

The Lufthansa LH 600 Flight Landed at the Imam Khomeini International Airport on Saturday Night, Marking the Resumption of the Airline's Services to Tehran After a Period of Suspension

IRAN NEWS

Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi Extended His Congratulations on the Arrival of the Holy Month of Ramadan, Expressing Hope that the Blessings of This Month Will Pave the Way for Success of the Muslim World

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Preserving People's Purchasing Power Must Be a Policy Priority



TEHRAN - In a session of Iran's parliament on Sunday, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the Speaker of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, emphasized that safeguarding the purchasing power of the Iranian people must remain a top priority in policymaking. He also warned that nations outsourcing their security to others are doomed to fail, accusing the global "system of dominance" of exploiting its allies with empty promises before discarding them.

Qalibaf opened the session by extending his congratulations on the arrival of the holy month of Ramadan, describing it as a "spring of spirituality." Addressing fellow lawmakers, the Iranian people, and Muslims worldwide, he highlighted the significance of Quranic gatherings, charitable iftar meals, and nationwide campaigns aimed at supporting the underprivileged during Ramadan. He urged the public to include lawmakers and public servants in their prayers throughout this blessed month.

Commenting on recent policy developments, Qalibaf noted that an electronic voucher program targeting the bottom three income deciles of society had been launched the previous day. "Preserving the purchasing power of the people under any circumstances must be a priority in policymaking," he stressed. He added that the parliament had long advocated for the implementation of this electronic voucher system, which has now been rolled out in collaboration with the government ahead of Ramadan, as previously promised. The Speaker explained that the bank cards of household heads have been credited for purchasing essential goods at designated stores, with plans to expand the program to cover all targeted income groups. He assured that parliament would closely monitor the program's execution, particularly to ensure it upholds the dignity of citizens, especially at the point of distribution.

Turning to broader geopolitical themes, Qalibaf remarked, "What the world is openly witnessing today is that any country entrusting its security and progress to others—or harboring even the slightest hope or trust in arrogant powers—is destined to fail." He accused hegemonic powers of shedding their "velvet glove" to reveal an iron fist, a reality he claimed is now evident to people worldwide.

Neighbors Have Special Place in Iran's Foreign Policy



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's deputy foreign minister has highlighted the "special place" that neighbors have in the country's foreign policy, calling for friendship and cooperation between regional countries.

"Neighbors have a special place in our foreign policy. Through friendship and cooperation, we can build a better and more prosperous future for our region," Majid Takht-Ravanchi said in an X post on Sunday.

He made the remarks after wrapping up a visit to Abu Dhabi, where he held talks with Emirati officials as part of the first round of Iran-UAE political consultations.

Takht-Ravanchi said that during his meetings with UAE Assistant Minister for Political Affairs, Lana Nusseibeh, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Khalifa Shaheen, and Anwar Gargash, diplomatic adviser to the Emirati president, both sides "indicated their eagerness to expand relations, particularly in the economic field."

The UAE is Iran's second-largest trade partner. In May 2024, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for expanding economic cooperation in different sectors.

During his meeting with Gargash, Takht-Ravanchi expressed the Islamic Republic's readiness to enhance ties with the UAE based on mutual interests.

Economy Minister Fails to Survive No-Confidence Vote of Majlis

TEHRAN - Majlis lawmaker voted to remove Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance Abdolnaser Hemmati from his post during a no-confidence session.

Representatives reviewed the impeachment motion of the finance minister in two sessions on Sunday, with several expressing their opinions both for and against the move to oust Hemmati.

The voting process, which began in the afternoon session, resulted in 182 votes in favor, 89 votes against, 1 abstention, and 1 invalid vote, out of a total of 273 parliamentarians present in the session.

Earlier, Hemmati delivered a lengthy speech in parliament, defending the measures taken by the government of President Pezeshkian to improve the country's economic conditions.

He highlighted the government's achievements in the past five months. "In 2018, the country's economic conditions were much more problematic than they are now, but we stood firm and withstood the maximum pressure," he said.

Hemmati, however, welcomed the impeachment motion, saying it is the right of the people's representatives. "Impeachment is a manifestation of political progress and will lead to greater empathy, but they are wrong about my lack of responsiveness to problems," he said.

Meanwhile earlier in defense of Hemmati, the President has emphasized that spreading despair and hopelessness harms both the people and society, urging officials to inspire hope instead of fueling negativity.

During a session in Parliament, discussing the impeachment of Hemmati President Masoud Pezeshkian addressed the nation's economic struggles. He stressed that these challenges cannot be attributed to a single individual and that the country is engaged in an economic war more severe than the eight-year war with Saddam Hussein.

"The enemy seeks to create division among us. We must not allow conflict and discord to serve their interests. The government is doing its utmost to resolve the crises and ensure the people's well-being," Pezeshkian said.

The President admitted that the country is facing serious economic difficulties and that no one is free from mistakes. However, he emphasized that unity and cooperation are the only paths to overcoming these issues.

He revealed that when his administration took office, it inherited significant financial liabilities, including: \$18 billion in outstanding debts within the healthcare sector; \$44 billion



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allocated for wheat procurement; \$24 billion in power sector debt; \$24 billion in required funds for social security payments.

Pezeshkian highlighted additional economic burdens, such as a \$24 billion debt in the transportation sector and logistical challenges caused by sanctions.

Acknowledging public grievances, the President apologized for certain government actions, such as power outages and fuel shortages, which were necessary to prevent a complete collapse of gas supplies during winter.

"The Supreme Leader declared this year as the year of economic growth and production, yet we were forced to cut power to factories. Economic changes take time. Sanctions are blocking our oil and gas shipments, and financial assets remain frozen abroad," he explained.

He also noted that \$6 billion remains

inaccessible in Qatari banks, with similar issues in Turkey and Iraq. Pezeshkian opposed the impeachment of the Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance, arguing that blaming one individual for economic turmoil is misguided.

"He has only been in office for six months. If miracles were possible, they would have happened before. We are doing everything we can to solve people's problems," he stated.

The President urged Parliament not to destabilize the government by removing key officials, emphasizing that economic strategies take time to yield results.

The President reiterated that Iran is in an all-out economic war, likening the current situation to past military conflicts but with more complex financial and political challenges.

"We must remain united. The enemy wants us divided. Parliament must work with the government, not against it. Frequent impeachments will only create instability," he warned.

Pezeshkian also reaffirmed Iran's commitment to its stance on foreign policy, following the Supreme Leader's directive against negotiations with the U.S. While he personally supports dialogue, he insisted that any diplomatic moves must align with the country's official policies.

