

Majlis Passed a Bill to designate Thursdays, Along With Fridays, as Weekend Holidays, as the Changes Will Be for All Government Employees, Establishing a 40-Hour Workweek With a Thursday-Friday Weekend

IRAN NEWS

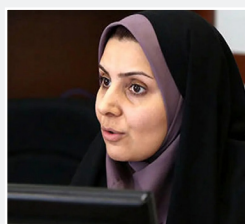
An Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Stressed the Need for the Removal of the Sanctions Imposed by the U.S. and the European Union in Order to Promote Tehran's Cooperation With Other Nations, Including Austria

VOL. XXIX, No. 8221 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

THURSDAY MARCH 06, 2025 ESFAND 16, 1403

2 DOMESTIC



Russia Remains Committed to Rasht-Astara Railway Loan

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

Arab States Adopt Egyptian Alternative to Trump's "Gaza Riviera"

> SEE PAGE 3



First VP Highlights Cybersecurity Training and Retention



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

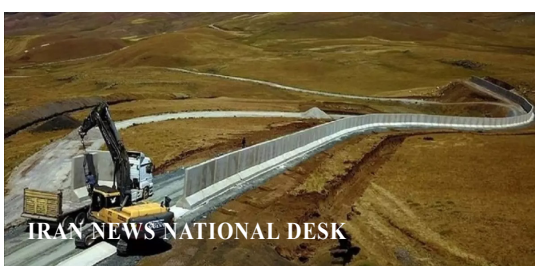
TEHRAN - Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref emphasized the urgent need to train, recruit, and retain top-tier cybersecurity talent, calling it a core responsibility for government ministries and related institutions.

Speaking at a meeting with managers from the Presidential Institution's Strategic Management Center for Information Security (AFTA), Aref commended the technical and scientific strides made in cyberspace over recent decades. He noted that elite students and young professionals consistently show eagerness to work with cybersecurity bodies, a testament to the trust and prestige these organizations enjoy in bolstering national security. "Strong foundations have been built in the technical aspects of cybersecurity," Aref remarked.

Aref credited universities, academic institutions, and elite students with playing a key role in sustaining cybersecurity efforts, such as the Cryptography Association. He highlighted the proven effectiveness of academic partnerships in advancing Iran's cybersecurity framework. Reflecting on the AFTA Document—a strategic national plan drafted during the eighth administration—Aref explained that it assigns clear roles to ministries and agencies to secure the "information production and exchange environment." Swift coordination, national consensus, and the Supreme Leader's support, he said, ensured its rapid legal approval. "All system-wide policies were integrated into this document," he added.

The First VP underscored the document's timely relevance, pointing to Iran's frequent targeting by cyberattacks from hostile powers. Recent incidents, he argued, highlight the AFTA Document's critical role in fortifying national defense through enhanced cybersecurity measures. Aref tied this priority to the Supreme Leader's vision in the Second Step of the Revolution, which calls for leadership in science and technology. He urged unified efforts across agencies to advance these fields, not just domestically but also regionally. "Countries with cultural and historical ties are eager to tap into Iran's cybersecurity expertise, viewing us as a 'third power' alongside Eastern and Western blocs," he noted.

Iran Bolsters Eastern Frontier: Over 60 Kms of High-Tech Border Wall Erected



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran is forging ahead with an ambitious border security project along its eastern edge, with Second Brigadier General Sadegh Nouri, deputy commander of the Northeast Regional Headquarters of the Army's Ground Forces, reporting swift progress. Tasked with fortifying the 300-kilometer border with Afghanistan in Razavi Khorasan province, the initiative blends massive physical barriers with cutting-edge technology, including long-range cameras, advanced sensors, and intelligent monitoring systems.

The project kicked off in mid-1402 (spring-summer 2023) under directives from the General Staff of the Armed Forces, with the Northeast Regional Headquarters mobilizing four combat engineering units. "Initial groundwork—studies, mapping, and road-building—started in late 1402," Nouri explained. Since July 2024 (Mordad 1403), production and installation have ramped up significantly. Over 60 kilometers of wall now stand, with another 12 kilometers ready to install. The walls, towering at 4 meters high, 3.8 meters wide, and weighing 14 tons each, are built from reinforced concrete, topped with barbed wire, and supported by guard towers.

Despite logistical hurdles—poor road access, brutal summer winds, and winter freezes that halted operations for over 40 days—progress persists. "We've tripled our production capacity by onboarding two more companies," Nouri said, aiming for completion of this phase by March 2026 (end of 1404). Heavy machinery is currently deployed in the Taybad and Dogharoun regions, where results have been "very promising" and legally sound, aligning with Iran's Constitution, which allows military resources for peacetime development.

Araqchi Emphasizes Independence and Self-Reliance in Security

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister, Seyyed Abbas Araqchi, has underscored that Iran does not purchase its security from others but builds it through internal strength and national resilience.

In an article, Araqchi emphasized that true security stems not from reliance on foreign powers but from domestic capabilities, national resources, and the support of the Iranian people.

"Iran does not buy its security; it creates it," he declared, rejecting dependency on external forces for protection. "We do not rely on others to defend us. Instead, we safeguard ourselves by leveraging our knowledge, power, and internal capacities."

In a detailed commentary titled "Chaos in the White House: Vertigo in Global Politics," published in the Ettela'at newspaper, Araqchi elaborated on Iran's strategic approach to independence. He noted that maintaining sovereignty and bolstering internal strength have always been central to Iran's national interests. "Preserving independence comes at a cost—one that Iran has consistently paid," he wrote, referencing the economic pressures, sanctions, military threats, and proxy wars that have targeted Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Despite these challenges, he argued, Iran has defied expectations and stood firm against efforts to transform it into a subordinate player in the international system.

