

Iranian Parliament Officially Approved a Free Trade Deal Signed Between the Country and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Allowing the Government to Implement the Agreement

IRAN NEWS

Members of Iranian Parliament (Majlis) on Tuesday Approved a Treaty Between Iran and Uzbekistan Regarding the Transfer of Convicts as the Treaty Includes a Preamble and 23 Articles

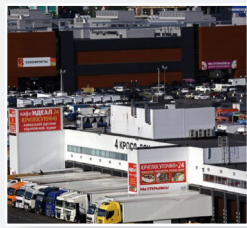
VOL. XXIX, No. 8220 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

WEDNESDAY MARCH 05, 2025 ESFAND 15, 1403

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DOMESTIC



Iran to Establish Trade Center in Russia, Boosting Economic Ties

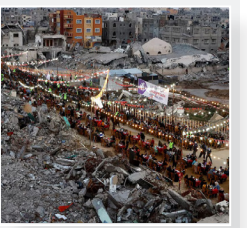
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INTERNATIONAL

Egypt's Alternative to Trump's "Gaza Riviera" Aims to Sideline Hamas

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Grossi Stresses IAEA Pursues Constructive Relations With Iran



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) says Iran and the agency need to engage in constructive and continued talks to resolve issues pertaining to Iran's nuclear program.

Rafael Mariano Grossi made the remarks at a press conference in Vienna on Monday after the IAEA Board of Governors meeting.

He said previous reports have indicated that many issues are interconnected and some can be deemed more important than others.

It is impossible to solve all issues in a single action; rather, the sides need constructive and consistent efforts in all fields, he added.

For example, the IAEA chief claimed, uranium particles discovered in certain facilities and specific places or the level of Iran's uranium enrichment activities show that there are various issues between the two sides.

"What we need is answers and constructive relations. Enough talk, we must move forward and achieve results. We have always put ways before Iran for bilateral cooperation," he said.

Grossi said his talks with Iranian authorities in Tehran in November showed that the country seeks to cooperate with the IAEA but unfortunately certain issues (anti-Iran resolutions) have prevented the sides from moving in this direction.

Referring to the IAEA's contact with the new US administration, Grossi said the highest-level political officials in the United States are examining ways to interact with respect to Iran's nuclear program.

The IAEA chief underscored the need for interaction between the US and Iran. Grossi said interaction, whether formal or informal, or through open and secret channels, is indispensable.

In 2015, Iran agreed to curb its peaceful nuclear work as a confidence-building measure in exchange for the removal of Western sanctions.

Corruption Is Contagious, Urgent Attention Needed to Improve People's Livelihoods

TEHRAN - Judiciary Chief, Hojjatolislam Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei, emphasized the judiciary's resolute commitment to combating various forms of corruption with a scientific and decisive approach. Speaking at a meeting with members of the National Security and Foreign Policy Commission of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Parliament), Mohseni Ejei warned, "Corruption is contagious; sometimes financial corruption brings with it political and cultural corruption as well." He stressed that the judiciary is unwavering in its efforts to address these issues and will show no leniency.

Mohseni Ejei held this session as part of his ongoing series of consultations with parliamentary commissions and factions. Addressing the concerns raised by the commission members, he said, "I view the issues and topics you, as representatives of the people, have raised as stemming from genuine concern and goodwill. We in the judiciary do not claim to be flawless, but we are fully dedicated to addressing weaknesses and shortcomings. We welcome the opinions and criticisms of all well-wishers and concerned individuals. We believe the judiciary can do better in certain areas, and we are focused on achieving that."

Mohseni Ejei noted that perspectives often shift depending on one's position. "We've seen many instances where individuals held a particular view while in the judiciary, but their stance changed after moving to other institutions," he remarked. Recalling a past meeting with prominent figures who criticized the country's governance, he challenged them: "Weren't you yourselves in positions of responsibility? Why didn't you address these so-called 'poor governance' issues during your tenure? As the saying goes, we need to hold ourselves accountable before pointing fingers at others."

The Judiciary Chief also shared an anecdote from a university visit in Tehran, where he engaged with students voicing valid criticisms. "I asked them how many graduates from their university currently hold positions of responsibility in the country. They gave a significant number. I told them to identify these criticisms now, so when they assume responsibility in the future, they don't repeat the same mistakes," he said.

Mohseni Ejei addressed the dire state of people's livelihoods, stating, "The current situation is not just unfavorable—it's bad. All branches of government and institutions must prioritize strengthening the country's economic and productive capacity, which directly impacts improving people's living conditions."

He called for a cultural shift in supporting investors, arguing that wealth should not be viewed as inherently negative. "Accumulating wealth through illicit means is undoubtedly deplorable and must be met with firm legal action. However, wealth gained legitimately by bolstering the nation's economy and production should not be stigmatized," he asserted.



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Highlighting the potential of Iranians living abroad, Mohseni Ejei noted, "Statistics show a significant number of Iranians reside outside the country. We must tap into their intellectual, financial, and creative capacities." He questioned prevailing assumptions: "Are all Iranians abroad anti-revolutionary? Are many of them worse than some individuals inside the country who engage in disruptive actions? Is it desirable for the enemy to recruit from this pool, or for them to return to their homeland—even if they voice criticisms?"

Reflecting on his 44-month tenure as Judiciary Chief, Mohseni Ejei outlined his priorities: "From my first day in this role, I set key objectives based on the country's urgent needs. One of those was to strengthen the economy and production to improve livelihoods. I firmly believe that removing obstacles to production and ensuring investment security are critical. We must respect investors who contribute to economic growth, rather than alienating them and later regretting it."

Responding to a question about why court proceedings aren't publicly broadcast, Mohseni Ejei clarified the distinction between "public trials" and "public dissemination." He referenced the special economic corruption courts established in the late 2010s, noting that when their authorization was renewed in 2020, many—including some MPs—argued that publicizing the proceedings had negative consequences. At the request of the then-Judiciary Chief, this aspect was removed from the renewed authorization by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

Mohseni Ejei stressed that the judiciary must lead by example in adhering to the law. "Sometimes demands are made of the judiciary in areas where no legal framework exists. For instance, not every 'failure to act' is a crime; such cases are often administrative violations handled within institutions. However, our Inspectorate has addressed some significant cases, referring over 10,600 reports of violations and inaction by executive bodies last year," he explained.

He also critiqued the legislative process: "Some laws we pass are unenforceable from the moment they're drafted, often because they lack budget considerations—whether they originate as bills or proposals."

Mohseni Ejei invited MPs to visit judicial facilities and prisons to witness firsthand the challenges, including budget constraints. On the topic of endowment lands—a recurring issue raised by MPs—he acknowledged widespread problems: "In most provinces, endowment boundaries are unclear, documents may be missing, or individuals without authority have made endowments. We need a governance decision that balances the rights of people and the endowment system."

