

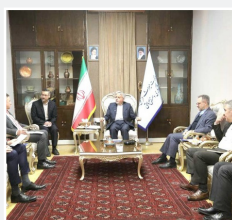
Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi Has Congratulated Mario Lubetkin on His Appointment as New Foreign Minister of Uruguay, Emphasizing the Use of Available Opportunities to Cement Ties Between Iran and Uruguay

IRAN NEWS

Iran's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Condemned the Suicide Attack That Took Place During Friday Prayers, Leading to the Martyrdom of a Number of People at Madrassa-e-Haqqania in Nowshera District of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Province, Pakistan

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Zelensky Says Trump Relationship Can Be Repaired After White House Row

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Iran Ready to Strengthen Ties With UAE Based on Mutual Interests



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran and UAE hold joint committee meeting on political consultations in Abu Dhabi on February 28.

Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht-Ravanchi has reaffirmed the country's readiness to strengthen cooperation with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) based on mutual interests.

Speaking at the Joint Iran-UAE Committee Meeting on Political Consultations held in Abu Dhabi on Friday, Takht-Ravanchi underscored Iran's readiness to deepening bilateral ties.

The meeting, co-chaired by Takht-Ravanchi and Lana Nusseibeh, UAE's Assistant Minister for Political Affairs, focused on political and economic cooperation, as well as regional and international developments.

Takht-Ravanchi reiterated Tehran's foreign policy priority of fostering stronger relations with neighboring countries and highlighted the meeting's role as a platform for advancing bilateral coordination.

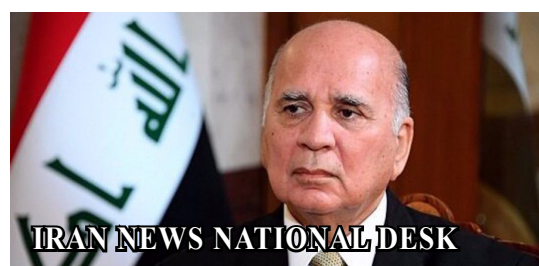
He also stressed the need to accelerate the implementation of agreements and explore new areas of cooperation to further solidify ties.

Addressing broader regional issues, Iranian diplomat called for unity among Islamic nations in countering Israeli aggression in Palestine and Tel Aviv's destabilizing influence in the region.

He pointed to the upcoming Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) foreign ministers' meeting as an opportunity for member states to take a unified stance against Israeli-American plans for genocide and the forced displacement of Palestinians in Gaza.

For her part, Nusseibeh reaffirmed the UAE's commitment to expanding comprehensive relations with Iran, expressing optimism that continued political consultations would enhance bilateral coordination and facilitate the effective implementation of agreements.

Iraq Asserts Commitment to Security Agreement With Iran



BAGHDAD (Dispatches) - Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein has reaffirmed Baghdad's commitment to its security agreement with Iran.

"We remain committed to the security agreement with Iran," he said, speaking in an interview with the Saudi-owned Al-Arabiya television channel.

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian called on Iraq, during a trip to the Arab country in his first state visit, to fully implement the bilateral security agreement that is aimed at neutralizing the threat from foreign-backed anti-Iran terrorists operating in the Iraqi Kurdistan region.

Iran has repeatedly urged Baghdad to prevent armed groups from using the Iraqi territory to launch attacks on Iranian soil, and has itself taken prompt defensive action on occasions.

On the issue of US-led foreign military presence in Iraq, Hussein affirmed that the timeline for the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq remained unchanged.

The remarks followed continued calls from Iraqi resistance groups and officials for a definitive exit plan for the United States forces, who have been mandated by the Iraqi parliament to leave the country's soil together with other foreign troops.

Washington and Baghdad have reached an agreement outlining plans for the withdrawal of US-led forces.

As part of the arrangement, hundreds of US troops are expected to leave Iraq by September 2025, including those stationed at the Ain al-Asad Airbase in the western Iraqi province of al-Anbar, and a large number from Baghdad.

A contingent of US and Washington-led forces, however, would remain in Erbil, the capital of the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region, until the end of 2026 under the pretext of continuing so-called operations against the Daesh Takfiri terrorist group, although the outfit was defeated by Iraq and Syria and their allies, including Iran, back in 2017.

No One Can Change the Name of the Persian Gulf



TEHRAN - In a resolute statement, the Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy, Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, declared that the Persian Gulf will always remain Persian, emphasizing that no one has the power to alter its name.

Speaking on the sidelines of a visit to an exhibition showcasing various high-speed vessels and the martyr Bagheri drone carrier warship, as well as the martyr Racisali Delvari warship, Tangsiri underscored that the responsibility of defending the Persian Gulf lies with the IRGC.

Tangsiri paid tribute to Iran's martyrs, stating, "The martyrs gave their lives so that this country could endure, allowing us to proudly speak Persian today and travel to 25 cities in our nation without needing a passport." He also honored the martyrs of the Shrine Defenders, the resistance front, and notable figures such as martyr Nasrallah and martyr Safiuddin, adding, "These great martyrs and commanders sacrificed their lives so that we can hold our heads high today."

Reflecting on historical struggles, Tangsiri recounted Iran's resistance against Portuguese occupation starting in 1508, when they controlled the region for 117 years. "They built a fortress here, intending to stay. At that time, Bandar Abbas was known as Jarun (Hormuz) or Gambnun. Imam Qoli Khan, with the help of locals, went to Qeshm and captured a fortress. Since we lacked a navy, we sought assistance from the British to liberate Jarun," he explained.

Tangsiri highlighted Iran's efforts to expel the Portuguese and emphasized the strategic importance of the Persian Gulf's 19 islands, particularly those in the Strait of Hormuz, such as Lark, Hormuz, Qeshm, Hengam, Greater Tumb, Lesser Tumb, and Abu Musa. "These islands are Iranian and will remain Iranian," he asserted, noting their critical role in controlling the waterway. "The Persian Gulf has no international waters; it is part of the continental shelf, with a depth of less than 100 meters. If we don't extract resources from this region, others will. We expect our leaders to match the extraction levels of southern Persian Gulf countries in shared reservoirs."

He added that of the 19 islands, 14 are in Hormozgan Province, three in Bushehr Province, and two in Khuzestan Province, recalling that Bahrain was also part of Iran until 1976.

Reiterating his stance, Tangsiri said, "This is the Persian Gulf, and it must remain Persian. No one can change its name. The duty to defend it rests with the IRGC."

Addressing Iran's history of resilience, he remarked, "We have never initiated a war. During the [Iran-Iraq] war, the Americans aided Saddam and attacked our platforms, but oil extraction never stopped. The Ministry of Petroleum defended our economy back then. Key ports like Khorramshahr, Abadan, and Bandar Imam were vital. For a year and a half during the Sacred Defense, we fought the Americans here with bare hands, losing nine IRGC Navy martyrs. We persevered through our own efforts, and today we stand proud in this position."

Meanwhile Tangsiri, in a ceremony attended by elites and media representatives, while honoring the memory of the martyrs of the revolution, the Sacred Defense, the defenders of the shrine, the martyrs of security, and the martyred president of our country, stated: "We take pride today in having security in our country, and we owe this security to the blood of the martyrs."