Araqchi pointed to historical examples of nations that tied their security to foreign powers, only to be abandoned when their patrons' priorities shifted. "Countries that built their security on dependency have, in critical moments, become victims of the changing agendas of their supposed protectors," he warned, positioning Iran's self-reliant stance as a counterexample.

The Foreign Minister's remarks come amid what he described as growing disarray in global politics, exemplified by a recent altercation in the White House involving U.S. President Donald Trump, Vice President J.D. Vance, and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

Araqchi framed the incident as a symptom of deeper fractures within the Western bloc, challenging Washington's long-standing claim to leadership in the West. "This was not just a routine disagreement—it revealed strategic doubts, diplomatic uncertainties, and unresolved



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

tensions," he wrote.

The dispute, he argued, reflects the complexities of the U.S.'s "peace through strength" policy and raises questions about its ability to fulfill commitments in a world where conflicts entangle multiple stakeholders. Araqchi suggested that the episode has broader implications, exposing vulnerabilities in Western unity and predictability.

Araqchi highlighted Ukraine's evolving position, noting that Zelensky—once heavily dependent on Western aid—now openly challenges the U.S. leadership. "Even smaller allies are willing to pay a price to assert their dignity and status," he observed, interpreting this as a sign of diminishing American dominance.

The Foreign Minister also addressed Europe's cautious response to the Ukraine conflict, questioning whether the White House incident might deepen transatlantic divides. He suggested that countries like France and Germany, which have adopted more reserved stances, may now doubt Washington's capacity to lead a cohesive Western front.

Meanwhile, Araqchi noted that Russia is closely monitoring these developments, viewing them as confirmation of the West's fragility. Beyond observation, he argued, Moscow is actively reshaping global power dynamics through strategic partnerships with China, expanding ties with developing nations, and reducing reliance on Western financial systems.

Against this backdrop of global upheaval, Araqchi portrayed Iran as a stabilizing force guided by wisdom and deliberate choice. "Independence is not an accident or an imposed condition for Iran—it is a conscious decision, a strategic principle, and an unshakable tenet of our foreign policy," he asserted. Unlike nations swayed by fleeting promises or threats, Iran's legitimacy and security, he said, derive from its people's will and its autonomous policies.

"Iran has learned history's lessons well," Araqchi concluded. "Dependence is not just a risk—it is a strategic error. In a world where powers clash and alliances waver, Iran's commitment to self-reliance ensures it remains steadfast, advancing a path defined by its own national interests."

Threats of Using Military Force Against Iran's Nuclear Sites "Unacceptable"

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia has strongly condemned threats of using military force against Iran's nuclear facilities, warning that such actions would have catastrophic consequences.

"Endless claims against Iran are unacceptable," Russia's Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna, Mikhail Ulyanov stated during a session of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)'s Board of Governors on Tuesday.

"And even more so threats to use military force," he added, referring to recurrent threats by the United States and its allies of deployment of aggressive and destructive force against the nuclear sites based on unsubstantiated and unexceptionally disproven allegations that the Islamic Republic was pursuing "nuclear weapons."

"Such an escalation will bury any possibility of a diplomatic settlement of the situation and will inevitably lead to a military-political escalation, not to mention irreparable radiological and humanitarian consequences, and not only for Iran and the Middle East region," the envoy cautioned.

"Iran remains the most verified IAEA Member State, unlike the non-nuclear states that criticize it, in some of which, by the way, socio-political circles are openly discussing the issue of creating their own military nuclear program," Ulyanov underscored.

"The high level of expenses envisaged by the [IAEA's] Secretariat, amounting to over 10 million euros per year for JCPOA verifications alone, speaks to the continuing intensity and scale of the Agency's verification activities in Iran," he said.

The official was referring to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, a 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and others, including Russia, the US, the UK, France, and Germany. "All these figures are contained in the [IAEA] Director General's report," Ulyanov noted.

Also on Tuesday, however, Elbridge Colby, nominated for the position of the US's undersecretary of defense for policy, talked of the necessity of presenting credible military options to prevent Iran from, what he called, acquiring "nuclear weapons."

This is while, Iran's nuclear doctrine is based on Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei's fatwa (religious decree) categorically banning production, possession, and stockpiling of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction.

The Israeli regime, Washington's most cherished regional ally, even acted on its routine threats of attacking Iran, launching, what Tel Aviv has called, "precise and targeted" military assaults against various sites across the Islamic Republic, reportedly including a nuclear research facility, last October.

The Islamic Republic, though, has dismissed suffering any extensive damage from the aggression, and announcing that whatever damage that might have been caused by the attacks has been repaired so far.



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

Ulyanov asserted that with just over six months remaining until the "Completion Day" of the JCPOA, all involved parties had to adopt a constructive approach towards engagement with the Islamic Republic before and beyond this date.

"The diplomatic resource remains, but political will is needed to use it. The IAEA Director General [Rafael Grossi] can also play an important constructive role here," he noted.

The US left the deal in an illegal and unilateral move in 2018, returning all the unlawful sanctions that the accord had lifted, and mounting even more such measures against the Islamic Republic as part of former president Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" policy.

The UK, France, and Germany pledged to return Washington to the deal, but failed to live up to their promise, and even followed the latter's course of returning their economic bans against Iran.

The European trio has even threatened to try to activate the so-called "snapback" mechanism that fully reinstates the United Nations sanctions against Iran.

Ulyanov reminded that with their violations of the JCPOA, the trio had lost any right to invoke the deal's mechanisms, including the snapback provision.

He cited a 1971 ruling by the International Court of Justice and a 2020 decision by the United Nations Security Council rejecting a similar attempt by Washington to reimpose sanctions on Iran.

"We recommend that Berlin, London, and Paris abandon their illusions about the snapback and instead focus on finding a political and diplomatic way out of the situation they have created," the official said.