Iran Summons Turkey's Ambassador



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran has advised Turkish officials to avoid making incorrect remarks and offering unreal analyses, which can lead to tensions in the two countries' relations.

On Monday, an assistant to the Iranian foreign minister commented on a meeting with Turkey's ambassador to Iran at the Iranian Foreign Ministry in Tehran, where he was summoned.

The Iranian official was reacting to recent remarks made by Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, who accused Iran of interfering with the internal affairs of regional countries.

The Iranian diplomat said the "two countries' common interests and sensitive regional conditions require Turkish officials to avoid making incorrect comments that would sow discord between the two nations."

The Director General of the Mediterranean and Eastern Europe Department of the Iranian Foreign Ministry added that the Zionist regime's ongoing aggression and expansionist policies pose the biggest threat to regional stability and security.

He also called on Muslim countries to focus their efforts on stopping Israel's aggression and crimes against Palestinians and other regional nations, including Syria.

Turkey's ambassador, for his part, said his country attaches importance to maintaining good relations with Iran.

He added that Ankara believes the two countries must boost cooperation to counter the existing threats.

In an interview with Al Jazeera on Wednesday, the Turkish foreign minister recently called for a change in Iran's regional policies.

Fidan, who also served as Turkey's intelligence chief for nearly eight years, said Iran's foreign policy in the region is "very dangerous."

"Perhaps this policy brought Iran some benefits, but the cost of keeping these benefits is higher," he added.

Israeli Ground Forces Conduct Deepest Invasion Yet Into Syria's Soil



DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - In a significant escalation, Israeli ground forces have conducted their "deepest invasion" into the Syrian territory to date, targeting areas in the southwestern provinces of Quneitra and Dara'a.

The incursion took place on Tuesday, merely hours after Israeli airstrikes near the coastal city of Tartus, farther upwards toward the Arab country's northern side.

The occupation troops advanced into several areas within the provinces with the support of helicopter airdrop and armored convoys.

The incursion focused on Tel al-Mal in Dara'a and the town of al-Mashara in Quneitra. Local sources reported that Israeli units had infiltrated a military site in Tel al-Mal, located on the outskirts of Quneitra's provincial capital, where they conducted search before withdrawing.

Observers and Syrian sources have said the development has marked the farthest that the Israeli regime has advanced into Syria since 1967, when the regime occupied the country's Golan Heights.

The invasion, they say, has even surpassed the regime's November 2024-present escalated deadly aggression against Syria amid which foreign-backed militants overthrew the country's democratically-elected government.

Prior to the incursion, Israeli warplanes had launched airstrikes targeting a Syrian air defense battalion near Tartus.

The new Syrian administration's media outlet confirmed the attacks, noting that while material damage had occurred, no casualties were reported.

The Israeli military alleged that the assaults had been aimed at preventing weapons from falling into "hostile hands."

The regime has been routinely coming up with the claim as a means of trying to justify its nearly-five-month-old escalation against Syria.

Iran Army Conducts Over 160 Special Operations during Zolfaqar Drills



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian Army commander says the force has successfully carried out more than 160 specialized exercises during the Army's recent Zolfaqar 1403 joint military maneuvers in the country's south.

Rear Admiral Habibollah Sayyari, deputy chief of the Iranian Army for Coordination, said on Monday that the Armed Forces made great efforts to obtain the drills' major objectives.

The Iranian Army held the Zolfaqar 1403 large-scale military exercise late in February in an area along the strategic Makran coastline in the southern part of the country, the Sea of Oman, and the northern tip of the Indian Ocean, extending up to the 10-degree latitude.

Various infantry, armored and mechanized units, air defense systems, unmanned underwater vehicles (UUVs), unmanned surface vessels (USVs) as well as air force strategic bombers for logistical support participated in the drills.

Sayyari said the maneuvers were staged in a vast area in the presence of a large number of forces from various units with very high mobility and diverse equipment.

He said not even a little incident occurred during the exercises despite all activities and the numerous launches on land, air, sea and underwater.

"This reflects the high precision and skill of the personnel of the Islamic Republic of Iran Army in conducting combat operations," Sayyari said.

Impeachment and Resignation Will Not Derail Government Unity

TEHRAN - Government Spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani emphasized that unity is not just a slogan but a core strategy for the administration. She asserted that neither impeachment nor resignations would disrupt the government's commitment to this principle. Mohajerani opened the weekly briefing by extending Ramadan greetings, noting, "Ramadan is a month to become more humane, distancing ourselves from anger, envy, resentment, and prejudice with the aid of its spiritual moments. I hope we can embody the noble verse, 'We have honored the children of Adam,' through the sanctity of the Nights of Power."

Addressing the recent impeachment of the Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance, she remarked, "No government welcomes losing a cabinet member, but the parliament has the right to exercise its oversight role, and no one holds a grudge over this. However, we must recognize that 40-odd years of accumulated issues cannot be resolved in six months—nor were they created in that time. We hope this parliamentary action brings stability, though yesterday's stock market index suggested otherwise." She reiterated that the government views unity as a strategy aimed at solving the people's and the country's problems, not merely as a superficial gesture.

"Unity is pursued with faith in the 14th government," Mohajerani stressed. "It's the only approach that can address the people's challenges. We face a backlog of issues, evident in the scale of imbalances we're tackling. Impeachment and resignations won't sway us from unity or our mission to improve society, the economy, and people's lives."

She also highlighted the government's focus on the Youth Population Plan, noting that while the budget allocated 19 trillion tomans for related loans, the Central Bank reported disbursing 24.6 trillion tomans, reflecting the administration's commitment.

On healthcare, Mohajerani said, "Health costs are tied to economic and social conditions, which are interconnected. The government is working to minimize the adverse effects of pharmaceutical sanctions on public health." She acknowledged that while much of Iran's medicine is produced domestically, the country is not entirely self-sufficient, and intensified sanctions significantly increase costs. "Through insurance coverage, optimized drug consumption, and a referral system, we aim to mitigate these challenges," she added, noting Iran's higher-than-average drug consumption compared to many nations.

Responding to a journalist's question about a message for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, Mohajerani said, "Security is inherent and not a commodity to be bought. It must be fostered in people's hearts to support governance. Don't gamble your country's assets as a president, and beware of losing them in that gamble."

On domestic policy, Mohajerani addressed plans to review subsidies for high-income groups, stating, "Budget Law 1404 mandates the elimination of cash subsidies for the top three income deciles (8, 9, and 10), ensuring aid reaches those truly in need."



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She also discussed spring exhibitions aimed at cutting out middlemen and offering products at 5-30% discounts, alongside continuing the distribution of commodity vouchers for lower-income deciles in two phases. Regarding the Minister of Communications' recent trip to Serbia, she emphasized Iran's balanced foreign policy, leveraging global capacities, including Europe, for technological and economic collaboration.