The President urged lawmakers to support the government's initiatives rather than obstruct them, emphasizing that Iran's economic woes require collective effort and long-term planning.

"Our priority is to stabilize the economy and secure people's livelihoods. If we work together, we can overcome these challenges. If we keep fighting among ourselves, we only serve the interests of our adversaries," he concluded.

Iran's Armed Forces Vow Immediate and Forceful Response to Any Aggression

TEHRAN - In a statement emphasizing Iran's defensive maturity, Brigadier General Ebrahim Gofgam, Deputy Cultural and Propaganda Officer of the General Staff of the Armed Forces, declared that Iran has achieved a level of defensive strength and capability that allows it to instantly and powerfully repel any aggression against the country, no matter how minor.

Gofgam highlighted the legacy of the late Imam Khomeini, crediting him with instilling a sense of self-belief in Iranians that unlocked their true potential. "Whenever we talk about power, we must acknowledge the role of Imam Khomeini. He revived our beliefs, enabling us to recognize and harness our real strength," he said.

Gofgam explained that prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's military relied heavily on expensive American equipment and foreign advisors, with over 50,000 military consultants stationed in the country. "They claimed Iranians lacked the understanding and capability to manage military affairs, forcing us to depend on them," he noted. However, the revolution and Imam Khomeini's vision dismantled these misconceptions, paving the way for self-reliance.

Reflecting on the eight-year Iran-Iraq War, Gofgam described it as a turning point. "The war, orchestrated and supported by the United States and 32 other countries, aimed to crush the Islamic Republic. Yet, Imam Khomeini called the Sacred Defense a university, transforming threats into opportunities. Our fighters matured, and our dependency on foreign weapons gradually diminished," he said.

He added that the war marked the beginning of Iran's defensive maturity. While equipment remained limited during the conflict, the human element became more effective. Post-war, Iran rapidly advanced, identifying threats and developing tailored strategies, tactics, and weaponry. "We realized what threats we faced and what weapons we needed. We crafted our own doctrines and built the necessary tools to defend ourselves," Gofgam stated.

Since the Sacred Defense, Iran has focused on maintaining and upgrading its arsenal while pursuing self-sufficiency in weapon production. "We entered every field where we saw a need, achieving independence in manufacturing all types of weapons. Today, in areas like missile technology, drones, and small arms, Iran is not only self-sufficient but exceptional," he asserted.



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Gofgam recalled the early 2000s, during the Second Persian Gulf War, when U.S. forces encircled Iran, contemplating a ground invasion to topple the Islamic Republic. "They backed off after witnessing our capabilities in military exercises," he said. Over time, Iran's innovations, skilled personnel, and spiritual resolve have silenced threats of military action from adversaries.

Iran's advancements extend across hardware and software in the defense industry. "From subsurface to sea, land, and air, we've designed a diverse array of weapons—long-range missiles, drones, and more," Gofgam explained. He emphasized that these developments have bolstered Iran's deterrence, neutralizing enemy attempts to monitor or control its forces.

Highlighting recent unveilings of underground missile cities by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Gofgam noted, "These facilities, packed with defensive missiles, demonstrate our readiness. Our capabilities were proven when we downed the U.S. Global Hawk drone—an expensive unmanned aircraft flying at 50,000 feet. No other country can claim such a feat."

He stressed Iran's firm stance: "Any minor violation of our airspace will be met with an immediate response. We've made it clear—any aggression will be struck down."

Gofgam traced Iran's path to military self-reliance back to the departure of U.S. advisors post-revolution. Under the guidance of then-representative of Imam Khomeini in the Supreme Defense Council—now Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei—the armed forces were ordered to repair all equipment domestically. "Our technicians and officers rose to the challenge, sparking a jihad of self-sufficiency," he said.

Today, Iran produces over 95% of its required weaponry, guided by revolutionary principles and innovation. "We showcase some capabilities in exercises, but much remains a mystery to our enemies," Gofgam remarked. Quoting IRGC Commander General Hossein Salami, he added, "The enemy's uncertainty about our military power is vast, ensuring they lack the courage to attack."

In closing, Gofgam reaffirmed Iran's resolve: "We stand ready to repel any aggression with strength and immediacy, safeguarding the Islamic Republic's sovereignty."

Iran Will Change Military Tactics, Techniques Based on Threats



TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian commander says the country will change its military techniques and tactics in response to evolving threats.

Commander of the Iranian Army's Air Defense Force Brigadier General Alireza Sabahi-Fard said on Saturday that enemies and aggressors are not able to reach Iran's skies.

"Changes in techniques and tactics are on the agenda proportionately to current threats," Sabahi-Fard told senior commanders and managers of the Air Defense Force.

He added that changes in Iran's techniques and tactics will certainly confuse enemies, noting that the country's Air Defense Force is pursuing this approach.

Pointing to plans to promote the force's capabilities, he added, "The power of our country is currently a thorn in the side of the enemies."

During the Army's Zolfaghar 1403 joint military maneuvers in the country's south last month, the Iranian Army's 15 Khordad air defense system and offensive Arash drone have successfully intercepted and destroyed mock hostile targets.

Observers say the operation showcased Iran's advancements in drone technology and its ability to carry out long-range strikes with a high level of accuracy, further cementing the country's growing military capabilities in the region.

These maneuvers, which are designed to simulate real-world combat scenarios, continue to underscore the Islamic Republic of Iran's air defense readiness and its commitment to maintaining a robust and integrated defense network to safeguard its national security, they note.

He added unity among air defense forces helps protect Iran against acts of air aggression by adversaries.

He went on to say enemies cannot launch air aggression against Iran as the country's air defense is integrated and changes tactics, leading to the confusion of the adversaries.

"Iran's sky is unattainable for enemies and aggressors" due to the unity among air defense forces, he said.

Iran Releases 1st Video of Israeli-Linked Ship Seized Last April



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has released the first footage of the Israeli-linked container ship MSC Aries, which was seized by the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC)'s special naval forces in the Strait of Hormuz in the Persian Gulf last April.

The video, broadcast on state television and shared across Iranian media outlets on Saturday, showed the ship that was subjected to a helicopter operation by the forces, who took control of the vessel during the mission on April 13, 2024.

The MSC Aries, owned by Zodiac Maritime, a company linked to Israeli billionaire Eyal Ofer, was flying the Portuguese flag at the time of its capture. It was seized along with its 24-strong crewmembers.

According to reports at the time, the vessel was intercepted in a swift and highly-coordinated military operation, emphasizing Iran's ability to monitor and control strategic maritime routes, particularly in the Persian Gulf and the hugely strategic Strait of Hormuz.