The envoy, meanwhile, pointed to Iran's "showing maximum patience for a year" after the onset of the US's "maximum pressure" approach, and "fully complying with the JCPOA and Additional Protocol until February 2021, despite the unilateral actions against it."

The Islamic Republic then set off a series of countermeasures, which Ulyanov defined as, Tehran's "exercising its rights under the JCPOA and UN Security Council Resolution 2231 [that has endorsed the deal], gradually reducing its compliance with the deal."

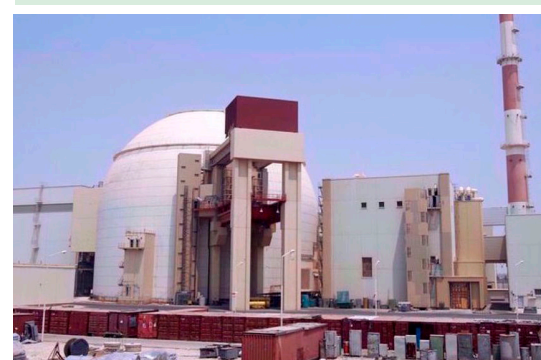
Activating the "snapback" amid the circumstances, he added, was "not only irresponsible but also unlawful."

The countries seeking to punish Iran for its nuclear activities were the same ones that violated their own commitments under Resolution 2231 and the JCPOA, he underlined.

According to the envoy, Tehran has, meanwhile, consistently expressed readiness to return to full compliance with the JCPOA if the United States and its European allies took reciprocal steps.

However, Western reluctance to engage in good-faith negotiations were preventing such prospects, Ulyanov said, arguing that the West's approach reflected an "opportunistic and far-fetched" stance rather than a genuine commitment to resolving matters.

Power Generated by Iran's Only Nuclear Plant at Over \$8b



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's only nuclear power plant has generated some \$8.2 billion worth of electricity since it was launched more than 11 years ago, according to a report published in the local media.

The Tuesday report by the Fars news agency, citing figures from the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), said that the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant has generated some 68,353 gigawatt hours (GWh) of electricity from September 2013 until September last year.

The report said that the total budget spent on the construction Bushehr plant was \$4 billion, adding that the performance of the plant justifies Iran's plans for building more nuclear power stations in the country.

It said that the Bushehr plant, located in southern Iran along the Persian Gulf coast, has powered some two million homes in Iran, adding that the on-time maintenance and overhaul operations carried out on the plant have enabled it to work almost non-stop in the past 11 years.

The figures come after reports published by Persian-language news services outside Iran claimed that the construction of the Bushehr Nuclear Power Plant has incurred billions of dollars of losses on the country.

That comes against the backdrop of similar reports and analyses suggesting that Iran should stop investing in nuclear technology because of its technological and political complications.

Iranian authorities have announced the country is planning to build more nuclear power stations to respond to the growing demand for energy in the country.

AEOI chief Mohammad Eslami said in September last year that Iran was seriously pursuing plans to build new nuclear power plants in the north and south of the country because of the high efficiency rates that exist in the sector.

Leader's Advisor Warns Turkish Officials Against Repeating Baseless Claims



TEHRAN - A senior advisor to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has strongly criticized recent unsubstantiated remarks made by Turkey's foreign minister about Iran, warning Ankara against repeating such unfounded allegations that could harm long-standing regional relations.

Ali Akbar Velayati cautioned that certain Turkish officials had to understand that repeating unfounded and interventionist claims would not serve the interests of the countries' bilateral relations.

He asserted that the Islamic Republic would not allow any country to undermine its deep-rooted and historic regional ties through irresponsible statements.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran has always adhered to a policy of mutual respect and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. We expect Turkish officials to uphold diplomatic decorum and refrain from making baseless accusations," he stressed.

The high-ranking advisor emphasized that Iran was a powerful nation with an ancient civilization and had consistently worked to promote regional security and cooperation.

The official further underlined the Islamic Republic's regional standing, warning Turkey against misjudging the country's position and strength in the region.

"If some figures in Turkey believe that by echoing incorrect stances influenced by foreign powers they can weaken Iran's standing in the region, they are gravely mistaken," he said.

"History has proven that Iran remains steadfast in its principles and will respond appropriately to any disrespect."

He, meanwhile, noted that Iran and Turkey enjoyed geographical proximity and common interests, noting again that it was imperative for Turkish officials to avoid statements that could strain the countries' ties.

IRAN NEWS



Majlis Ratifies Agreement on Prisoner Swap With Venezuela

TEHRAN (IRNA) – Majlis has voted in favor of a bill allowing the exchange of convicts between the Islamic Republic and Venezuela.

The Parliament approved the agreement during an open session on Tuesday.

The agreement includes a preamble and 22 articles.

The implementation or amendment of this law must adhere to principles 77, 125, and 139 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran-Spain Joint Chamber to Serve as Bridge to Iraq, Central Asia, and BRICS Countries



TEHRAN - In a meeting between the heads of the Iran-Spain Joint Chamber and the Valencia Chamber of Commerce, a proposal was put forward to hold an "Iran Week" event in Valencia. The discussions emphasized the pivotal role of the joint chamber in fostering connections between Spain, Iraq, Central Asian countries, and the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa).

Mohammad Taheri, President of the Iran-Spain Joint Chamber, stated, "Iran can serve as a key hub linking Spanish companies with Central Asian countries, Iraq, and BRICS members." Speaking during the meeting with José Vicente Morata, President of the Valencia Chamber of Commerce, Taheri highlighted Iran's strategic location and friendly relations with these nations, positioning it as a bridge for enhancing trade and economic cooperation between Spain and these regions. He noted that this collaboration, particularly in infrastructure and industrial sectors, could unlock significant potential for both sides.

