from elsewhere to support Kurdish forces would leave if a deal were reached with Turkey.

While Ocalan is still revered by the pro-Kurdish political movement, it is unclear how much influence he retains over the PKK fighters.

### North Korea Launches Cruise Missiles in Counterattack Drills



SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea carried out a test-launch of strategic cruise missiles in the Yellow Sea this week, in a drill Pyongyang said today aimed at showing off its "counterattack" capabilities.

Leader Kim Jong Un was at the exercise, which took place on Wednesday, the Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said.

The missiles flew for 130 minutes and travelled at a 1,587 kilometre-long (986 mile-long) trajectory before they "precisely hit the targets", according to KCNA.

Pyongyang said the drills were aimed at warning nuclear-armed North Korea's enemies of its "counterattack capability in any space and the readiness of its various nuclear operation means".

Images in North Korean state media showed Kim, flanked by officials, sporting binoculars and watching a missile destroy a small building, which erupts in flames.

Attending the drill, Kim said it was the responsibility of North Korea's nuclear forces to "defend the national sovereignty and security".

"Powerful striking ability", he said, served as "the most perfect deterrence and defence", KCNA reported.

Pyongyang accused North Korea's enemies of "seriously violating the security environment" as well as "fostering and escalating" confrontation.

KCNA did not say where the test took place, but specialist website NK News said it likely took place near the city of Nampho, roughly 130 kilometres (80 miles) from the border with South Korea.

Relations between Pyongyang and Seoul have been at one of their lowest points in years, with the North launching a flurry of ballistic missiles last year in violation of UN sanctions.

# World Agrees on Hard-Fought Nature Funding Plan at UN Talks

ROME (Dispatches) - Nations cheered a last-gasp deal to map out funding to protect nature, breaking a deadlock at UN talks seen as a test for international cooperation in the face of geopolitical tensions.

Rich and developing countries hammered out a delicate compromise on raising and delivering the billions of dollars needed to protect species, overcoming stark divisions that had scuttled their previous meeting in Cali, Colombia, last year.

Delegates stood and clapped in an emotionally charged final meeting that saw key decisions adopted in the final minutes of the last day of rebooted negotiations at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization headquarters in Rome.

COP16 President Susana Muhamad of Colombia hailed the fact that countries worked together for a breakthrough, enabling progress "in this very fragmented and conflicted world".

"This is something very beautiful because it's around protecting life that we have come together, and there cannot be anything higher than that," she added.

The decision comes more than two years after a landmark deal to halt the rampant destruction of nature this decade and protect the ecosystems and wildlife that humans rely on for food, climate regulation, and economic prosperity.

Scientists have warned that action is urgent.

A million species are threatened with extinction, while unsustainable farming and consumption destroys forests, depletes soils and spreads plastic pollution to even the most remote areas of the planet.

The agreement yesterday is seen as crucial to giving impetus to the 2022 deal, which saw countries agree to protect 30 per cent of the world's land and seas.

Talks were also seen as a bellwether for international cooperation.

The meeting comes as countries face a range of challenges, from trade disputes and debt worries to the slashing of overseas aid — particularly by new US President Donald Trump.

Washington, which has not signed up to the UN's Convention on



Biological Diversity, sent no representatives to the meeting.

"Our efforts show that multilateralism can present hope at a time of geopolitical uncertainty," said Steven Guilbeault, Canada's Minister of Environment and Climate Change.

Ousseynou Kasse of Senegal, speaking on behalf of the Africa Group, also threw support behind global cooperation.

"We believe that this is the way that can save the world, and we must continue down this path," he said.

Countries must be "accountable to our children, to the generations to come", he added, saying he was thinking of what he would tell his own son when he returns home.

"I will give him good news that we have a compromise, we have a deal."

The failure to finalise an agreement in Cali was the first in a string of disappointing outcomes at environmental summits last year.