Referring to historical efforts to preserve the country's territorial integrity, he added: "We must

look back and see how colonial powers, such as the Portuguese, were present in our region for over a century. They entered this area and stayed for 117 years, building numerous fortresses in Hormuz, Larak, and Qeshm, which demonstrated their colonial ambitions. However, with the bravery of Imam-Qoli Khan and the people of Iran, this occupation came to an end."

Admiral Tangsiri, highlighting the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy in securing the region, emphasized: "Today, we are no longer dependent on any foreign power, and relying on knowledge-based advancements, the IRGC Navy is moving toward greater strength." He asserted: "In the past, we were forced to collaborate with foreigners to confront the enemy, but today, by relying on our domestic capabilities, we meet all our defense needs ourselves."

The IRGC Navy commander, while paying tribute to the sacrifices of the martyrs of service and security, noted: "Maintaining the security of the Persian Gulf and its 19 strategic islands is a heavy yet honorable responsibility. Islamic Iran, relying on its brave sons, will continue on the path of progress and independence."

Admiral Alireza Tangsiri, in continuation of his remarks, emphasized the strategic position of the Persian Gulf islands and their historical and Iranian identity, saying: "The islands of Greater Tumb, Lesser Tumb, Abu Musa, and other Iranian islands of the Persian Gulf have always been part of Iran's territory and will remain Iranian as long as Iran exists."

He added: "These islands are Iran's point of dominance over the strategic Hormuz waterway and the entry and exit route of the Persian Gulf, offering a unique position in the country's maritime security. The Persian Gulf has 19 strategic islands that need to be better recognized and appreciated by the public."

Referring to Iran's role in defending the region's energy resources, Admiral Tangsiri stated: "We possess vast oil and gas reserves in the Persian Gulf, and we consider it our duty to protect this national wealth. Oil fields such as Nowruz, Soroush, Abuzar, and Forouzan were attacked by enemies during the Sacred Defense, yet their production never stopped."

Pointing to the role of the United States and Britain in the region's historical developments, he said: "The enemies have always sought to harm Iran—from aiding Saddam's regime during the imposed war to attempting to dominate the Persian Gulf's energy resources. However, today, relying on domestic capabilities, Iran is no longer dependent on foreigners and has achieved complete self-sufficiency in maritime defense."

The IRGC Navy commander underscored the importance of strengthening the country's defense capabilities, stating: "The IRGC Navy, relying on knowledge-based capacities and the expertise of domestic specialists, has reached a level of power that allows it to respond decisively and forcefully to any threat."

In conclusion, while honoring the memory of the martyrs of the revolution, the Sacred Defense, the defenders of the shrine, and the martyrs of security, he emphasized: "Islamic Iran, relying on its courageous youth, will continue on the path of strength and progress and will not allow enemies to make the slightest encroachment on the country's maritime borders."

Iran Remains Steadfast in Its Principled Positions



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei has reaffirmed Iran's commitment to its "principled positions," emphasizing that the country does not shift its policies on a daily basis.

"We are steadfast in our principled positions and do not shift from one policy to another every day. The Islamic Republic of Iran has always supported the resistance while honestly confronting illegal behavior and terrorism," Baghaei wrote in a post on X (formerly Twitter) on Friday.

He also underscored Iran's frontline role in the fight against terrorism. "We were the first country to raise the banner of the fight against Daesh (Takfiri terrorist group) and violent extremism with the hands of our national hero, Martyr (anti-terror commander General Qassem) Soleimani, and we defeated them in the region."

Baghaei also underlined Iran's longstanding opposition to extremism and its efforts to stabilize neighboring countries.

He pointed to Tehran's early rejection of the coup attempt against the Turkish government and stated, "We were the first country to oppose and confront the coup against the Turkish government. We were among the first countries to welcome the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) disarmament and considered it an important step toward strengthening security in our neighboring country, Turkey."

His comments came a day after jailed PKK founder Abdullah Ocalan called on the militant group to lay down arms, seeking an end to the decades-long conflict that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

In his X post, Baghaei also warned against ignoring "the overt and covert hands of the US and Israel in regional developments," asserting that their influence has fueled instability.

Iran's Oil Exports to China Surge, Undermining Trump's "Maximum Pressure" Policy



TEHRAN - Despite U.S. President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" strategy aimed at crippling Iran's economy through stringent sanctions, Iran's oil exports to China are projected to reach a staggering 1.74 million barrels per day in February, according to data from Kpler. This figure marks an 86% increase from January and the highest level since October, exposing the failure of U.S. efforts to reduce Iran's oil exports—particularly to China—to zero.

Trump's policy, outlined in a memo last month, sought to intensify sanctions, targeting Iran's oil sector to cut off funding for its alleged military and terrorist activities. However, the sharp rise in exports demonstrates Iran's resilience and casts doubt on the effectiveness of these measures. The surge underscores a significant setback for Washington's goal of economically isolating Tehran.

In response to this defiance, the U.S. has doubled down, imposing a fresh wave of sanctions targeting Iran's oil industry. The U.S. Treasury Department announced 35 new sanctions, hitting 17 companies, 13 vessels, and 5 individuals linked to Iran's oil trade. Among those sanctioned are Hamid Bord, CEO of the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC), as well as key figures in Iran's oil terminals and shipping operations. The measures also target oil brokers in the UAE and Hong Kong, tanker operators in India and China, and vessels responsible for transporting tens of millions of barrels of crude worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

These latest sanctions strike at the core of Iran's economy, intensifying pressure on its oil sector. Yet, the continued flow of oil to China highlights the persistent challenges facing U.S. policy. Analysts suggest that this escalation reflects not only Iran's adaptability but also the limitations of unilateral sanctions in achieving their intended outcomes, leaving Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign in tatters.

Yemen Will Intervene Militarily Should Israel Resumes Gaza Onslaught

SANAA (Dispatches) - The leader of the Ansarullah resistance movement has warned that the Yemeni armed forces will intervene across various military fronts in support of the Palestinians in Gaza in case Israel resumes its onslaught against the besieged coastal sliver.

Abdul-Malik al-Houthi specifically mentioned that Tel Aviv, one of Israel's most populous cities and a major economic center, will be a primary target for these retaliatory strikes.

"If war resumes in Gaza, Yemen will intervene militarily, striking the entirety of the Israeli-occupied territories. Tel Aviv will be a primary target," Houthi said in a televised speech broadcast from the Yemeni capital, Sana'a.

He added, "Yemen is constantly monitoring the implementation of the Gaza ceasefire agreement and is witnessing the extent to which the Zionist enemy is shirking its obligations."

Houthi noted that Israel is drawing on the support of the United States to infringe upon agreements.

He also condemned Israel's refusal to withdraw its troops from the Philadelphi Corridor on the Gaza-Egypt border and from the Rafah border crossing as a flagrant violation of the terms of the Gaza truce deal, stressing these breaches are being encouraged by the US.

He warned that such conduct poses a dire threat to the Palestinian people as well as the Egyptian nation, government, and army.



Sayyed Hashem Safieddine affirm the Lebanese people's firm commitment to the path of resistance.