The seizure of the ship came amid the Islamic Republic's pledges of retaliation against the regime's deadly aggression against the Iranian soil, including its July 2024 assassination of the Palestinian resistance movement Hamas' former Political Bureau chief, Ismail Haniyeh, and Tel Aviv's atrocities against other regional territories.

On the same day, the IRGC launched the country's Operation True Promise, an extensive reprisal that targeted sensitive and strategic Israeli military targets, using hundreds of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and loitering munitions.

The Corps launched Operation True Promise II last October, similarly slamming hundreds of ballistic missiles into high-stakes Israeli military targets.

Iran has consistently warned against the regime's targeting either the Iranian soil or the Islamic Republic's interests overseas, with a high-ranking IRGC commander recently announcing that the country would "soon" launch Operation True Promise III.

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Iran, Kyrgyzstan Highlight Tourism Development

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - During his visit to Bishkek, Ali Najafi, Iran's Deputy First Vice President for International Affairs and Regional Cooperation, met with the new Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan, Jeenbek Kulubaev, to discuss tourism.

Tourism is a vital source of income for countries today, and Iran has been actively working to attract foreign tourists to boost its non-oil income.

Najafi noted Iran's observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union and the finalization of its free trade agreement with the union, highlighting opportunities for enhancing economic cooperation with member states like Kyrgyzstan.

The officials underscored the need for ongoing high-level consultations and visits to strengthen bilateral relations.

Najafi also met with Sediqov, Kyrgyz Minister of Economy and Trade, to discuss convening the Joint Economic Commission, Kyrgyzstan's participation in the Iran Expo, and expanding tourism cooperation.

Iran, Brazil Hold Third Round of Talks to Boost Agricultural Cooperation



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TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Veterinary Organization announced that the third round of negotiations between Iran and Brazil aimed at enhancing agricultural cooperation and improving the trade balance was hosted by the Veterinary Organization, representing Iran's Ministry of Agriculture Jihad.

The third webinar meeting of the Joint Agricultural Cooperation Committee between Iran and Brazil (specifically Brazil's Department of Agriculture, Livestock and Food Supply, MAPA) took place. The discussions, hosted by Iran's Veterinary Organization, focused on sanitary quarantine measures for raw animal products (both imported and exported), sanitary quarantines for agricultural and horticultural products between the two nations, and bilateral scientific and technological collaboration.

Alireza Rafiepour, head of Iran's Veterinary Organization, emphasized during the meeting that cooperation between Iran and Brazil in the agricultural sector would undoubtedly facilitate and accelerate commercial ties, adherence to technical and sanitary standards, quarantine protocols, and bilateral scientific endeavors. He expressed hope that these efforts would lead to an improved trade balance and expanded cooperation between the two countries.

The Deputy Minister of Agriculture Jihad highlighted the exchange of protein-based products facilitated by the veterinary services of both nations. He noted that Iran has historically imported meat and livestock feed from Brazil, as well as white poultry meat in the past. However, he stressed the need for measures to enable the export of Iranian horticultural products—such as apples, kiwis, raisins, and saffron—to Brazil in return.

Expressing optimism about achieving a positive trade balance, Rafiepour outlined key areas for veterinary collaboration, including pharmaceuticals, biological materials, and laboratory work through training programs, leveraging Iran's advanced veterinary expertise. He also called for cooperation in vaccine research and development, testing and evaluation, standardization, biotechnology, and the joint production of high-tech medicines under licensing agreements. Additionally, he emphasized the need to align raw animal product standards with national, regional, and World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) guidelines, suggesting that deploying veterinary experts from both countries could play a pivotal role.

Iran's Administrative System in Need of Reform



TEHRAN - The Vice President and Head of Iran's Administrative and Recruitment Organization, Aladdin Rafizadeh, stated on Saturday that the country's administrative system requires reform. He emphasized that these reforms should be designed to ensure citizens can access services with ease.

Rafizadeh made these remarks during a meeting of the Administrative Transformation Steering Council at the Martyrs and Veterans Affairs Foundation. The meeting, attended by Saeed Ohadi, Vice President and Head of the Foundation, focused on outlining the key aspects of the administrative reform program under the 14th government.

Paying tribute to the memory of Imam Khomeini and the martyrs, Rafizadeh described the Martyrs and Veterans Affairs Foundation as a "sacred institution" due to its role in serving veterans and martyrs' families. He expressed gratitude to Ohadi for his efforts in addressing the needs of these families, adding, "The core purpose of the Administrative Transformation Steering Council is to engage with government institutions, assist in implementation, and pave the way for smoother execution of programs."

Rafizadeh acknowledged that while reforms have been attempted in previous administrations, the system remains far from ideal. "We needed to define a clear structure and executive framework for this purpose, which has been addressed in the 14th government's administrative reform program," he explained.

Highlighting the importance of user-friendly services, he noted, "These efforts carry double the reward in an organization like the Martyrs and Veterans Affairs Foundation. These individuals sacrificed their lives for Islam and the revolution without hesitation, and it is our duty to simplify their access to services."

In the same meeting, Saeed Ohadi announced that structural changes made to the Martyrs and Veterans Affairs Foundation under its previous management have been reversed, restoring its former framework. He added that several of the Foundation's regulations, unchanged for nearly 20 years, are now being consolidated and updated. "These changes aim to resolve issues faced by the veteran community without imposing additional burdens on the government," Ohadi stated.

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Minister Prioritizes Completion of Transit Corridors, Highlights Regional Cooperation

TEHRAN - Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Farzaneh Sadegh Malvajerd, emphasized that completing transit corridors is a top priority for her ministry to optimize the country's transit capabilities. Speaking at a nationwide governors' meeting on Saturday at the Ministry of Interior, she noted that neighboring countries are relying heavily on Iran to finalize these corridors despite sanctions and limitations.

Sadegh stated, "The completion of transit corridors should have happened much earlier, but it's not too late even now." She pointed out that China still views Iran as a faster, cheaper, and shorter transit route for goods, a factor that has encouraged Turkey to deepen ties with Iran. "Developing border terminals is also among our priorities," she added.

In the past five months, the ministry has ramped up engagement with neighbors through joint commissions, webinars, and invitations to visit Iran, focusing on borders, terminals, and regional connectivity. Addressing a recent issue faced by Iranian truck drivers at the Turkish border over the "full fuel tank" policy, Sadegh praised the role of provincial governors, particularly West Azerbaijan Governor Rahman Rahmani, whose efforts bolstered Iran's negotiating position with Turkish officials.