Mohajerani reassured the public that basic goods warehouses are fully stocked, with governors tasked as provincial market regulation heads to address local needs. She explained the Program and Budget Organization's silence on next year's budget changes amid the impeachment, stating, "Disrupting public calm and markets benefits no one. Efforts are underway to maintain water flow, not just due to rainfall, with hopes for its continuation."

On negotiations, she clarified, "We don't say 'no talks under sanctions,' but rather 'no talks under maximum pressure.' Negotiation is voluntary, not forced, and must be a dialogue toward a shared goal. We won't negotiate under maximum pressure, but we're open to respectful talks."

Commenting on Gaza and U.S. President Trump's alleged relocation plan, she said, "Gaza is an inseparable part of Palestine, the cradle of divine religions. This policy is a continuation of genocide against its people—an unforgivable crime. We stand with Palestinians and hope this ends soon."

On Iran's Hirmand water rights, she noted that the Foreign Minister's Kabul visit secured water flow, not just due to rainfall, with hopes for its continuation.

Addressing energy and water imbalances, Mohajerani outlined 14 mega-projects, including boosting power plant capacity and targeting 30,000 megawatts of renewable energy over four years—exceeding the 7th Development Plan's 12,000-megawatt goal. In education, she highlighted President's focus, with 18 meetings held to enhance pre-school access, teaching quality, and reduce dropout rates.

With Ramadan and Nowruz approaching, tourism services will extend until April 13, supported by 1.2 million personnel. Mohajerani endorsed the "No to Accidents" campaign, urging safer driving given Iran's high crash fatality rates.

She affirmed the government's commitment to mother-tongue education under Article 15 of the Constitution, with a comprehensive bill in progress to preserve Iran's linguistic heritage—potentially spanning 400 to 1,400 dialects—while addressing bilingual students' educational challenges.

Mohajerani hailed Mohammad Javad Zarif, who resigned as strategic deputy to the president, as a "system asset," expressing hope for legal reforms to retain such talents. She concluded by assuring citizens that the government is tackling year-end banking limits and market stability, with details forthcoming from relevant authorities.

IRAN NEWS



Iran, Qatar Discuss Enhancement of Relations

TEHRAN (Tasnim) – During a visit to Qatar, an Iranian deputy foreign minister weighed plans to promote cooperation between Tehran and Doha.

In a post on his X account, Iranian deputy foreign minister for legal and international affairs, Kazem Gharibabadi, gave a report of his recent visit to Doha.

“In a one-day visit to Qatar, I met with Ms. Maryam bint Ali bin Nasser Al Misnad, the Minister of State for International Cooperation, and Mr. Mohammed bin Abdulaziz Al Khulaifi, Minister of State at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and held talks on the relations and cooperation between the two countries, exploring ways to develop and strengthen the ties, as well as addressing several mutual interests,” he said.

UNWTO Secretary-General Hails Tehran Tourism Exhibition



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In a letter addressed to Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Seyed Reza Salehi Amiri, the Secretary-General of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Zurb Pololikashvili, praised the high quality of organization and participation at the 18th Tehran International Tourism and Related Industries Exhibition.

He described the event as a prominent platform in the modern framework of international tourism interactions, emphasizing the need to strengthen bilateral cooperation to foster sustainable development in the tourism industry.

The letter followed the attendance of a UNWTO representative at the exhibition, held from February 12-15, 2024. Pololikashvili highlighted Iran's influential role in the global tourism ecosystem and stressed the importance of sustained structural collaboration between Iran and the UNWTO.

Drawing on a report by Ian Wilko, the UNWTO's Director of Affiliate Members and Public-Private Partnerships, who attended the event on behalf of the organization, the Secretary-General lauded the Tehran Tourism Exhibition as a strategic platform for fostering synergy between the public and private sectors of the tourism industry. He pointed to the event's high level of participation, organizational coherence, and capacity-building efforts as key factors cementing its status as one of the world's leading platforms for exchanging experiences, shaping policy discussions, and exploring new investment opportunities in tourism.

Pololikashvili further noted that his joint meeting with Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts marked a significant step toward outlining a roadmap for future collaboration. He underscored the importance of deepening structural ties and leveraging shared capacities in tourism policymaking.

Iran to Establish Trade Center in Russia, Boosting Economic Ties



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran is set to expand its international trade footprint by establishing a major commercial center in Russia, according to Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO).

Speaking at a recent meeting, Dehghan Dehnavi outlined Iran's ambitious plans to develop trade centers in key target countries, with Russia as a priority destination. The initiative, supported by Iran's Chamber of Commerce, aims to strengthen the presence of Iranian brands abroad and enhance direct trade links with global markets.

Dehghan Dehnavi emphasized the importance of creating trade hubs that allow Iranian exporters to sell directly to consumers without intermediaries. “Our shopping centers must enable Iranian exporters to offer their goods directly to end consumers at their destinations,” he said. He added that these centers would serve as platforms for Iranian businesses to establish a stronger foothold in international markets.

The TPO chief also revealed that the National Brand Commission has been transferred from the Ministry of Industry, Mines, and Trade to his organization. “We have a clear plan for brand development,” he said. “We believe our exporters must elevate their brands to ensure a more robust presence in target markets.” This move is part of a broader strategy to maximize the benefits of trade agreements with other nations and counter the effects of sanctions.

Dehghan Dehnavi hailed the free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) as a significant achievement for Iran. Signed previously, the deal connects Iran to a market of five EAEU countries—Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia, and Kyrgyzstan—with a combined trade volume of \$850 to \$900 billion. “This agreement is undoubtedly an excellent tool that can mitigate some of the impacts of sanctions,” he noted, describing it as a means to bypass restrictions imposed by what he called “unjust sanctions” against Iran.

He emphasized that the trade pact offers mutual opportunities, with the greatest benefits accruing to the country that best capitalizes on them. “Increased imports are not necessarily negative if they come from a reliable source at competitive prices and high quality,” he said. “However, boosting exports brings even greater advantages for the country.” To safeguard domestic

production, the agreement includes protective measures allowing a country to act if a surge in imports threatens local industries, provided it notifies the other party.

Iran is currently negotiating with more than 10 countries to sign preferential or free trade agreements, some of which are nearing completion, Dehghan Dehnavi disclosed. He argued that lifting sanctions would amplify the economic benefits of these pacts, noting a global shift from reliance on the World Trade Organization (WTO) to regional trade unions. “Thirty years ago, the focus was on WTO membership, but today, regional unions dominate global trade,” he said, citing the United States' withdrawal from several multilateral agreements as a driving factor.

“Trade unions have become the main trend in global commerce,” he continued. “We must define our role in collaborating with or securing permanent membership in these unions.” Iran's efforts in this direction include leveraging its observer status in the EAEU to deepen ties.