A climate finance deal at COP29 in Azerbaijan in Nov was slammed by developing countries, while separate negotiations about desertification and

plastic pollution stalled in Dec.

Muhamad, who has resigned as Colombia's environment minister but stayed on to serve until after the Rome conference, was given a standing ovation as the talks drew to a close in the early hours of today.

Countries have already agreed a goal to deliver 200 billion a year in finance for nature by 2030, including 200 billion a year in finance for nature by 2030, including 30 billion a year from wealthier countries to poorer ones.

The total for 2022 was about \$15 billion, according to the OECD.

The main debate in Cali and later Rome was over developing countries' calls for the creation of a specific biodiversity fund, which has seen pushback from the EU and other wealthy nations, who have argued against multiple funds.

Thursday saw intense closed-door talks based on a "compromise attempt" text that Brazil put forward on behalf of the BRICS country bloc that includes Russia, China and India.

The agreement reached in Rome leaves it to the 2028 COP to decide whether to set up a specific new fund under the UN biodiversity process, or to name a potentially reformed existing fund to play that role.

Georgina Chandler, Head of Policy and Campaigns at the Zoological Society of London, said the finance roadmap was a "key milestone", but stressed that money is needed urgently.

Other decisions sought to bolster monitoring to ensure countries are held accountable for their progress towards meeting biodiversity targets.

One achievement in Cali was the creation of a new fund to share profits from digitally sequenced genetic data from plants and animals with the communities they come from.

The fund, officially launched on Tuesday, is designed for large firms to contribute a portion of their income from developing things like medicine and cosmetics using this data.

Delegates in Cali also approved the creation of a permanent body to represent the interests of Indigenous people.

# Trump Dodges Plea From Britain's Starmer for Ukraine Security Guarantee

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Donald Trump said that a minerals deal with Ukraine is the security guarantee Kyiv needs against Russia, brushing aside a plea from British Prime Minister Keir Starmer for a commitment of U.S. military support.

Starmer, who was meeting Trump at the White House for the first time since the U.S. leader took office, turned on the charm, saying peace in Ukraine had only become possible because of Trump.

Starmer also delivered an invitation from King Charles for a future state visit, which Trump accepted.

But underlying differences between the allies remained, including transatlantic frictions over U.S.-Russia talks aimed at ending the Ukraine war and Trump's tariff threats.

Before the meeting, Starmer had said there could be no long-term peace



in Ukraine without firm U.S. security guarantees - an argument Trump all but dismissed.

"We are a backstop because we'll be over there, we'll be working," as a result of the economic partnership, Trump said. "We're going to have a lot of people over there."

Asked whether he could trust Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump said, "trust and verify," echoing former U.S. President Ronald Reagan's views on negotiations with the Soviet Union.

He said he did not think Putin, who organized invasions of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, would do so again after a deal. Talks toward such a compact were moving briskly, he said.

"It will either be fairly soon, or it won't be at all," Trump said.



## Liverpool 13 Points Clear in Premier League After Newcastle Win



LIVERPOOL (Dispatches) - Liverpool boss Arne Slot hailed his side's winning mentality after surging 13 points clear at the top of the Premier League with a 2-0 win over Newcastle.

Dominik Szoboszlai and Alexis Mac Allister were on target either side of half-time as the Reds further stretched their advantage over Arsenal, who were earlier held 0-0 at Nottingham Forest.

Unbeaten in 24 league games, Liverpool are cruising towards a record-equalling 20th English top-flight title but just their second in 35 years.

Slot had to make do with a seat in the stands after being handed a two-match touchline ban for his red card in a fiery Merseyside derby at Everton earlier this month.

That was the start of a demanding run of five Premier League games in 15 days.

Liverpool have emerged with 11 points from those games to more than double their six-point lead two weeks ago.

"All the mental challenges we had, the players kept calm and did the things they had to do," said Slot.

"Making it as hard as possible for the opponents to play against us, and normally then our quality makes the difference."

Defeat leaves Newcastle down in sixth, three points adrift of the top four.