The Ansarullah chief stated that the heroic and tremendous sacrifices made by Palestinian and Lebanese resistance commanders and fighters beef up the determination of forces of the Axis of Resistance to keep up the fight against Israel.

The Ansarullah chief reaffirmed Yemen's unwavering support for the Palestinian cause and resistance factions, irrespective of Israeli failures to comply with the Gaza ceasefire deal and attempts to delay the second phase of the agreement with Hamas.

The Yemeni leader also reiterated his country's continued support for Lebanon and the Hezbollah resistance movement, denouncing the Israeli military's ongoing attacks, refusal to fully withdraw, and occupation of Lebanese lands.

He assured Palestinian and Lebanese resistance fighters that Yemeni forces will stand by their side, sternly warning the Israeli regime against persisting in its occupation and aggression.

Houthi advised Zionists and their allies to rectify their wrong policies, stressing that the historic funeral processions of martyred Hezbollah leaders Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and

IRAN NEWS



Iran Explores Transferring Hajj Pilgrims' Currency to Saudi Arabia Via Iraq

TEHRAN (ILNA) - Alireza Bayat, head of Iran's Hajj and Pilgrimage Organization, met with Iraq's Minister of Culture and Tourism, Central Bank Governor, and Supreme Hajj Council chief to discuss lowering travel costs for Iranian pilgrims and transferring their Hajj funds to Saudi Arabia via Iraq.

During his visit, Bayat urged swift action on a bilateral agreement to ease pilgrim travel between Iran and Iraq, outlining ongoing efforts. Iraq's Culture Minister, Ahmed Fakak Al-Badrani, pledged to reduce Najaf airport fees, emphasizing improved hosting for Iranian pilgrims. He encouraged travel via official caravans to ensure better security, medical, and transport services. Bayat also welcomed a proposed trilateral meeting with Hajj officials from Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia to address logistical hurdles, offering Tehran as a venue.

Iran's Steel Production Declines in January



TEHRAN - According to the latest report from the World Steel Association, released just hours ago, Iran's crude steel production in January 2025 (December 23, 2024, to February 11, 2025) dropped by 24.1% to 2.2 million tons. Despite this significant decline, Iran remains the world's tenth-largest steel producer.

The World Steel Association's report, which analyzes global crude steel production for January 2025 and compares it to January 2024, reveals that worldwide steel output reached 151.4 million tons in January 2025, marking a 4.4% decrease from the same period last year. Compiled based on data from 69 steel-producing countries, the report highlights a global downturn in steel production, with the exception of the "Russia and other CIS + Ukraine" region, which saw a modest increase of 1.4%. All other regions experienced declines, with the Middle East recording the steepest drop at 15.3%.

Regional Steel Production Breakdown (January 2025): Africa: 1.9 million tons, -3.5%; Asia and Oceania: 112.3 million tons, -4.5%; European Union (27 countries): 10.3 million tons, -3.3%; Other Europe: 3.5 million tons, -6.8%; Middle East: 4.2 million tons, -15.3%; North America: 9.0 million tons, -0.5%; Russia and other CIS + Ukraine: 7.0 million tons, +1.4%; and South America: 3.2 million tons, -9.8%.

The January 2025 report underscores the challenges confronting the global steel industry, with production declines in most major steel-producing regions and countries signaling the presence of inhibiting factors. Asia and Oceania remain the largest steel-producing region, with China accounting for a significant share of this output. The report attributes the global reduction to factors such as declining demand, supply chain disruptions, economic and political shifts, and environmental restrictions. Notably, while most countries saw declines, India and the United States reported increases in production.

Iran's crude steel production of 2.2 million tons in January 2025 reflects the country's steepest drop among the top 10 steel producers, contributing significantly to the Middle East's overall 15.3% reduction. The report identifies energy imbalances as a primary reason for Iran's 24.1% decline, highlighting the urgent need for solutions to address this issue. This percentage marks the largest drop among the world's leading steel-producing nations.

Security of German Tourists Guaranteed



TEHRAN - Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, in a meeting with the German Ambassador, stated that the government guarantees the safety of German tourists in Iran. He also expressed a desire to hold joint cultural seminars and museum exhibitions with the European country.

Seyed Reza Salehi Amiri, the Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts of the Islamic Republic of Iran, met with Markus Potzel, the German Ambassador, last week.

During the meeting, he highlighted the long history of cultural ties between Iran and Germany, saying, "The cultural relationship between the peoples of Iran and Germany dates back many years, and both nations share mutual positive sentiments. Cultural ties between the two countries must be strengthened."

The minister emphasized the importance of utilizing the potential of German museums to enhance cooperation, adding, "Germany's museums, particularly the Pergamon Museum, house outstanding examples of human art and history. Why shouldn't the artifacts of the Pergamon Museum be displayed in Iranian museums, and why shouldn't Iran's museum pieces be exhibited in Germany? I propose holding joint museum exhibitions, which could further develop cultural collaboration between the two nations."

Salehi Amiri also suggested organizing annual Iran-Germany cultural seminars, stating, "We should hold joint annual cultural seminars to continuously expand cultural and scientific connections between the two countries." He stressed, "Given the excellent history of cooperation between Iran and Germany in cultural and archaeological fields, we can once again develop and elevate these relations. With your deep understanding of the region, you can help strengthen these ties."

The minister continued, "Cultural diplomacy plays a crucial role, especially when political diplomacy faces challenges. Cultural diplomacy strengthens ties between nations, and when we discuss this, tourism is the starting point."

Pointing to tourism's role in fostering cultural ties, Salehi Amiri said, "We must advance these relations through tourism. Academic centers and elites in both countries are eager to collaborate, and tourism can serve as an effective means to facilitate these connections. The Iranian government guarantees the safety of German tourists in Iran."

He also referenced Germany's tourism exhibition, noting, "As this exhibition takes place, we are in talks with several countries to expand tourism relations." The German Ambassador, Markus Potzel, highlighted the longstanding archaeological cooperation with Iran, saying, "The German Archaeological Institute has always maintained ties with Iranian archaeological centers, and we are keen to expand these relations in the future."

Potzel shared a personal note, saying, "All my family members have visited Iran and have been deeply influenced by Iranian culture. I myself am very familiar with Iran's culture and environment." He also mentioned negotiations with Iran's Foreign Ministry about reopening closed consulates, adding, "Iran's new government could create fresh opportunities to enhance bilateral relations."

Referring to joint archaeological projects, he said, "I participated in archaeological projects in Iran last year, and I believe such collaborations could be the starting point for broader cultural and scientific ties between our countries."

Mohammad Ebrahim Zarei, head of Iran's Cultural Heritage and Tourism Research Institute, noted the research ties with Germany, saying, "We have signed memoranda of understanding with prestigious German universities such as Munich, Bochum, and Cologne, and we are prepared to establish further research connections."

Anoushirvan Mohsein Bandpey, Deputy Tourism Minister, outlined the Islamic Republic's policy, stating, "The 14th government's policy is based on constructive engagement with the world and fostering comprehensive relations with various countries. We have unilaterally canceled visa requirements with 30 countries and will leverage this to boost tourism ties."