Taheri also expressed readiness to host trade delegations from the Valencia Chamber of Commerce in Iran, inviting them to participate in prominent annual exhibitions such as "Iran Expo," the "Oil, Gas, and Petrochemical Exhibition," and "Agrofood." "These events provide new opportunities to explore Iran's commercial and industrial capacities across various economic sectors," he added.

During the meeting, José Vicente Morata proposed organizing an "Iran Week" in Valencia, which would include an exhibition showcasing Iran's capabilities. He emphasized that the event could serve as an ideal platform to introduce Iran's economic achievements and potential to the Spanish market and other European countries.

The talks also touched on broader economic ties. Earlier statements from Iranian business leaders in December 2024 highlighted the private sector's enthusiasm for partnering with Spanish firms to establish solar power plants in Iran, alongside calls for Spain to streamline visa processes for Iranian traders.

The meeting underscored the growing interest in strengthening economic relations between Iran and Spain, with the joint chamber poised to play a central role in connecting Spain to emerging markets in the Middle East, Central Asia, and beyond.

Russia Remains Committed to Rasht-Astara Railway Loan



TEHRAN - Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Farzaneh Sadegh, has confirmed that Russia has not withdrawn its loan commitment for the Rasht-Astara railway project, dispelling rumors of its cancellation. Speaking at a press conference today, Sadegh addressed key priorities of her ministry while issuing a stern warning to airlines failing to respect passenger rights, threatening to revoke their flight permits.

Sadegh emphasized her ministry's dedication to fulfilling its mandates under higher-level laws and policies. "Over the past six months, we've focused on delivering our defined responsibilities with excellence," she said. Key initiatives include transparency in housing data through the upcoming launch of the TAM system, ensuring equitable access to rural roads, flights, and housing, and prioritizing affordable housing for the underprivileged. "We aim to create a diverse housing portfolio to meet varied needs," she added.

Sadegh underscored the importance of direct public engagement, citing her visit to a juvenile correction center as evidence of the government's commitment to all societal segments. "When I visit such places, it shows the system hasn't forgotten these individuals," she noted.

On the transit front, Sadegh highlighted recent diplomatic efforts with neighboring countries, including Russia, Azerbaijan, Iraq, and Turkmenistan. "Transit development hinges on regional diplomacy," she said, pointing to progress in the North-South Corridor, particularly the Rasht-Astara railway. Addressing media speculation, she clarified, "The Russians have not backed out of the loan, nor has the project been canceled." Over the past six months, she held five meetings with Russia's Transport Minister, resolving legal concerns. Russia insists on land acquisition, and Iran has agreed to provide a timeline for this by next year's end, with Moscow simultaneously conducting technical studies.

A trilateral agreement involving Russia, Azerbaijan, and Iran further bolsters the project. Azerbaijan strongly supports it, securing a Russian guarantee for five million tons of cargo annually, though Sadegh predicts up to 15 million tons.

Turning to aviation, Sadegh tackled concerns over exorbitant airfares following a judicial ruling liberalizing ticket prices. She acknowledged warnings from Iran's regulatory bodies to airlines. "Some airlines fail to deliver services that respect passengers' dignity," she said, vowing action. "Beyond judicial measures, we'll revoke flight permits if they overcharge or underperform."

Sadegh also addressed Iran's rail sector, admitting a fleet shortage. "We've prioritized expansion over the past six months, and private sector involvement is key to accelerating this," she said, noting ongoing efforts to modernize the network.

Responding to media criticism of her ministry's performance, Sadegh welcomed the scrutiny. "We're at the forefront of public service, so demands are high. I see this as constructive feedback that strengthens my connection with people through the media," she said.

The Rasht-Astara railway remains a flagship project, symbolizing Iran's push for enhanced regional connectivity. Sadegh's assurances of Russia's continued support counter earlier doubts, reinforcing Tehran's commitment to completing this critical link in the North-South Corridor. With land acquisition underway and technical studies progressing, the project is poised to boost trade, potentially transforming Iran's transit capabilities.

As the ministry balances infrastructure ambitions with public service obligations, Sadegh's multifaceted approach—spanning housing, aviation, and transit—signals a proactive stance amid economic and diplomatic challenges. Her warning to airlines underscores a broader intent to safeguard consumer rights, while her optimism about rail and transit projects reflects confidence in Iran's strategic positioning. With Azerbaijan and Russia aligned on the railway's potential, the coming year will test Iran's ability to deliver on these promises, potentially reshaping regional trade dynamics.

End of Report

Iran, Russia Launch Expansion of Air Transport Cooperation



TEHRAN - A memorandum of understanding on air transport cooperation between Iran and Russia in the fields of aviation and flight standards has officially entered the implementation phase.

According to a report from Iran's Civil Aviation Organization, Hossein Pourfarzaneh, Iran's Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development and head of the Civil Aviation Organization, led a delegation to Russia. During the visit, he met with Patshkin, Russia's Deputy Minister of Transport for Aviation, to discuss matters related to aviation and flight standards.

The two-hour meeting, attended by deputy officials and representatives from the civil aviation authorities of both Iran and Russia, focused on advancing a previously signed memorandum from December of this year. The parties agreed to plan for elevating the memorandum into a formal agreement on flight certification, aiming to expand cooperation to higher levels.

It was also decided that Russia's Deputy Minister of Transport for Aviation would follow up on flight certification issues to enhance the quality and operational scope of the cooperation memorandum.

Additionally, the meeting addressed coordination on adopting supportive stances at international aviation forums and harmonizing the standards of both countries, which were among the key topics discussed.

ECO Transport Ministers' Summit in Mashhad Offers Opportunity to Strengthen Iran Transit Role



TEHRAN - A recent meeting of the Transport Commission of the Mashhad Chamber of Commerce emphasized the critical need to bolster Iran's position as a regional transit hub. The upcoming summit of transport ministers from member states of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), set to be held in Mashhad, was highlighted as a prime opportunity to advance this goal.