The sides will meet again in the League Cup final on March 16, and Eddie Howe believes the Magpies showed they can at least compete with Liverpool.

"I don't think it was a bad performance in any way, but with the two goals, we could have done much better," said Howe.

"Both were passes into our box that we did not get tight enough to their midfielders, which is frustrating really.

"Going the other way, we had opportunities and moments, but we were not clinical enough when those few chances did come our way."

Newcastle were dealt a huge blow before a ball was kicked as 21-goal top scorer Alexander Isak was ruled out due to a groin injury.

The Anfield crowd were in a mood to party after their side secured a statement 2-0 win at Manchester

City on Sunday.

And they were given plenty of reason to remain in good voice.

Meanwhile Leicester sank closer to an immediate return to the Championship after West Ham pulled clear of the bottom three with a convincing 2-0 win.

Tomas Soucek and a Jannik Vestergaard own goal did for the Foxes before half-time as the Hammers climbed to 15th and 16 points clear of the relegation zone.

Since Leicester won the reverse fixture in Ruud van Nistelrooy's first game in charge in early December, the Dutchman has overseen 11 defeats and one draw in 13 Premier League games.

"The goals we concede are easy goals. It's a reflection of how we played in the first half," said Van Nistelrooy.

"We were way too passive. We are in a situation where we are not winning games and we are in a situation where we are in the bottom three. The pressure is on. We cannot wait and sit back."

Graham Potter's men were well worthy of another three points and could have run out much more comfortable winners.

"It was a professional performance. Not fantastic, but we are delighted with two wins, two clean sheets and six points," said Potter.

Soucek had the simple task to tap into an empty net after Leicester goalkeeper Mads Hermansen saved Mohammed Kudus' effort from close range on 21 minutes.

Jarrod Bowen then took advantage of slack Leicester defending from a corner just before half-time and his shot deflected off the unfortunate Vestergaard beyond Hermansen.

Evan Ferguson wasted the chance to score his first West Ham goal when his shot was blocked by Wout Faes after the break.

But the home side had already done enough to earn back-to-back Premier League wins for the first time since Mar last year.

Defeat leaves Leicester still five points adrift of safety in 19th and showing no signs of being able to stop a slide back into the second tier.

## Spassky: Legendary Loser of "Match of the Century" Dies at 88



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Soviet chess grandmaster Boris Spassky, who was famously defeated in the so-called match of the century at the height of the Cold War, has died aged 88, the Chess Federation of Russia said.

The federation called his death a "great loss to the country", saying generations of chess players had learned from his matches.

One of the first to react was Soviet grandmaster Anatoly Karpov, who told TASS state news agency: "He was always one of my main idols."

Spassky is best remembered for his duel with American Bobby Fischer in 1972, which was emblematic of the confrontation between East and West.

The Soviet chess giant lived a checkered life, flitting between top-level clashes against the best players of the era and periods of virtual disappearance.

Born in 1937 in Leningrad, now Saint Petersburg, Spassky showed prodigious talent early, becoming junior world champion and the youngest grandmaster in history at the time at 18.

He said he learned to play chess at the age of five in an orphanage, having managed to flee Leningrad with his family when it was besieged by the Nazis during World War II.

After the war, his aggressive style of play without fear of sacrifice was noticed by his peers and encouraged by the state, which provided him with a scholarship and a coach.

Having made a strong impression, he found himself in the shadow of another rising figure in Soviet chess, Mikhail Tal, the so-called "Magician of Riga".