Mohammad Hossein Soufi, CEO of Iran's Tourism and Automobile Club, concluded the meeting by announcing, "The first group of Iranian travel agencies will travel to Germany on March 2, 2025, to participate in Germany's tourism exhibition."

This meeting reflects Iran's commitment to deepening cultural, scientific, and tourism ties with Germany, underpinned by a shared history and mutual goodwill.

Positive Trade Balance in Iran's Free Zones



TEHRAN - The latest report on the commercial performance of Iran's free zones indicates that in the first 11 months of the current year, exports from these zones have been steadily growing, maintaining an overall positive trade balance. During this period, regions such as Maku, Qeshm, Kish, and Aras have strengthened their positions in export markets by achieving positive trade balances.

According to a report by the Supreme Council of Free Trade-Industrial and Special Economic Zones, the council's secretary mandated the release of import and export data to ensure transparency in performance. The latest commercial performance reports for the country's free zones have been published on their respective websites.

The data reveals that over the first 11 months of the year, exports from these zones have increased. Alongside this growth, import trends have been influenced by commercial and economic policies. The total export value from the free zones exceeds \$1.085 billion, while imports (excluding machinery) amount to \$1.061 billion, resulting in a positive trade balance of \$24 million. Certain zones have successfully captured larger shares of international markets.

Among the standout performers, the Maku Free Zone recorded approximately \$169 million in exports and \$37 million in imports from the start of the Iranian year (March 21, 2024) through late February 2025, achieving the highest trade surplus of \$132 million. Qeshm Free Zone reported \$257 million in exports and \$143 million in imports, maintaining a positive trade balance of \$113 million. Similarly, Kish Free Zone posted \$224 million in exports and \$119 million in imports, with a trade surplus exceeding \$104 million. The Aras Free Zone, with \$180 million in exports and \$151 million in imports, recorded a positive trade balance of \$28 million, reflecting a steady upward trend.

Iran Expands Trade with Eurasian Union Using Russian Ruble



TEHRAN - The President of the Iran-Russia Joint Chamber of Commerce announced that Iran can now use the Russian ruble for trade with other member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), including Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia.

Hadi Tizhoush Taban, the President of the Iran-Russia Joint Chamber of Commerce, discussed the gradual removal of the US dollar from trade between Iran and Russia. He stated that for some time now, trade between the two countries has been conducted in rubles and rials, allowing businesspeople to convert currencies locally without relying on the dollar. However, he acknowledged that while the use of the dollar has decreased significantly, it has not been entirely eliminated and may still be used in certain sectors.

According to Tizhoush Taban, Iranian exporters who sell goods in Russia can receive payments in rubles, which are then transferred to Iranian banks through Russian financial institutions. However, he highlighted a challenge in financial transactions between Iran and Russia, noting that the current volume of rubles available in Iran and rials in Russia needs to increase for smoother trade operations.

Discussing the trade balance between the two countries, he pointed out that Iran's trade with Russia is currently valued at \$5 billion, with Iranian imports from Russia surpassing exports. He emphasized the need to address this imbalance, stating that even if the trade balance does not shift in Iran's favor, achieving equal import and export volumes would be beneficial.

Tizhoush Taban expressed hope that reducing reliance on the dollar would help stabilize trade relations, adding: "When our exports are lower than our imports, less money flows back into Iran, which disrupts currency exchange processes. To sustain dollar-free trade between Iran and Russia, achieving a balanced trade relationship is crucial."

Regarding banking cooperation, he highlighted that Mir Business Bank, a Russian financial institution, has been active in Iran for some time. The bank operates three branches in Russia and is also participating in the ongoing Eurasia International Trade Exhibition.

Finally, he reiterated that apart from Russia, other EAEU member states, including Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, also accept rubles for trade, offering Iran expanded opportunities for regional economic cooperation.

Iran-Pakistan Trade Needs Effective Cooperation to Overcome Complexities

TEHRAN - Speakers at a seminar on the future of Iran-Pakistan relations and regional connectivity emphasized the importance of constructive cooperation between the two nations to navigate administrative and logistical complexities and boost trade volume. They stressed that securing mutual interests and improving the well-being of the people of Iran and Pakistan require strong political commitment and practical steps from both sides.

The seminar, titled "Iran-Pakistan Relations: Trade Prospects and Strengthening Connectivity," was organized by the Iranian Embassy and hosted by the Islamabad-based Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad (ISSI).

The event brought together experts from diplomacy, media, economics, and politics, as well as foreign diplomats. Key speakers included Reza Amiri Moghadam, Iran's Ambassador to Pakistan; Muhammad Mudassir Tipu, Pakistan's Ambassador to Tehran; Sohail Mahmood, Director-General of ISSI; and Riffat Masood, former Pakistani Ambassador to Iran.

The speakers highlighted the \$10 billion trade target and major energy projects as crucial steps in strengthening Iran-Pakistan ties. Acknowledging the challenges in streamlining trade—such as administrative and logistical hurdles, as well as regional and international developments—they underscored the need for structured engagement, trust-building, and mutual respect to ensure a resilient and flexible partnership between Tehran and Islamabad.

Pakistani representatives emphasized border security, mutual trust-building, and projects like the Gwadar-Chabahar port linkage as key initiatives for unlocking further trade potential.

In his speech, Iran's Ambassador Reza Amiri Moghadam highlighted trade and connectivity as two pillars of global and domestic economies. He stressed that secure and reliable transportation networks are essential for sustainable trade, making investments in transit corridors a logical and profitable move.

He also pointed out two emerging global challenges: Tariff Wars - Disrupting supply chains and threatening international trade, particularly for Global South countries.

Corridor Wars - Geopolitical rivalries that aim to destabilize peaceful development projects through economic terrorism and unilateralism.

Amiri Moghadam emphasized Iran and Pakistan's unique geographical position as vital transit hubs connecting Asia and Europe. He noted that developing transport infrastructure would facilitate regional cooperation and trade, as Iran serves as a gateway to Eurasia and the Caucasus, while Pakistan provides access to South and Southeast Asia.

With 1,000 kilometers of shared land and maritime borders, cross-border markets, and multiple trade gateways, the ambassador pointed to the activation of Rimdan-Gabd and Pishin-Mand border crossings to streamline trade and facilitate movement. Plans for opening



additional crossings and border markets are also in progress. However, bureaucratic and logistical hurdles remain, requiring joint efforts to resolve them.

Amiri Moghadam dismissed concerns about Gwadar and Chabahar ports being rivals, calling them complementary rather than competing. He argued that some nations spread misinformation for geopolitical reasons, despite clear economic and strategic indicators proving their compatibility.

Iran supports regional integration and economic cooperation and views China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as a key framework for regional connectivity. Iran has expressed readiness to participate in related infrastructure projects.

The ambassador stated that Iran and Pakistan's economies are complementary rather than competitive. Pakistan's economy relies on textiles and agriculture, while Iran has strengths in oil, gas, and industrial production. Additionally, Pakistan is a major consumer of energy, while Iran is a leading producer. Similarly, Iran requires water management solutions, while Pakistan has abundant agricultural resources. These differences create mutual trade opportunities rather than competition.