The 18th session of the Transport, Transit, and Border Affairs Commission of the Khorasan Razavi Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture convened to discuss several key topics. These included a report on a recent meeting with the ECO Secretary-General, preparations for the specialized ECO Transport Ministers' Summit in Mashhad, an evaluation of temporary truck exit conditions at Khorasan Razavi customs points, and a review of the commission's two-year performance (2023-2024).

Ahmad Zamanian, Chairman of the Transport, Transit, and Border Affairs Commission, referenced a recent meeting with the ECO Secretary-General and representatives of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He noted that Khorasan Razavi's transport capacities and its pivotal role in regional transit were presented during the discussions. "The ECO Secretary-General was notably impressed by the province's capabilities and its significant role in international transport," Zamanian said, highlighting the active transport companies and the scale of operations in the region.

Border delays and transit-related challenges were also addressed, with a decision to compile a comprehensive proposal package for further discussion at the commission level. Zamanian added that the ECO Transport Ministers' Summit, tentatively scheduled for May or early June 2025 in Mashhad, would provide an ideal platform for diplomatic and transport-related interactions among member states, with a focus on transit development.

He underscored the importance of coordination between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Chamber of Commerce, stating that formal proposals from the meeting would be pursued through relevant channels to enhance regional transport and transit frameworks.

Mahmoud Omati, a member of the Mashhad Chamber's board, emphasized the significance of hosting international events like the ECO summit in Iran. "Given Iran's strategic geographic position and economic ties with neighboring countries, these gatherings can significantly boost our trade relations," he said. Omati stressed the need for active participation to maximize the benefits of such opportunities, particularly amid challenges in neighboring countries like Afghanistan.

Iranian Airlines Not Subsidized, Minister Shouldn't Threaten



TEHRAN - Maqsood Asaadi Samani, Secretary of the Iranian Airlines Association, has criticized recent remarks by the Minister of Roads and Urban Development, accusing her of lacking proper knowledge about the aviation industry and issuing threats that punish the public rather than resolve issues. In an interview with ILNA news agency, Samani responded to the minister's claims of airlines overcharging for tickets and her threat to revoke their licenses.

Samani argued that airlines do not receive government subsidies, dismissing the minister's stance as unwarranted. "The minister shouldn't act as if she's doing us a favor," he said, adding that her threats to cancel licenses would only harm passengers by limiting their travel options. He emphasized that no arbitrary ticket price hikes have occurred, citing compliance with a Supreme Aviation Council decision from March 2024, which set a ceiling of \$40 per seat-hour. Following a Supreme Administrative Court ruling barring market regulators from interfering in pricing, airlines adjusted rates based on this cap. Even with rising exchange rates, Samani noted, airlines currently charge \$32 per seat-hour—\$8 below the approved limit.

He accused the minister, referred to as Ms. Sadegh, of being misinformed about the industry and avoiding meetings with airline officials. "She either lacks the courage or the willingness to hear the truth from us," Samani said, urging her to engage with industry stakeholders for accurate insights. He called her failure to do so a significant weakness.

Samani also refuted claims of overpricing, pointing out that tickets for routes like Tehran to Kish are sold for as low as 850,000 toman (approximately \$20), well below the 4.2 million toman (\$100) cap, even during peak seasons like Nowruz. He denied plans for holiday price surges. Addressing the minister's mention of dollar-based fuel pricing, he countered that the ministry's own airport company already charges service fees in dollars, and fuel costs are set to rise next year per the budget law.

Rather than threats, Samani urged the minister to focus on enhancing aviation safety and setting minimum price floors to prevent undercutting that compromises flight safety. "Canceling licenses doesn't solve problems—it punishes the people," he concluded.

Indigenous and Ecological Capacities, Main Driver of Transformation in Tourism Industry

TEHRAN - The opening ceremony of 231 natural resources and watershed management projects across the country was held this morning, Tuesday, in the presence of Seyed Reza Salehi-Amiri, Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, and Gholamreza Nouri Qezelgeh, Minister of Agriculture. The event aimed to honor natural resources, highlight their role in sustainable tourism development, and emphasize the need for synergy between environmental and cultural heritage sectors.

The Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts emphasized Iran's unparalleled position in natural resources and tourism during the ceremony. He stated: "Iran is a land brimming with unique natural, historical, and cultural capacities. With over one million historical artifacts, 28 sites registered on UNESCO's World Heritage List, and 43,000 national treasures, Iran ranks among the top three global powers in heritage. Protecting these invaluable assets is only possible through smart management and active participation of the public and civil institutions."

He further highlighted Iran's remarkable geographical diversity, adding: "From the azure shores of the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea coastlines, from unparalleled deserts to dense forests, Iran is a microcosm—a small world showcasing the natural beauty of the planet. These extraordinary capacities provide a suitable foundation for fostering 20 types of globally recognized tourism that can flourish in this land."

The Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts pointed to the significant role of rural tourism and ecotourism in strengthening local economies, stating: "Today, more than 3,500 ecotourism lodges are operational nationwide. These have not only revived abandoned villages and curbed urban migration but also offered domestic and international tourists a unique experience of Iran's ecosystems and culture. One successful example is the revitalization of abandoned villages in Gorgan, which have now become thriving tourism destinations."

Salehi-Amiri stressed the critical role of natural resources in tourism



development, asserting: "Preserving the country's ecosystems and natural resources is a fundamental prerequisite for sustainable tourism growth. Under the Seventh Development Plan, the goal is to increase the number of inbound tourists to 15 million. However, this target can only be achieved if we effectively safeguard our natural capacities."