"Despite energy imbalances, sanctions, and potential escalation of restrictions, transportation and transit remain a fundamental solution," she said, urging preparations to facilitate this sector. Sadegh highlighted that connecting transit roads to borders and railways would drive development and wealth creation, calling on governors to advocate this vision to the government, parliament, and judiciary.

Sadegh acknowledged requests for cash funding amid energy shortages and other challenges but noted the complexity of disbursing funds late in the fiscal year (month 12 of the Persian calendar, nearing Nowruz). She cited obligations like payments to wheat farmers and nurses—debts inherited from previous administrations—explaining that even funds from revenue-coast companies had been redirected to farmers. "Allocating funds isn't something I can simply order; the resources must exist," she said, noting that provinces have so far received bonds rather than cash.

She revealed that 8 trillion tomans from her ministry's budget went to the Planning and Budget Organization, with a quarter allocated to parliament. With provinces juggling projects at 5% to 95% completion, Sadegh instructed her team to list road projects needing less than 20 kilometers to finish—some lingering for 5 to 25 years. Completing these alone requires over 500 trillion toman nationwide.

Sadegh urged governors to prioritize projects and not tie asset monetization solely to her ministry's properties. She encouraged them to leverage assets from other entities with a "fatherly perspective," citing Alborz province as a success story where monetized land is funding a highway. "Governors should submit

their monetization and project priorities to us," she said.

On housing, Sadegh referenced the Seventh Development Plan and the Housing Production Leap Law. Approximately 1.8 million people have registered over recent years, meeting eligibility criteria, with 800,000 securing initial payments. In recent months, 60,000 more projects were linked to bank loans, bringing the total to 430,000, though 400,000 remain unfunded. After talks with the Central Bank, loan quotas were assigned to banks, and Sadegh urged governors to monitor banks' compliance.

Housing preparation, she explained, is split between her ministry (one-third), the Ministry of Energy and regional water companies (one-third), and governorates (one-third). Citing a completed single-story housing project in Tabas lacking water, she said, "We won't inaugurate it without water." In some areas, land preparation costs 5 to 10 times the land's value, which she deemed wasteful. "In some cases, buying homes would be cheaper," she added.

Under the Population Youth Law, securing land has proven difficult in some provinces. Sadegh stressed that only land with clear boundaries should be allocated. While land swaps with contractors were previously barred, the 2025 budget now allows it, promising relief.

Of the 800,000 funded housing projects, over 300,000 belong to higher-income deciles (8-10), requiring prioritization for the rest. "Not everything can hinge on the budget; provinces must act creatively," she said, pledging to delegate authority if needed. She also addressed land shortages in free trade zones, noting a new agreement with the Free Zones High Council to streamline monetization and other processes.

The Minister also warned non-compliant airlines: If they increase airfare prices arbitrarily and without regulation, their licenses will be revoked.

The issue of airfare prices was one of the topics discussed in the second meeting to review the 1404 (2025) Nowruz travels at the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development.

In this meeting, Sadegh criticized the unregulated increase in airfare prices and called for serious action against non-compliant airlines. She stated: "These days, airfare prices have become outrageous, and some airlines increase prices whenever they decide."

She continued: "While we had an agreement with airlines to keep fuel prices under control so they wouldn't rise, they have still raised ticket prices." The Minister of Roads and Urban Development said: "Given the recent resolution of the Consumer Protection Task Force, we must intervene in airfare pricing, and if they cannot prevent the price increases, their licenses will be revoked." She added: "In this case, compliant airlines will be encouraged, and the public will understand that our supervision is not just about issuing notices and giving verbal warnings."

Iran Secures Zero-Tariff Trade with Five Eurasian Countries, Boosting Commerce

TEHRAN - Minister of Industry, Mines, and Trade, Seyed Mohammad Atabak, announced that Iran's integration into the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) has paved the way for tariff-free trade of 78% of goods with five regional countries, including Armenia, Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. The statement was made during a nationwide meeting of provincial governors held on Saturday at the Ministry of Interior.

Atabak highlighted the Eurasian agreement as one of the key achievements of Iran's 14th administration, noting that it opens the borders of these five nations to Iranian merchants. "This treaty establishes the possibility of exchanging 78% of goods with zero tariffs," he said, emphasizing its potential to strengthen international trade.

The minister also touched on domestic developments, including the mechanization of mines in several provinces. He revealed that resource management has been delegated to provincial mining councils, with plans soon to be implemented. Addressing energy shortages affecting industries, Atabak acknowledged that this year saw some of the toughest restrictions on electricity and gas supplies to production units. Under Article 25 of the Business Law, he noted, the government is obligated to compensate for losses caused by such disruptions. A support package, backed by the President and Interior Minister, has been approved, including deferred loan repayments and other relief measures, set to be officially announced soon.

On the export front, Atabak reiterated the government's commitment to enhancing trade through international agreements like the Eurasian treaty, responding to long-standing demands from exporters. He cited

the trade deal with Armenia as exceeding expectations, with Armenian markets showing strong demand for Iranian goods. Joint guarantees for technical, engineering, and contracting activities are now issued by banks in both countries, while multiple exhibitions in Armenia have garnered significant interest. A commercial building in Armenia has been established as a hub for private-sector cooperation, with a similar initiative planned in Iran.

Atabak stressed the government's focus on leveraging border provinces for trade expansion while considering tariff policies to boost cross-border exchanges. However, he pointed to the high number of industrial zones—approximately 870 across Iran—as a challenge to infrastructure development, noting that this figure is eight times higher than in developed nations like Germany.

To support provincial economies, the minister proposed to the Central Bank that certain provincial bank branches be granted the same authority as elite branches in Tehran, encouraging industries to relocate their accounts locally for easier access to financing. On market regulation, Atabak said various trade guilds have been enlisted to help stabilize prices, with sufficient supplies of essential goods secured and distribution efforts ongoing.

Addressing recent price hikes, he clarified that despite the government's decision to avoid raising prices of basic goods, some increases stem from inflationary expectations and others from global price trends.

This development marks a significant step in Iran's economic strategy, aligning domestic priorities with expanded regional trade opportunities.

Iran's 11-Month Foreign Trade Reaches \$117b, Up 11.2%

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TEHRAN - Iran's non-oil foreign trade surged to \$117 billion in the first 11 months of the current Iranian year, marking an 11.2% increase compared to the same period last year, according to the Deputy Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance.

Foroud Asgari, head of Iran's Customs Service, announced on Saturday that the total weight of non-oil foreign trade during this period reached 176.102 million tons, reflecting a 9.2% rise from the previous year. Speaking to IRNA, Asgari provided a breakdown of the figures, noting that non-oil exports amounted to \$53.376 billion (excluding crude oil, electricity, technical engineering services, and suitcase trade), while imports totaled \$63.606 billion. These figures represent a year-on-year increase of 19% for exports and 5.6% for imports.