With a combined population of over 340 million, Iran and Pakistan must leverage their economic potential through practical steps and joint initiatives. Economic integration with regional partners like China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Gulf nations could create a powerful geoeconomic network, utilizing natural resources, skilled labor, and advanced technology to drive sustainable development and collective security.

Amiri Moghadam highlighted ongoing efforts to strengthen transit routes, including: The Islamabad-Tehran-Istanbul (ITI) freight train, a major trade corridor under ECO (Economic Cooperation Organization); Port connectivity projects linking Iranian and Pakistani ports; East-West and North-South transit corridors, which hold immense economic and strategic significance; Iran-Afghanistan railway connectivity (Herat rail link) and the Rasht-Astara railway project, both of which will transform regional logistics and boost trade integration.

Despite post-pandemic improvements in trade volume, the current Iran-Pakistan trade levels remain below their full potential. The \$10 billion trade target set by both governments requires increased efforts and policy coordination.

Amiri Moghadam stressed that economic prosperity and security are inseparable—sustainable development cannot exist without stability, and vice versa. He called for: Resolving administrative obstacles to facilitate trade; Increasing direct flight connections between the two countries; Improving road and rail infrastructure; Launching a maritime passenger service to promote economic and cultural exchanges.

By addressing security concerns and enhancing bilateral cooperation, both nations can unlock their full trade potential and strengthen regional economic ties.

Iran Exports \$15m Worth of Tea in First 11 Months of 2025



TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Tea Organization, Habib Jahansaz, announced that Iran has exported 11,000 tons of tea valued at \$15 million in the first 11 months of this year. Russia is the top destination for Iranian tea exports, followed by India.

Jahansaz reported that 52,000 tea farmers are currently active, supported by 180 tea processing factories in the provinces of Gilan and Mazandaran. Of these, 150 factories have already signed contracts to begin purchasing green tea leaves. He noted that 30,000 tons of dried tea have been produced this year, with 145,000 tons harvested.

Jahansaz highlighted the challenges posed by climatic and soil limitations in eastern and western Gilan, stating, "Not all regions have equal potential for tea cultivation. We face constraints due to weather, soil quality, and land suitability, as much of the terrain in Gilan is either poorly suited or entirely unfit for tea farming."

He reiterated that Iran exported 11,000 tons of tea worth \$15 million in the same period, targeting neighboring countries and European markets, with Russia and India as the primary recipients. "Iranian tea holds a unique global position due to its quality, as it is produced without agricultural pesticides," Jahansaz emphasized. He added that successful tea exports depend on maintaining high quality, competitive pricing, and the tea's ability to generate foreign currency, given its chemical-free production and potential to compete in international markets.

Despite domestic production, Jahansaz acknowledged the need for imports, stating, "We produce high-quality dried tea suitable for consumption, but we still import 65,000 tons of tea annually." He explained that green tea leaf harvesting occurs in three seasons—spring, summer, and autumn—each year.

Regarding pricing, Jahansaz said the guaranteed purchase price of green tea leaves is adjusted based on inflation, rising production costs, and market demands. "We aim to increase the guaranteed price while maintaining government support to ensure timely payments to tea farmers," he noted.

Nicaragua Quits Two More Int'l Organizations

SAN JOSE (Dispatches) - Nicaragua said that it would leave the International Organization for Migration and the International Labour Organization, extending its retreat from multilateral bodies following criticism of its human rights record.

The two organizations "do not fulfil the mission for which they were created," said Rosario Murillo, who co-governs with her husband, President Daniel Ortega.

"We reiterate our irrevocable, firm position of repudiation of all insults, offences, falsehoods, aggressions, the double standard of colonialist politics that governs the actions" of these bodies, the 73-year-old added.

The announcement came a day after Ortega's government said it was withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council, after experts appointed by the organization accused Nicaragua of widespread repression.

It had previously said it was leaving the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in response to a report pointing to growing hunger in the Central American nation.



Violence Mars Protests in Athens Marking Anniversary of Greece's Worst Rail Crash



ATHENS (Dispatches) - Violence on Friday marred a huge demonstration in Athens to mark the second anniversary of the country's worst rail tragedy, as youths threw firebombs and clashed with riot police outside parliament.

Nearly 200,000 people had turned out in peaceful protest to demand justice for the 57 victims of the crash between a freight train and a passenger train near the central city of Larissa on February 28, 2023.

But the crowd, including children and the elderly, were forced to disperse when several hooded attackers threw firebombs and rockets at the police, prompting them to respond with teargas and stun grenades.

The ambulance service said five people were taken to hospital, including a photographer hit in the head by one of the grenades.

"The crowd was extremely packed and many panicked," protester Sofia Yianniri told AFP. "We tried to get people with children out."

Police earlier said some 325,000 people had turned out nationwide in demonstrations described by commentators as unprecedented in size and "historic".

In the capital, many were forced to walk several kilometres to join the protest as subway trains heading downtown were already jammed with passengers.

"Today we must send a strong message to punish those responsible for this tragedy," Nikos Lykomitros, a 20-year-old archaeology student, told AFP in Athens.

Babis Solakidis, a 44-year-old metalsmith, added: "This was not a simple accident, and there will be more if safety measures are not taken."

Schools, many shops, public services, trains, ferries and most flights were shut down by what is expected to be Greece's biggest mobilisation in recent history.

According to the victims' families, protests and gatherings were being held in over 200 cities and towns in Greece and other European countries, as well as in cities worldwide with large ethnic Greek populations, such as New York and Melbourne.

In a rare move, justice officials held a moment of silence and a one-hour stoppage before midday (1000 GMT) Friday in memory of the victims.

Zelensky Says Trump Relationship Can Be Repaired After White House Row

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Zelensky says U.S. relations with Trump can still be repaired after tense White House meeting

Volodymyr Zelensky said that his relations with the United States can still be repaired after President Donald Trump shouted at him in an angry White House meltdown accusing the Ukrainian leader of refusing to make peace with Russia.

"Of course," Zelensky said when asked in a Fox News interview if the relationship with Trump could be salvaged.

U.S.-Ukrainian ties are about "more than two presidents," he said, adding that Ukraine badly needs Washington's help in the fight against Russia's far bigger and better-armed military.

"It will be difficult without your support," Zelensky said on Fox — Trump's favorite news channel.

Zelensky's olive branch came hours after the extraordinary Oval Office scene where the years-long US policy of massive support for Ukraine's fight against Russian invasion collapsed in a shouting match.



Far-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni called for a summit "without delay" between the United States, Europe and their allies on Ukraine.

Trump and Vance are "doing Putin's dirty work," top U.S. Senate Democrat Chuck Schumer posted.

But Russia was delighted with the collapse in relations between Kyiv and Washington.

Former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev called Zelensky an "insolent pig" who had received "a proper slap down in the Oval Office."

Trump's Republican Party echoed the Russians in blaming Zelensky.

Ukraine appeared united behind Zelensky, with its army chief vowing to stand with him while the foreign minister praised his "bravery."

The meltdown came after Trump said Ukraine will have to make "compromises" in a truce with Russia, which has occupied swaths of the country.