To institutionalize its engagement with the EAEU, Iran has established a secretariat for the agreement within the TPO. Dehghan Dehnavi confirmed that the secretariat, promised during a presidential visit to the Eurasia Expo, is now operational and awaiting formal structural approval. “This secretariat will represent Iran in the EAEU, where we hold observer status,” he said. “It's a purely commercial entity that will allow us to participate in all union meetings.”

The secretariat will monitor developments, conduct studies, and coordinate with commercial attachés from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to support Iran's objectives. Dehghan Dehnavi highlighted a disparity in trade representation, noting that while many countries trading with Iran deploy 10 to 20 commercial attachés, Iran typically assigns only one per country. “This shows we need to expand our structure in this area,” he admitted.

The establishment of the trade center in Russia and the broader push for trade agreements reflect Iran's determination to bolster its economy amid external pressures. By enhancing its brand presence and securing favorable trade terms, Iran aims to turn opportunities into tangible gains, positioning itself as a competitive player in regional and global markets.

Iran's Food Exports to Germany Surge by 23% in 2024



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - In a notable rebound from 2023—when trade between Iran and Germany hit its lowest level in 25 years—bilateral trade between the two nations rose by 4% in 2024, reaching €1.5 billion, according to a report by Iran Chamber Online, citing the Iran-Germany Chamber of Commerce and Industry and data from Germany's Federal Statistical Office.

In 2023, the trade volume stood at €1.45 billion. This year, Germany's exports to Iran increased by 6%, totaling €1.28 billion, while Iran's exports to Germany saw an 8% decline, amounting to €226 million.

A closer look at December 2024 figures reveals that bilateral trade reached €134 million, marking a modest 1% increase compared to December 2023. Germany's exports for the month rose by 6% to €116 million, whereas Iran's exports dropped sharply by 26%, totaling €17 million.

According to the Standard International Trade Classification (SITC), Germany's top exports to Iran in 2024 were vehicles and industrial machinery (SITC-7), valued at €520 million, followed by chemicals and related materials (SITC-5) at €440 million. Imports of these categories to Iran grew by 1% and 14%, respectively. However, Germany's food exports to Iran declined by 14%.

On the other hand, Iran's leading export to Germany in 2024 was food and live animals (SITC-0), valued at €107 million, reflecting a significant 23% increase from the previous year. Meanwhile, Iran's exports of inedible raw materials (excluding fuels, SITC-2) fell by 25%, reaching €60 million.

The data highlights a mixed but recovering trade relationship between the two countries, with Iran's food exports showing strong growth despite an overall decline in its exports to Germany.

Cooperation Agreement Signed Between Isfahan and Russia's Orenburg Legislative Assembly



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed on Monday between Amir Kashani, President of the Isfahan Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture, and Sergei Ivanovich Grachev, President of the Legislative Assembly of Russia's Orenburg Region. The agreement aims to enhance collaboration, particularly in agriculture and light livestock farming, marking a significant step in expanding trade and economic ties between Isfahan, Iran, and Orenburg, Russia.

The signing ceremony took place during a meeting in Isfahan, where Kashani emphasized the potential of the Orenburg region as a gateway for Isfahan's traders to boost commercial exchanges with Russia. “Orenburg offers a valuable opportunity for Isfahan merchants to increase trade,” Kashani stated. He added that investment opportunities in Isfahan would be shared with Russia's Consul General in the city to encourage Russian investors to participate in the province's economy. Kashani expressed hope that ongoing discussions between Orenburg's trade delegation and Isfahan's business community would lead to deeper cooperation.

Seyyed Vahid Dezfuli, a member of the Isfahan Chamber's board and head of its Agriculture and Related Industries Commission, highlighted the strong commercial ties between Isfahan and Russia. “Just a few nights ago, 250 containers of agricultural and food products were exported from Iran to Russia, with around 60 originating from Isfahan,” he noted, underscoring the province's active role in bilateral trade.

Sergei Ivanovich Grachev provided an overview of the Orenburg region, describing it as a vast southern Russian territory spanning 124,000 square kilometers and sharing a 1,875-kilometer border with Kazakhstan. “Orenburg serves as a gateway to Asia,” Grachev said. He outlined the region's economic strengths, including its 40-year expertise in oil and gas, with an annual output of 20 million tons of crude oil and 20 billion cubic meters of gas. Orenburg also excels in machinery manufacturing and metallurgy, with historical contributions to the construction of Isfahan's steel plant.

Agriculture is another cornerstone of Orenburg's economy, with 3.5 million hectares of fertile public and private farmland dedicated to crops such as wheat, sunflowers, and watermelons. Grachev noted significant potential for collaboration with Isfahan in both industry and agriculture, given the structural similarities between the two regions.

Call for Improved Metro Services Amid Transport Challenges



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - During the 310th session of the Tehran City Council, President Mehdi Chamran tackled pressing issues plaguing the city's public transportation system. He emphasized that Tehran's residents should not endure 30-minute waits for metro trains, urging faster service to ensure commuters can board within minutes. Chamran's comments come as the city faces a shortage of metro trains, delays in bus imports, worsening traffic, and bureaucratic bottlenecks.

Chamran acknowledged significant expansions in metro lines and stations over recent years but pointed out a critical mismatch: the number of trains has not kept up with demand. “Train designs were finalized long ago, but with a growing population, we need serious planning to acquire more,” he told ILNA news agency. With Tehran's population nearing 10 million, efficient public transport is vital, especially as year-end traffic surges loom. “Reducing congestion requires serious investment in public transportation,” he stressed, warning that without it, reliance on the system remains impractical. He also cautioned against over-expanding roads, which could inadvertently boost car usage and worsen traffic.

On a positive note, Chamran revealed that a locally made metro train has begun trial runs, with more expected soon. Yet, he admitted, “This number is insufficient.” To bridge the gap, additional trains have been purchased from abroad. Meanwhile, bus services face their own hurdles. Chamran disclosed that some local companies, despite receiving municipal payments, sold buses to other cities, breaching Tehran's contracts. Plans for simultaneous bus imports and technology transfers have also stalled due to payment delays. The municipality currently funds 80% of bus purchases, with the government's promised 20% still pending, forcing the city to shoulder the full cost.

Chamran lambasted media outlets and individuals for spreading falsehoods about bus imports, calling despair “a deadly poison for society.” He attributed delays in transportation projects partly to administrative red tape, suggesting smoother processes could have expedited bus deliveries. Addressing a recent fatal escalator accident on Damavand Street, he promised a rigorous investigation, insisting, “No one should be harmed in such spaces.”

Responding to speculation about two imported trams possibly being second-hand, Chamran said he lacked details but noted prior talks about a test model's return. His remarks underscore Tehran's transportation strides—such as the debut of a national train—and its ongoing struggles. As the city works to enhance mobility for millions, Chamran's critique highlights the need for better infrastructure, funding, and accountability to meet residents' needs.