In terms of volume, Asgari reported that 141 million tons of goods were exported, a 12.6% increase, while 35 million tons were imported, down by 2.6% compared to the same period last year.

The deputy minister highlighted significant growth in petrochemical exports, with 58.5 million tons valued at \$23.5 billion shipped abroad during the 11-month period. This marks a 29% increase in weight and a 31.3% rise in value. The top three exported goods included natural gas (\$6.6 billion), liquefied propane (\$3.3 billion), and methanol (\$2.1 billion). The average customs value per ton of exported goods rose by 5.4% to \$378.

Asgari identified China as the leading destination for Iran's exports, absorbing \$13.8 billion worth of goods. Other major export markets included Iraq (\$11.2 billion), the United Arab Emirates (\$6.6 billion), Turkey (\$6.4 billion), Afghanistan (\$2.2 billion), Pakistan (\$2.2 billion), and India (\$1.8 billion). These seven countries accounted for 82% of the export volume and 83% of the total non-oil export value.

Iran Explores Export Advantages in Mexican Market



TEHRAN - A specialized session titled "Introducing Market Opportunities and Trade Development with Mexico" emphasized the need to expand trade relations between Iran and Mexico, highlighting the commercial advantages of both nations.

The event took place at the Pearl Hall of Tehran's Permanent International Exhibition Center. It was attended by Ahmad Firouzi, Director General of the Europe and America Office at Iran's TPO, Guillermo Puente Ordoica, Mexico's Ambassador to Iran, Afshar Fathollahi, CEO of Iran's Export Guarantee Fund, alongside a group of traders, businesspeople, representatives of private sector associations, and government organizations.

Addressing the session, Ahmad Firouzi pointed to the export potential for Iran in the Mexican market. He noted that Mexico's foreign trade doubled between 2010 and 2023, with imports growing by 4.5% and exports by 4% in 2024, reflecting the dynamism of its economy.

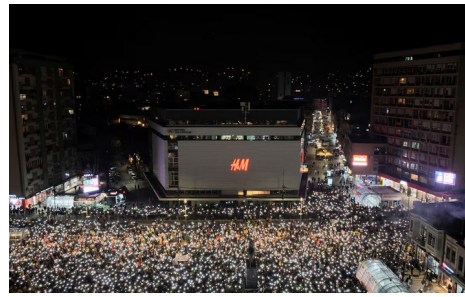
Firouzi highlighted that imported product categories in Mexico—such as rubber and plastics, chemicals, steel, and dried fruits like pistachios and dates—align with Iran's export strengths. However, he acknowledged the dominance of competitors, stating, "Sixty percent of Mexico's imports come from the U.S. and China, where our rivals perform strongly. Still, a wide range of countries are Mexico's export partners, and we can secure a significant share of this market."

He further explained that Mexico maintains a positive trade balance with the U.S. and Canada but a negative one with other nations. Iran's exports to Mexico peaked in 2016 at approximately \$56 million, a figure Firouzi sees as a benchmark for recovery. He described Mexico as an attractive market for Iran, citing exports like pistachios, carpets, flooring, and caviar. Notably, Mexico imported 48 tons of pistachios from Iran despite higher prices compared to the U.S., even though it trades with most countries at zero tariffs.

Serbian Protesters Pressure Gov't Over Railway Disaster

NIS (Dispatches) - Tens of thousands of people flocked to the southern town of Nis to commemorate victims of a railway station disaster and take part in a student-led protest that has become the biggest threat yet to the Serbian president's grip on power. Mass demonstrations have gathered momentum in the four months since 15 people were killed when a roof collapsed at a newly renovated train station in Novi Sad, Serbia's second-biggest city.

Many Serbians blame the collapse on corruption they link to President Aleksandar Vucic's decade in power, and teachers, farmers and other workers have joined the protests that began with a student blockade of classes at universities in December. Vucic's government has said it will launch an anti-corruption campaign, and has denied allegations of corruption.



Hungary's Orban Pushes Direct Russia Talks



BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - Hungary's prime minister has urged the European Union to start direct discussions with Russia on a ceasefire in Ukraine and drop plans for a joint declaration at an extraordinary EU summit next week, saying differences in the bloc "cannot be bridged".

Under President Donald Trump, the United States has started talks with Russia on ending its war in Ukraine, but without Kyiv or the EU at the table. Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy clashed in a White House meeting on Friday.

In a letter to European Council President Antonio Costa dated Saturday, first reported by German daily Welt and seen by Reuters, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said of the EU that there were "strategic differences in our approach to Ukraine that cannot be bridged".

The European Council did not immediately respond to a request for comment. "I am convinced that the European Union - following the example of the United States - should enter into direct discussions with Russia on a ceasefire and sustainable peace in Ukraine," Orban, a Trump ally, said in the letter.

He said this approach could not be reconciled with the draft conclusions for next Thursday's EU summit, set to focus on additional support for Ukraine, European security guarantees and how to pay for European defence needs.

"Therefore, I propose not to attempt adopting written conclusions on Ukraine," Orban said, alluding to the fact that decisions at EU summits need to be taken unanimously.

Since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Orban has emerged as a vocal critic of EU sanctions against Moscow and the bloc's financial and military support for Ukraine.

Slovakia's Prime Minister Robert Fico is another EU leader who has pushed for fast peace talks. On Saturday, he called the bloc's "peace through force" strategy unrealistic and said the necessity of an immediate ceasefire should be in the EU summit's conclusions.

Romanian Far-Right Supporters Hold Protest Rally Ahead of Election Re-Run



BUCHAREST (Dispatches) - Tens of thousands of protesters gathered in Romania's capital on Saturday in the latest anti-government demonstration by far-right groups after a top court canceled a presidential election in the European Union country last year.

Protesters converged in front of the government building in Bucharest, waving Romania's tricolor flags and chanting slogans such as "Down with the Government!" and "Thieves". Many expressed support for Calin Georgescu, who emerged as the frontrunner in December's canceled election, and demanded they be resumed from the second round.

George Simion, the leader of the far-right Alliance for the Unity of Romanians, which organized the protest, told supporters on Saturday: "We are united, we are strong. We are here because our vote was stolen. Because democracy was trampled on."

Simion told reporters that the protest aimed to "restore democracy and free elections" and demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Marcel Ciolacu.

"We do not trust that the upcoming elections will be free and fair," he said.