Zelensky said there should be "no compromises with a killer on our territory."

After he pointed out that previous Western-backed peace efforts had failed to deter Russian aggression, Vance interrupted and called him "disrespectful."

The session then boiled over into Trump and Vance loudly berating the Ukrainian leader. He sat in evident discomfort as his hosts talked over him.

Trump has alarmed Kyiv and European allies with his abrupt U-turn in US policy, casting himself as a mediator between Putin and Zelensky and refusing to condemn the Russian invasion.

He said in the Oval Office that he had "spoken on numerous occasions" to Putin — more than has been publicly reported.

Trump called Zelensky a "dictator" last week and has said he trusts Putin to "keep his word" over a ceasefire.

Trump told Zelensky that as a mediator he could not criticize one of the main sides.

However, speaking to Fox News, Zelensky said he wished Trump was "really more on our side."

Meanwhile, Russia's assault on Ukraine continued.

Russian infantry were yesterday storming the Ukrainian border from the Russian region of Kursk, near areas of the region that were seized last summer by Ukrainian forces, Kyiv said.

The row saw European leaders scramble to voice support for Ukraine after Zelensky was made to leave the White House early and without signing a minerals-sharing deal seen as vital to an eventual U.S.-brokered truce.

During the ugly clash, played out in front of US and international media, Trump and Vice President JD Vance shouted at Zelensky, accusing him of not being "thankful" and refusing to accept their proposed truce terms.

"You don't have the cards right now," Trump said. "You're either going to make a deal or we're out, and if we're out, you'll fight it out and I don't think it's going to be pretty."

Zelensky departed shortly after, with Trump posting on social media that "he can come back when he is ready for peace."

U.S. media reported that Zelensky had been told to leave by senior Trump officials.

The president told journalists later that Zelensky was "overplaying his hand" and should agree to end fighting "immediately."

Zelensky, however, refused to apologize, telling Fox News, "I'm not sure that we did something bad." He did, however, say he wished the exchange had not taken place in front of reporters.

U.S. allies in Europe — already worried that Trump will force Ukraine to effectively hand victory to Russian President Vladimir Putin — rushed to back Zelensky.

"You are not alone," Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, fresh off his own visit to the White House, said he had spoken to both Trump and Zelensky by phone following the clash and vowed "unwavering support" for Kyiv.

Brazil's Finance Minister Isolated as Market Fears of a Leftist Pivot Mount



BRASILIA (Dispatches) - Brazil's latest cabinet shuffle has left Finance Minister Fernando Haddad with no strong supporters in President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's inner circle for his moderate fiscal approach, fueling fears of a populist pivot to revive the aging leftist leader's popularity.

Haddad, who has butted heads with members of the cabinet who favor ramping up spending despite a solid economy and rising inflation, had looked to outgoing Institutional Relations Minister Alexandre Padilha for support during policy debates and to lead negotiations with a Congress dominated by conservatives.

The cabinet shuffle announced on Tuesday made Padilha the new health minister. On Friday, the government announced that Gleisi Hoffmann, the president of Lula's Workers Party (PT) and a staunch advocate of state-driven economic stimulus, would take over his former role.

Hoffmann has criticized the Finance Ministry for pursuing what she sees as a punishing austerity campaign and lambasted the central bank's monetary tightening, even as Haddad publicly acknowledged the need to slow the economy to avoid imbalances.

"The problem for Haddad is that his strongest opposition comes from within his own party because no one, including the president, believes that spending cuts should be a priority," said Ricardo Campos, CEO and chief investment officer at Reach Capital. "For this government, what matters is spending to keep the economy moving."

A government source, speaking anonymously due to the confidential nature of discussions, said Lula's allies have pushed for measures to curb food prices, including unconventional proposals such as taxing exports, an approach Haddad opposes.

Israel Lobbies U.S. to Keep Russian Bases in a Weak Syria

BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Israel is lobbying the United States to keep Syria weak and decentralized, including by letting Russia keep its military bases there to counter Turkey's growing influence in the country, four sources familiar with the efforts said.

Turkey's often fraught ties with Israel have come under severe strain during the Gaza war and Israeli officials have told Washington that Syria's new Islamist rulers, who are backed by Ankara, pose a threat to Israel's borders, the sources said.

The lobbying points to a concerted Israeli campaign to influence U.S. policy at a critical juncture for Syria, as the Islamists who ousted Bashar al-Assad try to stabilise the fractured state and get Washington to lift punishing sanctions.

Israel communicated its views to top U.S. officials during meetings in Washington in February and subsequent meetings in Israel with U.S. Congressional representatives, three U.S. sources and another person familiar with the contacts said.

The main points were also circulated to some senior U.S. officials in an Israeli "white paper", two of the sources said.

All the sources spoke on condition of anonymity due to diplomatic sensitivities.

"Israel's big fear is that Turkey comes in and protects this new Syrian Islamist order, which then ends up being a base for Hamas and other militants," said Aron Lund, a fellow at U.S.-based think-tank Century International.

The U.S. State Department and National Security Council did not provide a response to questions for this story. The office of Israel's prime minister and the foreign ministries in Syria and Turkey did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

It was not clear to what extent U.S. President Donald Trump's



administration is considering adopting Israel's proposals, the sources said. It has said little about Syria, leaving uncertainty over both the future of the sanctions and whether U.S. forces deployed in the northeast will remain.

Lund said Israel had a good chance of influencing U.S. thinking, describing the new administration as wildly pro-Israeli. "Syria is barely even on Trump's radar now. It's low priority, and there's a policy void to fill," he said.

Israel has publicly declared its mistrust of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Islamist faction that led the campaign that toppled Assad and which emerged from a group that was affiliated to al Qaeda until it cut ties in 2016.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Sunday that Israel will not tolerate the presence in southern Syria of HTS, or any other forces affiliated with the new rulers, and demanded the territory be demilitarised.

Following Assad's ouster, Israel carried out extensive airstrikes on Syrian military bases and moved forces into a U.N.-monitored demilitarised zone within Syria. Earlier this week, Israel struck military sites south of Damascus.

Now, Israel is deeply concerned about Turkey's role as a close ally of Syria's new rulers, three U.S. sources said, describing the messages delivered by Israeli officials.

Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan, who leads the Islamist-rooted AK Party, said last year that Islamic countries should form an alliance against what he called "the growing threat of expansionism" from Israel.

Earlier this month, Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar said Israel was concerned Turkey was supporting efforts by Iran to rebuild Hezbollah and that Islamist groups in Syria were creating another front against Israel.

Turkey has said it wants Syria to become stable and pose no threat to its neighbours. It has repeatedly said Israel's actions in southern Syria were part of its expansionist and invasive policy, and showed Israel did not want regional peace.

To contain Turkey, Israeli officials have sought to persuade U.S. officials that Russia should keep its Mediterranean naval base in Syria's Tartus province and its Hmeimim air base in Latakia province, the sources said.

When Israeli officials presented Russia's continued presence in a positive light in a meeting with U.S. officials, some attendees were surprised, arguing that Turkey - a NATO member - would be a better guarantor of Israel's security, two of the U.S. sources said.

Israeli officials were "adamant" that was not the case, the sources said.