Uzbekistan Ready for Extensive Economic Cooperation with Alborz Province

TEHRAN - The Ambassador of Uzbekistan to Iran, Fariddin Nasriyev, has expressed his country's readiness to expand economic and trade cooperation with Alborz Province, emphasizing the need to strengthen ties between the private sectors of the two nations. The statement came during a visit to the Alborz Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture, where he met with provincial executives and private sector representatives.

According to the public relations office of the Alborz Chamber of Commerce, Ambassador Nasriyev highlighted a productive meeting held earlier on Sunday with the Governor of Alborz, which focused primarily on economic collaboration, particularly in the field of production. “Before this meeting, we had a useful and constructive discussion with the Governor of Alborz,” he noted.

Nasriyev, who has been stationed in Iran for about a year and visited 10 provinces, remarked that despite Alborz's proximity to Tehran, he had not had the chance to visit it until now. “Today, I witnessed firsthand the significant capacities of this province,” he said during a tour of the permanent exhibition of Alborz's manufactured products. He added, “According to the president of the Alborz Chamber of Commerce, due to space limitations, only a portion of the province's industrial and production capabilities is on display here. Yet, even this segment reflects Alborz's strong potential in production and exports.”

The ambassador pointed to the growing trade relationship between Iran and Uzbekistan, noting that last year's financial exchanges exceeded \$500 million. “In the recent meeting between the presidents of our two countries, there was a strong emphasis on developing trade and economic cooperation,” he said. “The goal is to increase the volume of financial exchanges to \$2 billion, which requires expanded collaboration, particularly in the private sector.”

Highlighting Uzbekistan's economic potential, Nasriyev said, “With a population of 37 million, Uzbekistan accounts for more than half of Central Asia's population, and it grows by over one million people annually. This demonstrates the existence of a large market for trade



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development.” He also noted the presence of free trade zones in Uzbekistan, stating, “These zones offer excellent opportunities for Iranian companies to operate independently or in partnership with Uzbek firms. We are prepared to introduce Uzbek business partners to collaborate with Alborz companies.”

The ambassador addressed advancements in Uzbekistan's transportation and logistics sectors, revealing that starting January 2025, all transit tariffs for heavy trucks will be eliminated. “Previously, each transit shipment incurred a \$400 fee. This decision will significantly boost transportation and reduce trade costs,” he explained.

On the issue of financial hurdles, Nasriyev acknowledged challenges in money transfers due to Iran's exclusion from the SWIFT system. “We are aware of the financial obstacles and difficulties in transferring funds. Joint Iran-Uzbekistan working groups are exploring suitable solutions, and we hope to achieve positive outcomes soon,” he said.

Nasriyev stressed Uzbekistan's commitment to fostering ties with Alborz's economic stakeholders. “We are in constant contact with our country's companies and production sectors and are aware of their challenges. Today, we are ready to address the concerns of Alborz's business community regarding trade with Uzbekistan and partnerships with Uzbek firms,” he said.

He also welcomed Iranian trade delegations to Uzbekistan for further negotiations and collaboration, adding, “Beyond Samarkand and Bukhara, Uzbekistan has other historic and commercial cities that offer numerous opportunities for investment and trade with Iran and the rest of the world.”

Before the meeting with provincial officials and economic activists, Ambassador Nasriyev and his delegation toured the permanent exhibition showcasing Alborz's industrial and production capabilities at the Chamber of Commerce.

China Vows to Retaliate Against U.S.

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China's Commerce Ministry on Tuesday vowed to retaliate against fresh U.S. import tariffs set to take effect later in the day, reiterating its stance that the Trump administration was trying to "shift the blame" and "bully" Beijing over fentanyl flows.

The extra 10% duty U.S. President Donald Trump threatened China with last week is expected to enter into force at 0501 GMT on Mar. 4, resulting in a cumulative 20% tariff in response to what the White House considers Chinese inaction over drug flows. The tariff represents an additional hike to preexisting levies on thousands of Chinese goods.

The U.S. has argued that China supplies chemicals used in fentanyl production. China has denied any wrongdoing.



OPEC+ to Proceed With Planned April Oil Output Hike



LONDON (Dispatches) - OPEC+ has decided to proceed with a planned April oil output increase, the group said on Monday, a move that follows U.S. President Donald Trump renewing pressure on OPEC and Saudi Arabia to bring down prices.

The increase is the first since 2022 from OPEC+, which includes the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, plus Russia and other allies. Oil was trading 2% lower towards \$71 a barrel at 1900 GMT.

Eight OPEC+ members that are making the group's most recent layer of output cuts held a virtual meeting on Monday and agreed to proceed with the April increase, OPEC said. The increase is 138,000 barrels per day according to Reuters calculations.

"This gradual increase may be paused or reversed subject to market conditions," OPEC said in a statement. "This flexibility will allow the group to continue to support oil market stability."

Oil has been trading in a range of \$70-\$82 a barrel in recent weeks in anticipation of major changes to U.S. sanctions on large oil producers Iran, Russia and Venezuela as well as U.S. tariffs on China that could reduce demand.

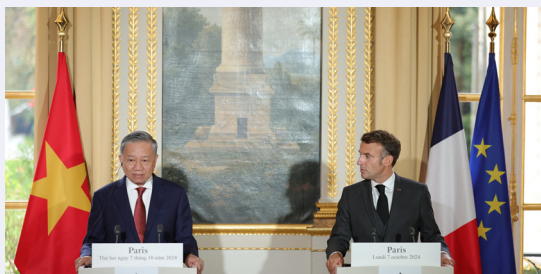
Trump has renewed pressure on OPEC to bring down prices, which rallied to multi-month highs above \$82 a barrel in January after Trump's predecessor Joe Biden slapped new sanctions on Russia.

Since then prices have fallen on hopes Trump would help clinch a peace deal in the war between Russia and Ukraine and boost Russian oil flows. However, his plans to cut Iran's oil exports to zero and the cancellation last week of a Chevron license to operate in Venezuela prevented prices from falling further.

The combination of those bullish and bearish factors made decision-making for April extremely complex, OPEC+ sources have said. They added that Trump's plans for global tariffs could complicate the outlook even further.

OPEC+ has been cutting output by 5.85 million barrels per day, equal to about 5.7% of global supply, agreed in a series of steps since 2022 to support the market.

Europe Prepares Charm Offensive in Vietnam Amid U.S. Trade Risks



HANOI (Dispatches) - European leaders are planning visits to Vietnam in coming months to strengthen ties with the Southeast Asian nation, officials said, amid tensions with Washington that could impact their exports to the United States.

Former U.S. President Joe Biden pushed hard to boost U.S. influence in the former foe, considering the country a key partner in his strategy to contain China, but bilateral relations may weaken if his successor Donald Trump imposes duties on Hanoi, which is a potential target of his threatened reciprocal tariffs due to its large trade surplus.