He also underscored the importance of the handicraft economy in boosting tourism and job creation, saying: "Over 573,000 handicraft artists operate across Iran, generating nearly \$500 million in added value annually and exporting \$224 million worth of goods. A significant portion of the raw materials for these crafts—wood, native plants, and other natural resources—relies on the country's natural wealth, forming the backbone of many Iranian handicraft disciplines."

The minister identified the participation of the public, civil institutions, and the private sector as the key to success in protecting natural resources and advancing sustainable tourism. He emphasized: "No government can single-handedly protect natural resources, cultural heritage, or develop tourism. The government's strategy is to delegate responsibilities to the people, private entities, and civil organizations. Socializing the protection of natural resources is a policy that can lead to effective preservation of our national assets."

In closing, Salehi-Amiri outlined the long-term goals for tourism development, stating: "The Seventh Development Plan aims to double the country's accommodation capacity from 455,000 beds. Achieving this target will be a crucial step toward establishing Iran as one of the world's leading tourism destinations."

Expressing optimism about the future of Iran's tourism industry, he added: "If we can engage the public in this journey, we will undoubtedly witness a major transformation in national development. Progress is impossible without the involvement of the people, investors, and civil institutions, and it is the government's duty to remove obstacles in their path. This approach will serve as a key strategy in achieving Iran's sustainable progress."

Mexico Vows Retaliation as Trump Trade War Erupts

MEXICO CITY (Dispatches) - Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum on Tuesday condemned U.S. President Donald Trump's 25% tariffs on imports from Mexico and said her government would respond with its own measures, without immediately providing details. Trump's across-the-board tariffs, which took effect overnight, mark a turning point in over 30 years of economic integration between Mexico and the U.S. and could have deep repercussions on Latin America's second-largest economy. Mexico and the United States are each other's top trading partners, with key industries such as the automotive sector benefiting from the cross-border movement of goods facilitated by their trilateral trade deal which also includes Canada. "There is no reason, rationale or justification to support this decision that will affect our people and nations ... Nobody wins," Sheinbaum told a press conference.



German Parties Agree on Historic Debt Overhaul



BERLIN (Dispatches) - The parties hoping to form Germany's next government on Tuesday agreed to create a 500 billion euro infrastructure fund and overhaul borrowing rules in a tectonic spending shift to revamp the military and revive growth in Europe's largest economy.

Friedrich Merz's conservatives and the Social Democrats (SPD), who are in negotiations to form a coalition after a national election last month, will put their proposals to the German parliament next week.

Germany's likely next chancellor, Merz, has seized the moment after the return of Donald Trump to the White House put the transatlantic alliance in turmoil and underlined the urgency for Europe to strengthen its own defences.

Trump froze military aid to Ukraine after a bitter clash last week with its President Volodymyr Zelenskiy, reinforcing fears he could strike a deal with Russia to end the war in Ukraine while disengaging from Europe.

Economists and investors have urged Germany to reform its constitutionally enshrined state borrowing limits known as the "debt brake" in order to free up investment and support an economy that has contracted for the past two years.

The reform would mark a rollback of borrowing rules imposed after the 2008 global financial crisis that many have since criticised as outdated and putting Germany into a fiscal straitjacket.

"In view of the threats to our freedom and peace on our continent, whatever it takes must now also apply to our defence," said Merz, leader of the CDU/CSU conservatives. "We are counting on the United States of America to continue to stand by our mutual alliance obligations in the future. But we also know that the resources for our national and alliance defence must now be significantly expanded."

The euro rallied to a three-month high on the news, German government bond futures fell sharply, while stock futures rose. European defence company shares have soared in recent days as momentum to ramp up spending across the region gathers pace.

Trudeau Claims Trump's Dumb Tariffs Aim to Facilitate U.S. Annexation of Canada



OTTAWA (Dispatches) - Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Tuesday that U.S. President Donald Trump imposed tariffs on Canada to destroy the country's economy to make it easier for the United States to annex its northern neighbour.

The extraordinary warning about Trump's threat to Canadian sovereignty came as the US president delivered on his vow to impose 25 percent tariffs on all Canadian goods.

Canada immediately retaliated, triggering a trade war between previously close allies and threatening future commerce across a border that regularly sees billions of dollars in daily trade.

President Trump threatened Tuesday to further raise tariffs on Canadian goods to match the retaliation by Ottawa, hours after the initial tariffs came into force.

One of your browser extensions seems to be blocking the video player from loading. To watch this content, you may need to disable it on this site.

"Please explain to Governor Trudeau, of Canada, that when he puts on a Retaliatory Tariff on the US, our Reciprocal Tariff will immediately increase by a like amount!" Trump wrote in a post on his Truth Social platform, after Trudeau announced reciprocal 25 percent tariffs on US goods.

Trump has said the tariffs are necessary to force Canadian action against what he describes as the flow of undocumented migrants and the drug fentanyl across the border.

Trudeau has maintained that Canada is not a significant contributor to either problem in the United States, and on Tuesday called Trump's fentanyl justification "completely false".

Arab States Adopt Egyptian Alternative to Trump's "Gaza Riviera"

CAIRO (Dispatches) - Arab leaders adopted an Egyptian reconstruction plan for Gaza on Tuesday that would cost \$53 billion and avoid displacing Palestinians from the enclave, in contrast to U.S. President Donald Trump's "Middle East Riviera" vision.

The White House said the plan adopted by Arab states did not address Gaza's reality and that Trump stood by his proposal.

Trump's plan to displace Palestinians in a U.S. takeover of the enclave received global condemnation last month and echoed long-standing Palestinian fears of being permanently driven from their homes.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said the Egyptian proposal, welcomed in subsequent statements by Hamas and criticised by Israel and the U.S., had been accepted at the closing of a summit in Cairo.