## Stephen Curry Scores 56 in Warriors' Win

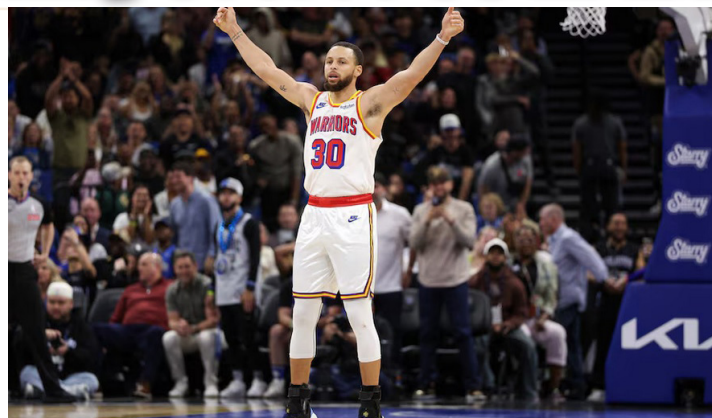
NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Stephen Curry ignited his own third-quarter explosion with a 50-footer at the halftime horn, then capped a 56-point performance with his 11th and 12th 3-pointers to protect a late lead that resulted in the Golden State Warriors' 121-115 victory over the host Orlando Magic.

Curry's 56 points were the fourth most of his career and his 12 3-pointers equaled his second most, helping the Warriors win their fifth in a row and their seventh in eight games since acquiring Jimmy Butler in a trade. Curry shot 16-for-25 overall, 12-for-19 on 3s and 12-for-12 at the free throw line.

Quinten Post finished with 18 points off the bench, Draymond Green scored 12 to complete a double-double with a team-high 10 rebounds, and Moses Moody had 10 points for Golden State, which completed a season-series sweep of the Magic.

Led by Paolo Banchero's 41 points, the Magic got within 108-104 with 2:56 remaining and to 111-109 with 1:55 left. But Curry countered both times with 3-pointers, allowing Golden State to retain a lead the rest of the way.

Pelicans 124, Suns 116: Zion Williamson scored 27 points, matched his career high of 11 assists and collected 10 rebounds for his first career triple-double while leading New Orleans to a win in Phoenix.



Williamson made 13 of 17 field-goal attempts as New Orleans won its third straight game and fourth in its past five outings. CJ McCollum scored 19 points, Trey Murphy III added 18 points and Karlo Matkovic had 17 points and 10 rebounds for the Pelicans.

Devin Booker recorded 36 points, nine assists and seven rebounds but couldn't prevent the underachieving Suns from losing for the 10th time in their past 12 games. Kevin Durant scored 28 points,

Tyus Jones had 15 points and matched his season best of 12 assists, Bol Bol tallied 15 points.

Mavericks 103, Hornets 96: Kyrie Irving poured in 25 points while powering Dallas past visiting Charlotte.

Irving, who tallied 19 points in the second half, tied his season best with nine rebounds. Moses Brown tacked on season bests of 20 points and 11 rebounds, and Klay Thompson logged 18 points as the Mavericks ended a two-game skid.

Mark Williams (26 points, 16 rebounds) and Miles Bridges (20 points, 12 rebounds) both picked up double-doubles for the Hornets, who absorbed their fifth loss in a row.

Bucks 121, Nuggets 112: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 28 points, grabbed 19 rebounds and dished seven assists to lead Milwaukee over visiting Denver.

Brook Lopez added 22 points for Milwaukee, which earned its fifth win in six games. Damian Lillard poured in 19 points, and Kyle Kuzma produced 16 points and nine rebounds.

Nikola Jokic compiled 32 points, 14 rebounds and 10 assists for the Nuggets, who have lost two of the past three since winning nine straight. Jamal Murray added 20 points while Christian Braun (13 points, 10 rebounds) and Michael Porter Jr. (12 points, 10 boards) each had a double-double.

## Ten Hag Says Modern Footballers Struggle With Criticism



LONDON (Dispatches) - Former Manchester United manager Erik ten Hag says modern footballers find it tough to deal with criticism and that his generation had "much thicker skin".

The 55-year-old, sacked in October after a poor start to the season, clashed with several high-profile players during his tenure at Old Trafford.

Cristiano Ronaldo said he did not respect Ten Hag, leading to his exit from the club in November 2022, a few months into the Dutchman's reign.