G20 Finance Meeting Ends Without Consensus or Communiqué

CAPE TOWN (Dispatches) - South Africa voiced dismay that Group of 20 talks it hosted on global economic issues ended without consensus, after top officials from several countries skipped it and delegates remained far apart on issues such as climate finance.

The two-day G20 meeting of finance ministers and central bankers in Cape Town failed to come up with a joint communiqué. However a "chair's summary" issued by the host said participants "reiterated the commitment to resisting protectionism."

The summary added they had "supported a rules-based, non-discriminatory, fair, open, inclusive, equitable, sustainable and transparent multilateral trading system," using several words the Trump administration has already strongly objected to.

South Africa had hoped to make the G20 a platform for putting pressure on rich countries to do more to tackle climate change, to give



more towards poorer countries' transitions to green energy and to reform a financial system that favours investment banks at the expense of poor sovereign debtors.

But the talks were overshadowed by the absence of several key finance chiefs - such as from the United States, China, India and Japan - and foreign aid cuts by major economies like the United States and Britain, against a backdrop of rising geopolitical tensions.

South African Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana said he was "not happy" the G20 meeting could not issue a joint communiqué. "I'm not going to (name) ... any specific country, but climate issues are becoming a challenge for the first time," he told Reuters after issuing the G20 summary.

Blazers Pull Away in First Half, Roll to Win Over Nets



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Shaedon Sharpe scored 25 points to lead the Portland Trail Blazers to a fourth consecutive victory, a 121-102 triumph over the Brooklyn Nets in New York.

Sharpe made 9 of 14 attempts from the field while also dishing out five assists. Dalano Banton finished with 23 points on 8-of-11 shooting, scoring 16 points in the fourth quarter, and he grabbed a game-high eight rebounds.

Portland's Toumani Camara added 19 points on 6-of-11 shooting, while Scoot Henderson chipped in 12 points and a game-high nine assists.

Cam Thomas made his return for Brooklyn after missing nearly two months with a hamstring injury, scoring 16 points on 7-of-17 shooting in his first game since Jan. 2. Nic Claxton added 16 points and five rebounds, Killian Hayes also had 16 points and Cameron Johnson contributed 14 points as the Nets took their third loss in a row.

The Trail Blazers made their first 10 shots from the field, culminating with a Camara 3-pointer that gave Portland a 25-18 lead. Sharpe scored 14 points in the opening quarter, helping the Trail Blazers take an eight-point lead into the second.

The visitors took full control in the second quarter, outscoring Brooklyn 31-22 in the frame to take a 17-point halftime lead. Portland pushed the lead to a then-game-high 21 points almost immediately after the break, as Kris Murray sank a basket and a 3-pointer to make the score 71-50.

Brooklyn managed to trim the deficit to nine points entering the fourth quarter by closing the third on an 8-0 run. That was as close as Brooklyn would get, however, as the Trail Blazers opened the fourth quarter with a 16-6 run that once again put them in control.

Two free throws from Banton with 6:52 to go make it 109-88, and Portland led by as many as 26 points in the late going.

The Trail Blazers made 45 of 78 attempts (57.7 percent) from the field, shooting 15 of 36 (41.7 percent) from 3-point range. The Nets made 36 of 86 (41.9 percent) of their field-goal attempts, including 7 of 29 (24.1 percent) from beyond the arc.

Meanwhile Tyler Herro scored a team-high 29 points and dished seven assists, leading the host Miami Heat past the Indiana Pacers 125-120.

Miami's Davion Mitchell snapped a tie on a 3-pointer with 43.8 seconds left. Indiana doubled Herro, leaving Mitchell open.

On Indiana's next possession, Miami's Bam Adebayo stole a pass thrown by Tyrese Haliburton, and Herro iced the game with two free throws with 6.5 seconds left.

Indiana's Pascal Siakam scored a game-high 36 points, including 18 in the fourth quarter. He set a career high with eight 3-pointers, missing just three.

The Pacers also got 22 points from Myles Turner. Haliburton added 19 points, 10 assists and a game-high four steals. His last-minute turnover was his only miscue.

Heat starter Andrew Wiggins missed the game due to a sprained right ankle. Jaime Jaquez Jr. started in his place, but he sprained his right ankle in the third quarter.

Jaquez did not return. Key Pacers reserve Benedict Mathurin was out due to a sprained left wrist.

T.J. McConnell returned to the Pacers after missing two games due to a sprained right ankle. He had seven points and five assists.

Siakam scored 11 points in the first six minutes, helping the Pacers race to a 35-29 first-quarter lead. Indiana shot 66.7 percent in the quarter, including 6 of 8 from deep.

Indiana made 12 of its first 15 3-point attempts, but Miami closed the first half on a 13-2 run, cutting Indiana's lead to 69-68.

Miami had a strong third quarter, taking a 97-92 lead. Indiana cooled off in that period, shooting just 43.5 percent, including 2 of 9 from deep (22.2 percent).

The Pacers posted an 18-4 run midway through the fourth quarter, taking a 110-108 lead. But Mitchell, who finished with 10 points and eight assists, made the big shot late.

Sinner's Laureus Sportsman of Year Nomination Revoked After Doping Ban



MADRID (Dispatches) - The Laureus Academy revoked tennis number one Jannik Sinner's nomination for its annual World Sportsman of the Year Award, citing his three-month doping ban.

Sinner, who accepted the ban earlier this month, had tested positive for anabolic agent clostebol which the 23-year-old said had entered his system from a member of his support team through massages and sports therapy. The ban will end on May 4.

"We have followed this case, the decisions of the relevant global bodies and - whilst we note the extenuating circumstances involved - feel that the three-month ban renders the nomination ineligible," Laureus Academy Chairman Sean Fitzpatrick said in a letter addressed to nomination panel members.

"Jannik and his team have been informed."

The Laureus World Sports Awards have been presented since 2000, with nominees selected by the global media, recognising individual and team achievement in sport. The nominees for this year's awards will be announced on March 3 in Madrid.

Sinner, who retained his Australian Open title last month, failed two drug tests in March 2024 but was allowed to keep competing while he appealed his case.

The positive tests came to light days before the U.S. Open, when an independent tribunal cleared him of wrongdoing, plunging the year's final major into controversy.

A number of players and fans criticised officials for allowing Sinner to play on despite the positive tests and believed that the Italian had been given preferential treatment because of his top ranking status.

Asensio Sinks Cardiff as Villa Reach FA Cup Quarters



LONDON (Dispatches) - Marco Asensio fired Aston Villa into the FA Cup quarter-finals as the Spanish forward struck twice in a 2-0 win against Cardiff.

Unai Emery's side were held at bay by the gritty Championship outfit until deep into the second half of the last-16 clash at Villa Park.

Asensio's double ensured Villa advanced to the last eight for the first time since their run to the final in 2015.

The 29-year-old has four goals in six games for Villa since joining on loan from Paris Saint-Germain in the January transfer window.

It was a welcome victory for Villa, who were thrashed 4-1 at Crystal Palace in the Premier League on Tuesday.

"We needed Asensio. We were creating chances but not clinical. The second half was still difficult to beat them. We scored one goal. After that it was easier to dominate," Emery said.