Sisi said at the summit that he was certain Trump would be able to achieve peace as the Gaza Strip has been left devastated by Israel's military assault.

The major questions that need to be answered about Gaza's future are who will run the enclave and which countries will provide the billions of dollars needed for reconstruction.

Sisi said Egypt had worked in cooperation with Palestinians on creating an administrative committee of independent, professional Palestinian technocrats entrusted with the governance of Gaza after the end of the Israel-Gaza war.

The committee would be responsible for the oversight of humanitarian aid and managing the Strip's affairs for a temporary period, in preparation for the return of the Palestinian Authority (PA), he said.

The other critical issue is the fate of the Palestinian militant group Hamas, the PA's rival, whose October 7, 2023, attack on Israel killed 1,200 people with more than 250 taken as hostages, according to Israeli tallies.

The attack was followed by Israel's military assault on Gaza that has killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, according to the local health ministry. The assault has also displaced nearly Gaza's entire population and led to accusations of genocide and war crimes that Israel denies.

The Islamist faction that has run Gaza since 2007 said in a statement it agrees to the Egyptian committee proposal. Hamas has agreed it will not field candidates to the Cairo-proposed committee but it would have to give its consent to the tasks, members and the agenda of the committee that would work under the PA's supervision.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelaty said late on Tuesday the names for the individuals participating in the committee had been decided.

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, who heads the PA, said he welcomed the Egyptian idea and urged Trump to support



such a plan that would not involve displacing Palestinian residents.

Abbas, in power since 2005, also said he was ready to hold presidential and parliamentary elections if circumstances allowed, adding his PA was the only legitimate governing and military force in the Palestinian Territories.

Hamas said it welcomed the elections. Abbas has seen his legitimacy steadily undermined by Israeli settlement building in the occupied West Bank, which he oversees. Many Palestinians now regard his administration as corrupt, undemocratic and out of touch.

The Israeli foreign ministry in a statement called the plan "rooted in outdated perspectives" and rejected the reliance on the PA while complaining that Hamas was left in power by the plan. Washington also voiced its disapproval.

"The current proposal does not address the reality that Gaza is currently uninhabitable and residents cannot humanely live in a territory covered in debris and unexploded ordnance," White House spokesman Brian Hughes said when asked whether Trump would support the Arab leaders' plan.

"President Trump stands by his vision to rebuild Gaza free from Hamas," he said.

Any reconstruction funding would require heavy buy-in from oil-rich Persian Gulf Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, which have the billions of dollars needed.

Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Mustafa said the reconstruction fund would seek international financing as well as oversight and likely be located in the World Bank.

The UAE, which sees Hamas and other Islamists as an existential threat, wants an immediate and complete disarmament of the group, while other Arab countries advocate a gradual approach, a source close to the matter said.

A source close to Saudi Arabia's royal court says the continued armed presence of Hamas in Gaza was a stumbling block because of strong objections from the United States and Israel, which would need to sign off on any plan.

In a speech at the summit, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said international guarantees were needed that the current temporary ceasefire would remain in place, and supported the PA's role in governing the strip.

Leaders of the UAE and Qatar did not speak during open sessions of the summit.

Trump Lauds Aggressive Start to Term in Speech to Congress

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. President Donald Trump took a victory lap in an address to Congress on Tuesday, drawing catcalls and interruptions from some Democratic lawmakers who held up signs and walked out mid-speech in protest.

The partisan rancor was reflective of the tumult that has accompanied Trump's first six weeks in office upending U.S. foreign policy, igniting a trade war with close allies and slashing the federal workforce.

The primetime speech, his first to Congress since taking office on January 20, capped a second day of market turmoil after he imposed sweeping new tariffs against Mexico, Canada and China.

At 100 minutes, the speech was the longest presidential address to Congress in modern U.S. history, according to The American Presidency Project.

The speech was reminiscent of Trump's campaign rallies though he largely avoided his habit of straying from prepared remarks to deliver asides. The president assailed his Democratic predecessor Joe Biden, attacked immigrant criminals as "savages" and what he called "transgender ideology."

He vowed to balance the federal budget, even as he urged lawmakers to enact a sweeping tax cut agenda that nonpartisan analysts say could add more than \$5 trillion to the federal government's \$36 trillion debt load. Congress will need to act to raise the nation's debt ceiling later this year or risk a devastating default.

World leaders were watching Trump's speech closely, a day after he paused all military aid to Ukraine. The suspension followed an Oval Office blowup in which Trump angrily upbraided Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy in front of TV cameras.

Trump said Zelenskiy wrote him a letter on Tuesday saying Ukraine was prepared to sign a rare earth minerals deal that had been left in limbo by their clash.

"Simultaneously, we've had serious discussions with Russia and have received strong signals that they are ready for peace," Trump said. "Wouldn't that be beautiful?"

The pause in aid threatened Kyiv's efforts to defend against Russia, which launched a full-scale invasion three years ago, and further rattled European leaders worried that Trump is moving the U.S. too far toward



Moscow.

While Trump has appeared to fault Ukraine for starting the war, a new Reuters/Ipsos poll found 70% of Americans - including two-thirds of Republicans - say Russia was more to blame.

"To my fellow citizens, America is back," Trump began to a standing ovation from fellow Republicans. "Our country is on the verge of a comeback the likes of which the world has never witnessed, and perhaps will never witness again."

Democrats held up signs with messages like "No King" and "This Is NOT Normal," and dozens walked out mid-speech.

One Texas congressman, Al Green, was ordered removed after he refused to sit down.

"The chair now directs the sergeant at arms to restore order. Remove this gentleman from the chamber," Republican House Speaker Mike Johnson said after warning Democrats to maintain decorum.