The following year, Jadon Sancho, now on loan at Chelsea, said he was being made a "scapegoat" as he responded on social media after Ten Hag said he had dropped the England winger because of his training performances.

Ten Hag disciplined Marcus Rashford when the forward, currently on loan at Aston Villa, missed training after reportedly being spotted in nightspots in Northern Ireland.

The former United boss told SEG Stories, a media outlet attached to his management agency: "This generation usually find it difficult to deal with criticism. Criticism really gets to them.

"The generation that I grew up in had much thicker skin. You could be much more direct with that generation. I was approached much more directly. If I would do that with my current group of players, I would demotivate them."

Ten Hag, who was replaced in the Old Trafford hot seat by Ruben Amorim, oversaw the development of young players such as Alejandro Garnacho and Kobbie Mainoo.

He said young players require "different words and a different approach".

"(Former United boss Alex) Ferguson also belonged to the previous generation. With that generation, you could be much more direct in your communication and approach," he said.

"With this generation, you have to convey your message in a more tactful way to get the same effect. You have to show the player more love. Our generation found that much more difficult to do than this generation."

Ten Hag, who previously managed Ajax, won the League Cup and FA Cup during his spell at Old Trafford but they finished eighth in the Premier League last season — their lowest top-flight finish for decades.

Despite his struggles, he said he had enjoyed his stint with the club and felt appreciated by the fans.

## Griekspoor Ousts Daniil Medvedev in Dubai

DUBAI (Dispatches) - Tallon Griekspoor saved four match points in upsetting top seed Daniil Medvedev 2-6, 7-6 (7), 7-5 in the quarterfinals at the Dubai Tennis Championships.

The Dutchman advanced to his eighth career ATP Tour semifinal (3-4 record) in knocking off Russia's Medvedev, the 2023 winner of this event who posted 15 aces on this day. Griekspoor saved 11 of 14 break points while converting 2 of 7.

Griekspoor next faces fourth-seeded Stefanos Tsitsipas of Greece, a 7-6 (5), 1-6, 6-4 winner over Italy's Matteo Berrettini. Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime defeated Croatia's Marin Cilic 6-4, 3-6, 6-2 to advance to the semifinals against French qualifier Quentin Halys, who also went three sets to hold off Italian lucky loser Luca Nardi 2-6, 6-3, 7-6 (5).

Argentina's Federico Coria saved four set points in the first-set tiebreaker and emerged with a 7-6 (11), 4-6, 6-3 win over second-seeded Alejandro Tabilo of Chile in the second round at Santiago, Chile.

Coria needed four set points before he captured the tiebreaker, then prevailed in a match that lasted 2 hours, 37 minutes, to



earn a spot in the quarterfinals.

Third-seeded Sebastian Baez eked out a 6-3, 5-7, 7-6 (5) victory over Argentine countryman Francisco Comesana. Another Argentine, Camilo Ugo Carabelli, advanced by rallying past Brazil's Thiago Monteiro 4-6, 7-6 (2), 6-3, but Bosnia's Damir Dzumhur downed sixth-seeded Mariano Navone of Argentina 6-4, 3-6, 6-3.

U.S. qualifier Learner Tien couldn't make it two upsets in a row, falling 6-3, 7-5 to eighth-seeded Tomas Machac of the Czech Republic in the quarterfinals at Acapulco, Mexico.

A day after Tien ousted top-seeded Alexander Zverev of Germany, the American lost his serve six times and won just 54.9 percent of his first-serve points.

Machac's semifinal opponent will be the United States' Brandon Nakashima, who topped Belgium's David Goffin 7-6 (4), 6-2.

The last two semifinal berths were set to be decided later Thursday night. Ninth-seeded Denis Shapovalov of Canada was ready to oppose the United States' Marcos Giron, and Spain's Alejandro Davidovich Fokina was prepared to face 19-year-old Mexican Rodrigo Pacheco Mendez.