Amid this growing uncertainty, European countries are intensifying their contacts with Vietnam, with the head of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen and France's President Emmanuel Macron both planning visits in the next months, European officials and diplomats said, noting the trips have long been planned and are not yet finalized.

"The tide of tariffs and export controls is rising... We want to create new opportunities to trade and invest with trusted partners," von der Leyen told top officials from Southeast Asian bloc ASEAN in a video message when they were gathered last week in Vietnam's capital Hanoi.

Macron could travel to Vietnam in late May, with the aim of further boosting ties with the former colony after Paris formally elevated diplomatic relations last year, while von der Leyen could visit earlier with the goal of formally upgrading ties, a senior EU official said, adding EU trade commissioner Maros Sefcovic may precede them in April.

Macron's office declined to comment. A spokesman for the European Commission could not confirm any official visit at this stage. Vietnam's foreign ministry did not reply to requests for comment.

Egypt's Alternative to Trump's "Gaza Riviera" Aims to Sideline Hamas

DOHA (Dispatches) - A plan for Gaza drawn up by Egypt as a counter to U.S. President Donald Trump's ambition for a Middle East Riviera would sideline Hamas and replace it with interim bodies controlled by Arab, Muslim and Western states, according to a draft seen by Reuters.

The Egyptian vision for Gaza, which is due to be presented at an Arab League summit on Tuesday, does not specify whether the proposal would be implemented before or after any permanent peace deal to end the war triggered by the Oct. 7, 2023 attacks.

Trump's plan, which envisioned clearing Gaza of its Palestinian inhabitants, appeared to back away from long-standing U.S. Middle East policy focused on a two-state solution and sparked anger among Palestinians and Arab nations.

Who will run Gaza after the conflict remains the great unanswered question in negotiations over the future of the enclave. Hamas has so far rejected the idea of any proposal being imposed on Palestinians by other states.

Cairo's plan does not tackle critical issues such as who will foot the bill for Gaza's reconstruction or outline any specific details around how Gaza would be governed, nor how an armed group as powerful as Hamas would be pushed aside.

Under the Egyptian plan, a Governance Assistance Mission would replace the Hamas-run government in Gaza for an unspecified interim period and would be responsible for humanitarian aid and for kick-starting reconstruction of the enclave, which has been devastated by the war.

"There will be no major international funding for the rehabilitation and reconstruction of Gaza if Hamas remains the dominant and armed political element on the ground controlling local governance," a preamble outlining the draft Egyptian plan's objectives said.

Details of Egypt's proposed framework for Gaza's future have not been previously reported.

Egypt, Jordan and Persian Gulf Arab states have for almost a month been scrambling to formulate a diplomatic offensive to counter Trump's plan. A number of ideas have been proposed, with Egypt's considered the frontrunner.

Reuters was unable to determine whether Arab leaders would support the plan presented by Egypt.

The plan does not specify who would run the governance mission. It said it would, "draw on the expertise of Palestinians in



Gaza and elsewhere to help Gaza recover as quickly as possible".

The draft proposal was shared with Reuters by an official involved in Gaza negotiations who wished to remain anonymous because the draft has not yet been made public.

The plan firmly rejects the U.S. proposal for mass displacement of Palestinians from Gaza, which Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan see as a security threat.

"President Trump has been clear that Hamas cannot continue to govern Gaza," White House National Security Council spokesman Brian Hughes said when asked about Egypt's Gaza plan and whether the U.S. would support it.

"While the President stands by his bold vision for a post-war Gaza, he welcomes input from our Arab partners in the region. It's clear his proposals have driven the region to come to the table rather than allow this issue to devolve into further crisis," Hughes said.

Senior Hamas official Sami Abu Zuhri told Reuters the group knows of no such proposal by Egypt.

"The day after in Gaza must only be decided by the Palestinians," he said. "Hamas rejects any attempt to impose projects or any form of non-Palestinian administration, or the presence of any foreign forces on the land of the Gaza Strip."

The Egyptian draft does not mention future elections.

Egypt's foreign ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment, nor did the office of Israel's prime minister, whose support for any plan is seen as vital to secure a commitment that any future reconstruction will not be destroyed again.

Palestinian Islamist group Hamas has ruled the coastal enclave since 2007. It launched the Oct. 7, 2023 attack on Israel that killed 1,200 people and started the Gaza war.

A January 19 ceasefire brought a temporary end to the fighting but the first phase of the deal expired on Saturday with no sign of an agreement to move to the second phase.

The Egyptian draft does not tackle the issue of what actions could be taken if Hamas refuses to disarm or step aside from politics.

The proposal envisions an International Stabilisation Force drawn primarily from Arab states that would take over the role of providing security from the militant group, with the eventual establishment of a new local police force.

Trump Pauses All U.S. Military Aid to Ukraine

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. President Donald Trump has paused military aid to Ukraine following his clash with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy last week, a White House official said, deepening the fissure that has opened between the two one-time allies.

The move comes after Trump upended U.S. policy on Ukraine and Russia upon taking office in January, adopting a more conciliatory stance towards Moscow - and after an explosive confrontation with Zelenskyy at the White House on Friday in which Trump criticized him for being insufficiently grateful for Washington's backing in the war with Russia.

"President Trump has been clear that he is focused on peace. We need our partners to be committed to that goal as well. We are pausing and reviewing our aid to ensure that it is contributing to a solution," said the official on Monday, speaking on the condition of anonymity.

The White House had no immediate comment on the scope and amount of aid affected or how long the pause would last. The Pentagon could not provide further details.

Zelenskyy's office did not immediately respond to a Reuters request for comment nor did the Ukrainian Embassy in Washington.

On Monday, Trump again said Zelenskyy should be more appreciative of American support after earlier responding angrily to an Associated Press report quoting Zelenskyy as saying the end of the war is "very, very far away."

"This is the worst statement that could have been made by Zelenskyy, and America will not put up with it for much longer!" Trump wrote on Truth Social, using an alternative spelling of the Ukrainian leader's name.

Since Russia's invasion three years ago, the U.S. Congress has approved \$175 billion in total assistance for Ukraine, according to the nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget.

The Trump administration inherited \$3.85 billion worth of Congressionally-approved authority to dip into U.S. arms stocks for Ukraine, but given the growing row between Washington and Kyiv, it was already unlikely for that assistance to be used.



Monday's move goes beyond the no-new aid stance Trump had taken since assuming office - and appears to halt deliveries of military equipment approved by Biden including munitions, missiles and other systems.

But Trump also suggested on Monday that a deal to open up Ukraine's minerals to U.S. investment could still be agreed despite his frustration with Kyiv, as European leaders floated proposals for a truce in Russia's war with its neighbor.