A no-confidence vote on Friday, which was backed by AUR and two other far-right opposition parties, failed to unseat Ciolacu's pro-Western coalition government, which was formed after a December 1 parliamentary election.

Romania has seen recurring protests after the Constitutional Court made the unprecedented move to annul the election two days ahead of the December 8 runoff following Georgescu's surprise win in the November 24 first round of the 2024 presidential election.

Holding Off Russia Will Be Difficult for Ukraine Without U.S. Support



LONDON (Dispatches) - Hundreds of people marched through central Berlin on Saturday alongside Yulia Navalnaya, the widow of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, to demand an end to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Navalnaya was at the head of the march alongside Russian opposition figures Ilya Yashin and Vladimir Kurza, a day after a meeting between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Donald Trump ended in a showdown.

Alongside slogans denouncing Russian President Vladimir Putin and Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, some protesters also carried signs criticising the U.S. president.

The UK and Ukraine have signed a loan agreement worth £2.26 billion (\$2.84 billion, 2.74 billion euros) to support Ukraine's defense capabilities, which London called a sign of "our unwavering and ongoing support for the Ukrainian people".

The two countries' finance ministers, Rachel Reeves and Sergii Marchenko, signed the loan at a virtual ceremony as Prime Minister Keir Starmer met President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in London.

The loan is to be paid back with the profits of immobilised sovereign Russian assets.

French President Emmanuel Macron has spoken to President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, according to the Elysée presidential palace.

Macron also spoke to British Prime Minister Keir Starmer, European Council President Antonio Costa and NATO chief Mark Rutte. The discussions were part of the preparations for Sunday's meeting of European leaders in London, as well as a special EU summit on March 6, said the French presidential office.

In an interview with French weekly, La Tribune Dimanche, on Sunday, Macron called for "calm" and "respect" following Friday's disastrous Trump-Zelenskyy meeting, which ended with the US president and vice president yelling at the Ukrainian leader.

A "possible disengagement" of the US from Ukraine is not in Washington's interests, noted Macron. If Russian President Vladimir Putin is not slowed down, "he will certainly go for Moldova and perhaps beyond that for Romania," said Macron, referring to Ukraine's southern neighbours.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy does have EU support, but it's extremely important for Ukraine to maintain a constructive relationship with the US, says Natia Seskuria of the London-based Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

While Zelenskyy's meeting with President Donald Trump on Friday marked the "lowest point" in US-Ukraine relations, it did show that Zelenskyy "is not ready and is unwilling to sign any deal for the sake of keeping these relations as usual," explains Seskuria, referring to a US-Ukraine minerals deal that Zelenskyy was supposed to sign in the White House.

Germany's politicians face mounting pressure to speed up forming a new government and provide fresh aid to Kyiv as Berlin reels from the blazing row between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Donald Trump.

Friday's altercation in the White House came just hours after Germany's centre-right CDU and centre-left Social Democrats (SPD) began exploratory talks on forming a new coalition government. The CDU/CSU came first in last week's general election and its leader Friedrich Merz, a fervent supporter of Ukraine, has said he wants a new government in place by Easter.

"Everything has become more urgent," senior CDU lawmaker Johann Wadepuhl told the Sueddeutsche Zeitung newspaper. "Wouldn't it be appropriate to negotiate the central points as quickly as possible and then move straight to full coalition talks?" a comment piece in the Spiegel magazine asked.

"Germany needs a government with a parliamentary majority and a chancellor who is able to communicate as soon as possible," it said, adding: "The next coalition will face a historic task."

Zelenskyy arrived to shouts of support from people who had gathered outside of 10 Downing St., where Starmer gave him a hug and ushered him inside.

"And as you heard from the cheers on the street outside, you have full backing across the United Kingdom," Starmer told the leader of the war-torn country. "We stand with you, with Ukraine, for as long as it may take."

Zelenskyy thanked him and the people of the UK for their support and friendship.

NATO chief Mark Rutte said on Saturday he told Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that he needs to find a way to restore his relationship with US President Donald Trump after Friday's clash during a White House meeting.

"It is important that President Zelenskyy finds a way to restore his relationship with the American President and with the senior American leadership team," Rutte told the BBC, commenting on a call he had with Zelenskyy on Friday.

No Progress in Hams-Israel Ceasefire Talks



GAZA (Dispatches) - Under the terms of the latest Gaza ceasefire deal, which came into effect January 19, Saturday marked the last day of the first phase of the Israel-Hamas truce. But negotiations on the critical second phase, which should secure a permanent ceasefire, have so far been inconclusive.

Hamas on Saturday said it was ready to go ahead with the "remaining stages" of the ceasefire agreement in Gaza.

"We affirm our keenness to complete the remaining stages of the ceasefire agreement, leading to a comprehensive and permanent ceasefire, full withdrawal of the occupation forces from the Gaza Strip, reconstruction and lifting the siege," the Palestinian militant group said in a letter to the Arab League summit due to be held on March 4.

"We categorically reject the attempt to impose any non-Palestinian projects or forms of administration or the presence of any foreign forces on the territory of the Gaza Strip," it added.

The first phase, which paused 15 months of fighting in Gaza, saw the release of 33 hostages, including eight bodies, in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners. Hundreds of thousands of people returned home to northern Gaza, aid into the territory increased and Israeli forces withdrew to buffer zones.

Officials from Israel, Qatar, Egypt and the US have been involved in negotiations on the second phase in Cairo. Hamas did not attend, but its position has been represented through Egyptian and Qatari mediators.

The truce enabled greater aid flows into Gaza, where almost the entire population was displaced.

But by early Saturday, there was no sign of consensus, and a Hamas source accused Israel of delaying the second phase.

"The second phase of the ceasefire agreement is supposed to begin tomorrow morning, Sunday ... but the occupation is still procrastinating and continuing to violate the agreement," the source told AFP.

Hamas on Saturday released a video documenting Iair Horn, who was released from Hamas captivity in February, parting from his brother Eitan, whose remains are being held hostage in the Gaza Strip.

Horn was kidnapped alongside his younger brother, Eitan, from Kibbutz Nir Oz on October 7, 2023. Eitan's name was not included in the list of 33

Israeli hostages released during the first stage of the current ceasefire.

During the latest talks in Cairo, an Israeli proposal called for extending the ceasefire through the Muslim holy month of Ramadan in return for an additional hostage exchange, according to sources familiar with the negotiations.

The ceasefire agreement calls for Israel to begin withdrawing troops from Gaza this weekend and complete the process within eight days. But an Israeli official said Thursday that Israeli forces would remain in the Philadelphi corridor indefinitely.