"Playing against a Championship team is not easy, trying to respect them because you can lose even if you're better than the opponent."

Villa last won the FA Cup in 1957 and Emery added: "We are not considered favourites to win this trophy. We are contenders but not favourites."

Despite the Champions League last-16 first-leg tie at Club Brugge looming on Tuesday, Emery opted to pick a strong team against the Bluebirds.

Teetering just six points above the Championship relegation zone, Cardiff boss Omar Riza took the opposite approach, as he selected a weakened team to prioritise their survival battle.

Cardiff last won the FA Cup in 1954 and the Welsh side never looked like ending that futile streak.

Marcus Rashford's snap-shot and John McGinn's curler from distance were both well saved by Cardiff keeper Ethan Horvath in the opening stages.

Ollie Watkins should have put Villa ahead but the England striker poked wide after racing into the penalty area.

Emery's men monopolised possession to such an extent that Cardiff fans sarcastically chanted "we've got the ball" when they finally stemmed the tide of Villa attacks for a moment.

Villa were swiftly back in ascendancy and Leon Bailey's fierce blast was tipped over by Horvath.

Rashford wasted a golden opportunity to end Cardiff's resistance, scuffing Bailey's cross over from close-range.

Tsitsipas, Auger-Aliassime Set Up Showdown in Dubai Final

DUBAI (Dispatches) - Stefanos Tsitsipas stands between Felix Auger-Aliassime and a tour-leading third title this year at the Dubai Championships.

They will meet for the 10th time on tour in the final on Saturday. Tsitsipas leads 6-3 overall and has dominated their matchups since 2020 but they are 1-1 in finals.

If Tsitsipas wins against Auger-Aliassime in Saturday's final, he will return to the top 10 for the first time since June.

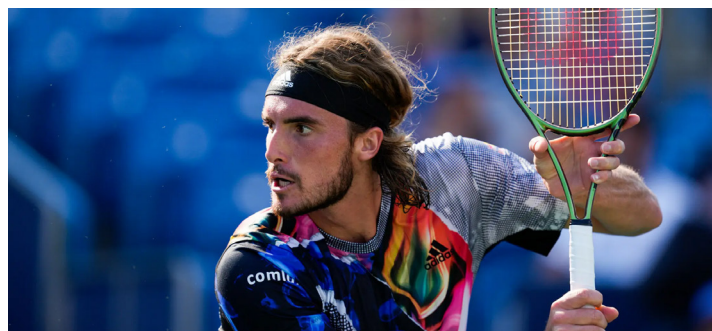
No. 11-ranked Tsitsipas beat No. 47 Tallon Griekspoor of the Netherlands 6-4, 6-4, without offering a break point in their semifinal.

"I feel extremely happy that I was able to avoid the drama today, and play good tennis," Tsitsipas said after reaching his first hard-court final since 2023.

Appearing in Dubai for the first time since 2020, the Greek has achieved three consecutive Dubai finals. He fell in the deciders to Roger Federer in 2019 and Novak Djokovic in 2020.

No. 21 Auger-Aliassime overcame French qualifier and No. 77 Quentin Halys 5-7, 6-4, 6-3 for the second time in two weeks.

The Canadian has played four sets in every match this week, and



turned this one midway through the second when he scrambled to a smash by Halys and flicked a cross-court winner to set up break point. He converted and dominated the rest of the way.

"We were both feeling a bit tired I think," Auger-Aliassime said. "It was just (about) having positive self talk. When we're having a tough day, just to have a pep talk and stay positive. I did that well and dug deep physically."

He has already won in Adelaide and Montpellier this year and advanced to a third final in a season for the first time since 2022.

Meanwhile top-seeded Jessica Pegula needed just 58 minutes to post a 6-2, 6-2 victory over Russia's Anna Blinkova to reach the semifinals of the ATX Open in Austin, Texas.

Pegula won 76.9 percent of her first-serve points and converted 5 of 7 break points while cruising to the victory. She is into her second semifinal of the season, the other coming at Adelaide where she eventually lost to Madison Keys in the final in January.

Pegula will next face Australian wild card Ajla Tomljanovic, who outlasted Japanese qualifier Ena Shibahara 7-5, 3-6, 7-6 (8) in their quarterfinal match. Tomljanovic saved a match point in the third-set tiebreaker while winning four of the final five points.

In other quarterfinals, fifth-seeded McCartney Kessler will face Romania's Sorana Cirstea and American Caroline Dolehide will meet Belgium's Greet Minnen.

Duplantis Breaks His Own Pole Vault World Record With Leap of 6.27m

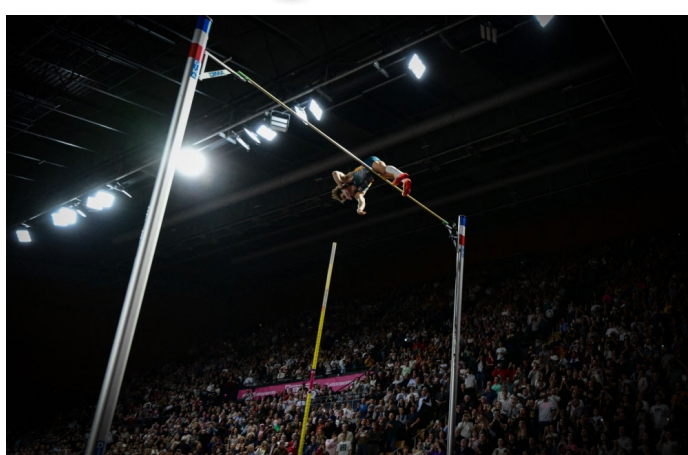
CLERMONT-FERRAND (Dispatches) - Swedish Olympic champion Armand Duplantis broke his own world record at the All Star Pole Vault in Clermont-Ferrand, France, and then promoted another type of record.

After securing victory in the competition by clearing a bar at 6.07m, Duplantis then took aim at the world record, raising the bar to 6.27 metres and clearing it at the first attempt.

"I just felt really good," the vaulter known as "Mondo" said. "What can I say, I came here to do it. I put everything in place to do it. The run-up worked really well. I just did it."

"Sometimes it's easy, sometimes it's not, but there's a lot of hard work, hardship, bad days, good days, everything in between that gets you to the easier moments," he said, adding that breaking the world record remained exhilarating.

"It's always special. It's a crazy feeling every time. It's like a feeling of euphoria. It's hard to explain."



It was the 11th time he had broken the record by one centimetre since first claiming it with a leap of 6.16m in Feb 2020.

Duplantis made sure that his song "Bop" — released just in time for the meet — was playing in the arena.

"That was my song that was playing," the breathless Duplantis said immediately after the jump. "When I made this song a couple of months ago, I thought this would be a perfect song to jump to here. That's why I rushed it out."

It was "playing in the background, everything, exactly as I'd imagined it in my head, so we can't complain," he said.

"I thought maybe I wasn't going to be serious about jumping on my own song. It seemed almost funny to me. But when I heard it on the speakers, I thought it sounded good. I thought it sounded really good and it put me in a good frame of mind," he added at the press conference.