The Trump administration views a minerals deal as America's way of earning back some of the tens of billions of dollars it has given to Ukraine in financial and military aid since Russia invaded three years ago.

When asked on Monday if the deal was dead, Trump said at the White House: "No, I don't think so."

Trump described it as a "great deal for us" and said he would give an update on the situation on Tuesday night when he addresses a joint session of Congress.

In an interview on Fox News, Vice President JD Vance called on Zelenskyy to accept the minerals deal.

"If you want real security guarantees, if you want to actually ensure that Vladimir Putin does not invade Ukraine again, the very best security

guarantee is to give Americans economic upside in the future of Ukraine," Vance said.

Zelenskyy has made clear that a ceasefire must carry explicit security guarantees from the West to ensure that Russia, which holds about 20% of its land, does not attack again. Trump has refused to give any such guarantees.

Beyond the military portion, U.S. assistance to Ukraine also includes budgetary assistance, largely delivered through a World Bank trust fund, and other funds that had been delivered through the U.S. Agency for International Development, which has been throttled by the Trump White House.

The U.S. decision left many questions unanswered, including whether munitions for the already delivered weapons systems can now be supplied or if the U.S. would still share intelligence with Ukraine on target identification and missile launches.

Key members of congressional oversight committees were not notified of the decision, including those on the Senate Armed Services Committee, a person with knowledge told Reuters.

Razom for Ukraine, a Ukrainian advocacy group, condemned the White House's decision on aid. "By abruptly halting military assistance to Ukraine, President Trump is hanging Ukrainians out to dry and giving Russia the green light to keep marching west," the group said in a statement.

Prior to the White House's decision to halt its aid, European nations were rallying around Zelenskyy and trying to hatch a peace plan.

Privately, and sometimes publicly, officials are fuming at what they see as a betrayal of Ukraine, which had enjoyed staunch support from Washington since Russia's invasion.

France, Britain and potentially other European countries have offered to send troops to Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire - something Moscow has already rejected - but say they would want support from the U.S., or a "backstop."

"There are clearly a number of options on the table," British Prime Minister Keir Starmer's spokesman said.

Car Drives Into Crowd in German City of Mannheim, Killing Two

MANNHEIM (Dispatches) - A car drove into a crowd in the western German city of Mannheim on Monday, killing at least two people and injuring 11 others, overshadowing carnival celebrations in the region where police had been on alert for attacks.

Police detained the driver, who appeared to have ploughed intentionally into the crowd given the speed at which he was driving, prosecutors said in an act Interior Minister Nancy Faeser labeled "horror in broad daylight".

He did not appear to have been politically or religiously motivated, but there were reasons to believe he was psychologically unwell, said Mannheim Chief Public Prosecutor Romeo Schluessler.

Prosecutors have initiated investigative proceedings against the suspect, a 40-year-old German man from the neighbouring state of Rhineland-Palatinate, on two counts of murder and multiple counts of attempted murder.

The suspect has not been questioned yet as he had to undergo medical



treatment after shooting himself in the mouth with a blank-firing gun after the attack.

He appeared to be a landscape gardener who lived alone, prosecutors said, adding that they were now investigating his home for clues.

Security has been a key concern in Germany following a string of violent attacks in recent weeks, including deadly car rammings in Magdeburg in December and in Munich last month, as well as a stabbing in Mannheim in May 2024.

"The incident — like the terrible acts of the past months — serves as a stark reminder: we must do everything possible to prevent such acts," said Germany's likely next leader, Friedrich Merz, whose conservatives won a national election last month.

"Germany must once again become a safe country. We will work with full determination to achieve this."

Cavs Edge Blazers With Late 3 in OT



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - De'Andre Hunter made a go-ahead 3-pointer with 30.8 seconds remaining in overtime, lifting the Cleveland Cavaliers to a stunning 133-129 victory over the visiting Portland Trail Blazer.

Hunter finished with 32 points and came up in the clutch after Anfernee Simons put Portland ahead 129-128 with a triple of his own with 44 seconds left.

Ty Jerome provided 25 points off the bench for the Cavaliers, who also got 20 from Evan Mobley and 14 from Max Strus. Jarrett Allen (12 points, 10 rebounds) recorded a double-double as Cleveland won its 10th straight game.

Avdija matched his season high of 30 points, tied his career high of 10 assists and also had 12 boards for his first career triple-double. Simons supplied 27 points, Toumani Camara collected 19 and Sharpe finished with 18 as Portland's four-game winning streak came to an end.

Celtics 110, Nuggets 103: Boston snapped a two-game skid with a win over visiting Denver as Jaylen Brown racked up 22 points, eight assists and five rebounds for the Celtics.

The Nuggets trimmed the gap to 102-99 with just over a minute to play, but Al Horford, who finished with 19 points and eight rebounds, pushed the Boston lead to 106-99 with 33.4 seconds left.

Jamal Murray had 26 points, seven assists and six rebounds for Denver, while Christian Braun chipped in with 24 points.

Knicks 116, Heat 112 (OT): Jalen Brunson had 26 of his 31 points in the second half as visiting New York rallied from a 19-point, third-quarter deficit to beat Miami in overtime.

Brunson's basket with 26.1 seconds left tied the game 105-105 to force the extra session, where the star point guard scored six of the Knicks' 11 points to beat the Heat.

OG Anunoby had 23 points for New York, while Karl-Anthony Towns contributed 19 points and 16 rebounds. Bam Adebayo paced Miami with 30 points and Tyler Hero added 22.

Raptors 104, Magic 102: With Immanuel Quickley going for 24 points and R.J. Barrett adding 22, the Raptors ended a three-game losing streak with the road win over Orlando.

The Magic trailed 104-92 with under three minutes left before ripping off 10 straight points to cut the gap to two points with just 5.1 seconds to go. After a Toronto turnover, Franz Wagner missed a game-tying layup that sealed the Raptors' victory.

Wagner finished with 25 points for Orlando, while Paolo Banchero chipped in with 23.

Pacers 127, Bulls 112: Indiana picked up its fifth win in seven games thanks to a career-high 27 points by Aaron Nesmith as the Pacers downed Chicago in Indianapolis.

Pascal Siakam had 20 points for Indiana, while Tyrese Haliburton added 17 points and 12 assists.

Coby White paced the Bulls with 26 points, 20 of which came in the first half. Both Josh Giddey and Matas Buzelis finished with 18 points for Chicago, which was outscored 32-20 in the fourth quarter.

Lakers 108, Clippers 102: Luka Doncic scored 29 points with six rebounds and nine assists as the short-handed Lakers continued their surge into March with a victory over the visiting Clippers.

LeBron James scored 17 points with nine assists and rookie Dalton Knecht added 19 points off the bench as the Lakers extended their winning streak to six games. They were playing without starters Rui Hachimura (knee) and Austin Reaves (calf). Doncic, who was acquired at the trade deadline, has scored at least 20 points four times in the past five games. The Lakers won the season series 3-1 over the Clippers.