Hamas has rejected the Israeli proposal to extend the ceasefire's first phase by 42 days, doubling its length, saying it goes against the truce agreement.

Max Rodenbeck, of the International Crisis Group think tank, said the second phase cannot be expected to start immediately.

"But I think the ceasefire probably won't collapse also," he said.

The preferred Israeli scenario is to free more hostages under an extension of the first phase, rather than a second phase, Defence Minister Israel Katz said.

Of the 251 hostages seized during Hamas's attack, 58 are still held in Gaza, including 34 the Israeli military says are dead.

Hamas, for its part, has pushed hard for phase two to begin, after it suffered staggering losses in the devastating war.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday that the Israel-Hamas ceasefire "must hold".

PKK Declares Ceasefire With Turkey, Ending 40 Years of Armed Struggle

ANKARA (Dispatches) - Outlawed Kurdish militants on Saturday declared a ceasefire with Turkey following a landmark call by jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan asking the group to disband and end more than four decades of armed struggle.

It was the first reaction from the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) after Ocalan this week called for the dissolution of the group and asked it to lay down arms.

"In order to pave the way for the implementation of leader Apo's call for peace and democratic society, we are declaring a ceasefire effective from today," the PKK executive committee said referring to Ocalan and quoted by the pro-PKK ANF news agency.

"We agree with the content of the call as it is and we say that we will follow and implement it," the committee based in northern Iraq said. "None of our forces will take armed action unless attacked," it added.



The PKK, designated a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States and the European Union, has waged an insurgency since 1984 with the aim of carving out a homeland for Kurds, who account for around 20 percent of Turkey's 85 million people.

But more recently, the group calls for more autonomy, cultural and linguistic rights rather than independence.

Since Ocalan was jailed in 1999 there have been various attempts to end the bloodshed, which has cost more than 40,000 lives.

After several meetings with Ocalan at his island prison, the pro-Kurdish DEM party on Thursday relayed his appeal for PKK to lay down its weapons and convene a congress to announce the organisation's dissolution.



Manchester City Survive Plymouth Scare in English FA Cup

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Manchester City survived a scare to beat giant killers Plymouth 3-1 and progress to the FA Cup quarter-finals, after Crystal Palace striker Jean-Philippe Mateta was hospitalised in the Eagles' 3-1 win over Millwall.

Plymouth had shocked Premier League leaders Liverpool in the previous round and were on course for another stunning upset at the Etihad when Maksym Talovierov headed them in front on 38 minutes.

Argyle boss Miron Muslic said it would be the "biggest honour" of his life to go head-to-head with Pep Guardiola.

With FA Cup glory City's only realistic hope of silverware this season, Guardiola surprisingly rotated his side with Erling Haaland among those left on the bench.

However, it was one of City's youngsters who took his chance to shine as Nico O'Reilly turned the tie around.

Muslic will be furious at the manner of both the 19-year-old's goals as he twice headed in from set-pieces under little pressure.

O'Reilly's equaliser just before half-time calmed City's nerves before he powered in Phil Foden's corner 14 minutes from time.

By that point, Guardiola had summoned Haaland off the bench and he teed up the third for Kevin De Bruyne in stoppage time.

"Big compliments to Plymouth for making our job so difficult. They were incredibly organised, but we played a good game," said Guardiola.

Palace's progress into the last eight came at a cost as Mateta was stretchered off the field straight into an ambulance and taken to hospital in the early stages of their south London derby.

Millwall goalkeeper Liam Roberts was sent off just eight minutes in after catching Mateta's head with his boot as he raced out of the penalty area to clear the ball.

Referee Michael Oliver only issued a red card after a VAR review of the challenge, with Roberts winning the ball before accidentally crashing his boot into Mateta's head.

"Thank you for all your kind messages. I'm doing well. I hope to be back very soon. And stronger than ever. Well done guys for a great job today," Mateta posted on Instagram.

Palace later said he had been discharged from hospital after receiving 25 stitches "to a severe laceration to his left ear."

Manager Oliver Glasner said the incident could have ended the Frenchman's career. "Just imagine if he hits his face straight, with his power, with the studs, it is the end of JP's career," said Glasner.

Palace chairman Steve Parish described it as the "most reckless challenge" he had ever seen. The home side made use of the man advantage to book their place in the quarter-finals. Japhet Tanganga's own goal put Palace ahead in the 33rd minute before Daniel Munoz prodded in the second seven minutes later.

Wes Harding pulled a goal back for the Lions 13 minutes into first-half stoppage time added on for Mateta's treatment.

Palace were made to wait until 82 minutes to ensure progress when Eddie Nketiah's looping header found the far corner.

Bournemouth advanced to the last eight for only the third time in their history with a 5-4 penalty shoot-out win over Wolves after their 1-1 draw at the Vitality Stadium.

Evanilson's 30th-minute opener for Bournemouth was followed by VAR controversy as Milos Kerkez had a second ruled out for offside after an eight-minute check when the new semi-automated version of the system broke down.

Matheus Cunha levelled for Wolves with a second-half rocket to force extra time, but the Brazilian was sent off for violent conduct after repeatedly clashing with Kerkez just before the penalties.

After Matt Doherty missed when he had the chance to send Wolves through, Boubacar Traore hit the crossbar and Luis Sinisterra sealed the win for Andoni Iraola's men.

Milutin Osmajic taunted Burnley fans after helping Preston into the quarter-finals for the first time since 1966 with a 3-0 win at Deepdale.

When the Championship sides played in the league two weeks ago, Burnley midfielder Hannibal Mejbri accused Osmajic of racist abuse, allegations which the Preston striker denies.

Burnley players declined to shake hands with Montenegro international Osmajic before their latest meeting.

Osmajic got Preston's second goal late in the first half and celebrated by taunting Burnley fans with his hands cupped around his ears.

Robbie Brady and Will Keane were also on target as Preston ended Burnley's 23-game unbeaten run.

Atletico Go Top After Real Madrid Stumble at Betis



BARCELONA (Dispatches) - La Liga champions Real Madrid suffered a 2-1 defeat at Real Betis, which coach Carlo Ancelotti said was a "big blow" to their title defence, while Atletico Madrid took advantage to move top of the table.

Diego Simeone's side scraped a nervy 1-0 win against fourth-placed Athletic Bilbao, to lead Barcelona and Real Madrid by two points.

For Betis, Isco scored the winner from the penalty spot against his former side Madrid, who are third, with Barca in action tomorrow against Real Sociedad and able to reclaim top spot with a win.

Real Madrid coach Carlo Ancelotti picked a strong lineup, with no breathing room in the title race, despite the impending Champions League clash against rivals Atletico.

"If we play like this on Tuesday, we will not win," said Ancelotti, whose side have one win in their last five Liga matches.

The visitors took the lead at the Benito Villamarin stadium through Brahim Diaz, but Betis struck back with a Johnny Cardoso header, as Real Madrid missed the suspended Jude Bellingham.

Isco secured the Andalusian side a deserved victory with a penalty early in the second half.

"It's a big blow. We have to react," continued Ancelotti. "We started well, but later we did not have the same level of commitment, the game got out of control against a side that played better than us and deserved to win."

Isco returned to action in December after missing several months with a broken leg and has hit top form in recent weeks.

Australia, South Africa Forced to Wait on Champions Trophy Semifinal Venues



DUBAI (Dispatches) - The full implications of the India's refusal to play Champions Trophy matches in Pakistan were laid bare on Sunday as Australia and South Africa waited to find out whether they will play their semi-finals in Lahore or Dubai this week.

Political tensions between the neighbors mean India have not played a cricket match in Pakistan since 2008 and the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) were not inclined to change the policy for the Champions Trophy, citing government advice over security issues.

As a result, although the rest of the tournament is taking place in Pakistan, India played all of their group matches in Dubai and will stay put for Tuesday's semi-final as well as the final next Sunday, if they make it through.

The outcome for Australia and South Africa is that they will not know until the final group game is completed on Sunday night whether they will face the Indians in Dubai on Tuesday or New Zealand in Lahore on Wednesday.

South Africa will join Australia to wait in Dubai but one squad is destined to make the four-hour return journey back to Pakistan depending on whether India or New Zealand win on Sunday and top Group A.

"It is what it is," Rassie van der Dussen, who helped fire South Africa into the semis with a half-century in the seven-wicket win over England in Karachi on Saturday, said this week.

"Physically, it's not that long a flight. It would be nice to just sit in one hotel the whole time on one ground like some teams, but that's not the reality for everyone."

Travis Head said Australia, who finished second behind South Africa in Group B and will play the winners of the India-New Zealand clash, were also taking the uncertainty in their stride and preparing to play on two very different surfaces.

"We'll watch the next couple of days, stay relaxed and then get to work," the batter said in Lahore after Australia secured their semi-final spot on Friday when their final group game against Afghanistan was washed out.

"I guess there'll be two different scenarios where it could be two different conditions. We'll prepare for both ways and see how we go."

Van der Dussen said the arrangements were undoubtedly advantageous to the Indian team.

Tsitsipas Beats Felix Auger-Aliassime to Claim Dubai Crown

DUBAI (Dispatches) - Fourth-seeded Stefanos Tsitsipas saved all seven break points he faced while cruising to a 6-3, 6-3 victory over Canada's Felix Auger-Aliassime to win the Dubai Tennis Championships.

Tsitsipas won 83.3 percent (35 of 42) of his first-serve points to knock off Auger-Aliassime in 88 minutes. The Greek won the final four games of the first set then the final three games of the second set.

Auger-Aliassime won 70.6 percent (24 of 34) of his first-serve points, but his failure to convert a break point hurt. He was looking for his third title of this year and eighth of his career.

Meanwhile Serbia's Laslo Djere upset top-seeded Francisco Cerundolo of Argentina 6-1, 4-6, 6-3 in the semifinals in Santiago, Chile.

Ranked No. 103 in the world, Djere saved 5 of 6 break points and converted 4 of 9 opportunities. Cerundolo, No. 26 in the world, matched Djere with three double faults but countered with only two aces, to four for his opponent.

Djere next faces third-seeded Sebastian Baez, the defending champion who knocked out fellow Argentinian Camilo Ugo Carabelli in three sets, 6-1, 3-6, 6-2. Baez beat Carabelli for the third



time in three weeks and is 2-0 all-time against Djere. Baez converted 5 of 10 break-point opportunities vs. Carabelli.

Meanwhile world number one Aryna Sabalenka praised the WTA's mission to highlight the personalities of its athletes and called Saudi Arabia's investment in the women's tennis tour an important part of growing the game.

The WTA rebranding, complete with a new logo and "Rally the world" tagline, comes amid a rise in global viewership and a record

\$4.8 million prize awarded last year to Coco Gauff for winning the WTA Finals in Riyadh, a tournament sponsored by Saudi's Public Investment Fund (PIF).

"It means a lot. We needed this refreshing moment for so long," Sabalenka told Reuters at a WTA-hosted cocktail party in Hollywood celebrating the tour's new look and mission.

"It's a big move and I hope it's going to help our sport to get better."

Sabalenka, a big-serving Belarusian who grew up admiring the power games of Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova, said giving fans a more intimate look at the stars of the tour would pay off.

"The WTA should show our personalities and what it takes to become a top athlete," she said.

"We all have to be an inspiration for the younger generation."

Announced in May, the multi-year partnership with PIF marked the latest move in a dramatic shift by the women's tour, which was previously reluctant to embrace Saudi partnership amid criticisms of the Persian Gulf nation's human rights record.

"I've been there a lot and they have passion for sport. Their help means a lot for us," Sabalenka said.

76ers Halt Losing Skid by Defeating Warriors

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Quentin Grimes scored a career-high 44 points on 18-of-24 shooting as the Philadelphia 76ers snapped a nine-game losing streak with a 126-119 home victory over the Golden State Warriors.

Guerschon Yabusele made five 3-pointers en route to 18 points for Philadelphia, which played its first game since announcing that Joel Embiid (knee) would miss the remainder of the season.

Kelly Oubre Jr. had 20 points for the Sixers and Paul George scored 17, while Tyrese Maxey dished out 11 assists while shooting 2-of-14 for five points.

Stephen Curry recorded 29 points and 13 assists to pace the Warriors, who had won their previous five games. Golden State played without Jimmy Butler (back) for the first time since acquiring him in a trade with the Miami Heat last month.

Amid an offensive explosion by Grimes, the Sixers led by 13



points early in the fourth quarter.

Golden State rattled off nine straight points to get within 109-108. Included in that burst was a transition dunk by Curry -- his first slam in more than six years.

However, Yabusele hit a big 3-pointer with just over four minutes left then made another with a minutes and a half remaining to put Philadelphia ahead 121-116.

George provided the dagger with a pull-up jumper with 42 seconds left.

Curry and Grimes each scored 12 first-quarter points as the teams were tied at 30 after one period.

Philadelphia began to create some separation late in the second quarter as Oubre scored nine points in less than a minute to help the hosts take a 50-39 lead. The Sixers went on to lead 67-55 at halftime as Grimes drained a 3-pointer at the second-quarter buzzer.