Kawhi Leonard scored a season-high 33 points with 10 rebounds for the Clippers, who lost for the fifth time in six games. Kris Dunn added 15 points, Ivica Zubac had 12 points and 10 boards, and James Harden finished with 13 points and eight assists.

Nottingham Forest Beat Ipswich to Reach FA Cup Quarterfinals



NOTTINGHAM (Dispatches) - Nottingham Forest reached the FA Cup quarter-finals as they beat fellow Premier League club Ipswich Town on penalties after the City Ground clash ended 1-1 after extra time on Monday.

After nine penalties found the back of the net, Forest keeper Matz Sels dived the right way to keep out Jack Taylor's effort and send his side through 5-4.

Forest will face Brighton and Hove Albion away in the quarter-finals.

George Hirst gave Ipswich the lead in the second half with a header through a crowd but Forest replied when Ryan Yates was picked out by Anthony Elanga's inswinging cross to nod home.

Callum Hudson-Odoi hit the crossbar for Forest shortly afterwards as Forest took charge but Ipswich held out to take the tie to 30 minutes of uneventful extra time.

Sels then made the difference with a crucial save to put Forest in their second FA Cup quarter-final in four seasons.

"The game was not so good. In the end extra time is a gamble, you don't want to gamble too much," Sels, whose save helped Forest beat Exeter City on penalties in the previous round, told ITV Sport.

"I'm happy I could help the team to the next round. It was the only penalty I was in the right corner. In penalties one of the goalkeepers is going to be the hero.

"I am happy. Looking forward to the weekend now."

Forest host Manchester City on Saturday in the Premier League as they push for a Champions League spot.

For Ipswich it is back to the reality of trying to avoid relegation back to the Championship.

Juventus Ease Past Verona to Reclaim Serie A Top-Four Spot



TURIN (Dispatches) - Juventus moved back into Serie A's Champions League places on Monday by beating Verona 2-0 yesterday to dampen rumbling fan discontent.

Khephren Thuram's fine first-time finish in the 72nd minute and a late strike from Teun Koopmeiners saw off struggling Verona.

Juventus climbed two points above Lazio who briefly moved into the top four by winning at AC Milan on Sunday night, and next week host third-placed Atalanta with only three points separating the two teams.

France midfielder Thuram opened the scoring just as fans at the Allianz Stadium in Turin were turning on the Juve players, loudly booed off at half-time by supporters already outraged at the midweek exit from the Italian Cup at the hands of lowly Empoli.

"We played well and we deserved to win... it was an important three points," said under-fire Juve coach Thiago Motta.

"I'm pleased with the players I have, with the effort and commitment they show... We know that the attitude was wrong last time (against Empoli)."

The match was played in a flat atmosphere as fans protested their team's underwhelming season after bringing in Motta to replace Massimiliano Allegri and spending significant sums to renew the squad and mount both a challenge for the Scudetto and a deep run in the Champions League.

Instead, Juve were dumped out of Europe's top club competition in the play-offs by PSV Eindhoven and trail league-leaders Inter by six points.

Demanding supporters staged a protest outside the team hotel on Sunday night and launched foul-mouthed chants at Motta ahead of Monday's win, Juve's fifth in a row in Serie A.

Yesterday, Juve would have been behind to a rocket of a shot from Toma Suslov at the break had Davide Faraoni not strayed offside in the build-up.

That ruling set the stage for Juve to win a match which they dominated from the first whistle and could have won more comprehensively had it not been for Verona goalkeeper Lorenzo Montipò.

Koopmeiners, who has underperformed since arriving from Atalanta as a potential star of a reworked team, netted just his third goal of the season give the match a more respectable scoreline.

Djokovic, Alcaraz on Collision Course in Indian Wells Draw

INDIAN WELLS (Dispatches) - Carlos Alcaraz could run into Novak Djokovic in the quarter-final stage in his quest for a rare Indian Wells "three-peat," while defending women's champion Iga Swiatek also faces a tough test, according to the draw released on Monday.

Djokovic beat the Spaniard to reach the Australian Open semi-final in January and is hoping he can become only the third man to claim 100 career singles titles when the main draw of the tournament kicks off on Wednesday in the California desert.

The Serb, who got a first-round bye, will hope to have put recent injury concerns behind him as he kicks off his campaign at the 1000-level event against a qualifier or Australian firebrand Nick Kyrgios.

The men's draw could also see German top seed Alexander Zverev play against rival Greek Stefanos Tsitsipas in a potential quarter-final meeting, while 2022 champion and home hope



Taylor Fritz may run into Russian Andrey Rublev in the final eight.

On the women's side, Polish second seed Swiatek was on a quarter-final collision course with Zheng Qinwen months after the Chinese seventh seed knocked her out in the Olympic semi-final.

Top seeded Aryna Sabalenka will hope to bounce back after a pair of early exits from Doha and Dubai last month with Italian Jasmine Paolini potentially standing between her and the semi-final stage.

A tantalising all-American quarter-final clash could be in the cards after 2023 U.S. Open winner Coco Gauff and newly minted Australian Open champion Madison Keys were pulled into the same half of the draw.

Each hope to end an American women's Indian Wells trophy drought, with 24 years since Serena Williams last won.

Blatter, Platini Back in Swiss Court for \$2.22m Fraud Case

MUTTENZ (Dispatches) - Former FIFA president Sepp Blatter and France soccer great Michel Platini are due to appear in court in Switzerland on Monday accused of fraud - 2 1/2 years after they were cleared.

Both men, once among the most senior figures in global soccer, were acquitted in 2022 at a lower Swiss court following a seven-year investigation into a payment of 2 million Swiss francs (\$2.22 million) to Platini.

The Swiss federal prosecutor has appealed against that decision, leading to a new hearing at the Extraordinary Appeals Chamber of the Swiss Criminal Court in Muttenz, near Basel.

"The Office of the Attorney General of Switzerland (OAG) has filed an appeal against the first-instance judgment and submitted a statement of appeal in October 2022 requesting that the judgment be set aside in full," the prosecutor said.



It declined to give further details.

The 2022 indictment accused Blatter and Platini of deceiving FIFA staff in 2010 and 2011 about an obligation for world soccer's ruling body to pay the Frenchman, who was president of the game's European governing body UEFA at the time.

"They falsely claimed that FIFA owed Platini, or that Platini was entitled to, the sum of 2 million Swiss francs for advisory work. This deception was achieved through repeated untruthful claims made by both accused parties," the indictment added.

The case wrecked Platini's hopes of eventually succeeding Blatter, who resigned from FIFA in 2015 following a separate corruption scandal.

Blatter and Platini were suspended from football in 2015 by FIFA for ethics breaches, originally for eight years, although their exclusions were later reduced.