Green, shaking his walking cane at Trump, appeared to be shouting that Trump did not win a mandate in November's election after the president bragged about the Republicans' victories. As Green was led from the chamber, some Republicans sang, "Nah, nah, nah, nah, hey, hey, goodbye."

Trump, a political brawler by nature, appeared to revel in the disagreements.

"I look at the Democrats in front of me, and I realize there is absolutely

nothing I can say to make them happy or to make them stand or smile or applaud," he said after Green's ejection.

Trump spoke in the House of Representatives, where lawmakers huddled in fear for their lives a little over four years ago while a mob of Trump supporters ransacked the Capitol in an unsuccessful effort to overturn Democrat Joe Biden's 2020 victory over the then-incumbent Trump.

The president praised billionaire businessman Elon Musk and his so-called Department of Government Efficiency, which has downsized more than 100,000 federal workers, cut billions of dollars in foreign aid and shuttered entire agencies.

Trump credited Musk with identifying "hundreds of billions of dollars of fraud," a claim that far exceeds even what the administration has claimed so far. Musk, seated in the gallery, received ovations from Republicans.

Trump reiterated his intention to impose additional reciprocal tariffs on April 2, a move that would likely roil financial markets even more.

"Other countries have used tariffs against us for decades, and now it's our turn to start using them against those other countries," he said.

On this point, many Republicans remained seated, a signal of how Trump's tariffs have divided his party.

Trump's 25% tariffs on Mexico and Canada, two of the country's closest allies, and an additional 10% on Chinese imports deepened investor concerns about the economy. The Nasdaq Composite is down more than 9% from its record closing high on December 16, near the 10% decline commonly called a market correction.

Trump, who has often taken credit for market increases, did not mention this week's downturn in his speech. He also barely mentioned stubbornly high prices, blaming Biden and saying he was "fighting every day" to lower costs.

Trump urged Congress to extend his 2017 tax cuts. Congressional Republicans have advanced a sweeping \$4.5 trillion plan that would extend the tax cuts, tighten border security and fund a huge increase in deportations.

The proposal calls for \$2 trillion in spending reductions over a decade, with possible cuts to education, healthcare and other social services.

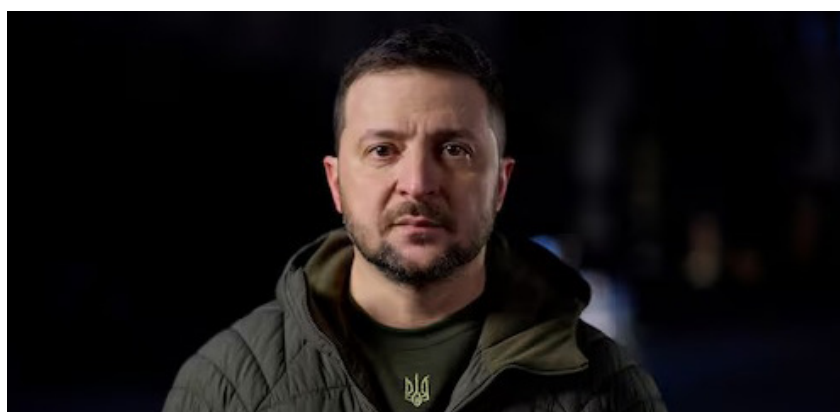
Zelenskiy Pledges to Make Things Right With U.S.

KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy pledged to repair relations with the U.S. on Tuesday after what he described as a "regrettable" Oval Office clash with U.S. President Donald Trump last week, while the fate of a much-debated minerals deal remained unclear.

Four sources told Reuters that the Trump administration and Ukraine plan to sign a deal giving the U.S. access to Ukrainian minerals in return for military aid. Later on Tuesday, however, U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent told Fox News, "There is no signing planned," according to a post on X by a Fox reporter.

The White House, Ukraine's presidential administration in Kyiv and the Ukrainian embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to requests for comment on the deal.

Early Tuesday Zelenskiy said he wanted to "make things right" and was ready "any time and in any convenient format" to sign a minerals deal, which



he left on the table during a visit to Washington after the Oval Office argument with Trump.

His statement came a day after Trump halted military aid to Ukraine, his latest move to upend U.S. policy and adopt a more conciliatory stance toward Russia.

"None of us wants an endless war. Ukraine is ready to come to the negotiating table as soon as possible ... Nobody wants peace more than Ukrainians," Zelenskiy said in his statement on X.

"My team and I stand ready to work under President Trump's strong leadership to get a peace that lasts."

The statement made no mention of the pause in U.S. military supplies. Zelenskiy's statement was clearly aimed at stressing Kyiv's gratitude following the explosive confrontation at the White House, at which Trump and Vice President JD Vance scolded Zelenskiy as insufficiently appreciative.

Real Win Madrid Derby as English Duo Score Away Victories



PARIS (Dispatches) - Real Madrid eked out a 2-1 home victory over crosstown rivals Atletico Madrid, while Arsenal and Aston Villa scored emphatic first-leg victories as the Champions League last 16 kicked off.

In the night's fourth tie, Lille gained a 1-1 draw at Borussia Dortmund.

At the Santiago Bernabeu, Real, who sit third in La Liga, edged Atletico, who are second, in a game illuminated by three dazzling goals.

Real took the lead on four minutes when Rodrygo Goes dribbled in from the right and placed a shot inside the far post.

The visitors gradually gained control and levelled after 32 minutes.

Julian Alvarez bounced off Eduardo Camavinga and slammed a curling shot into the top far corner. It was the Argentine's seventh goal of the Champions League campaign.

Antoine Griezmann and Rodrigo De Paul helped Atletico take control for long periods, with Madrid finding it hard to win the ball back.

Thibaut Courtois saved at full stretch from Griezmann before Brahim Diaz restored the home lead in the 55th minute, shimmying past a challenge and curling a shot inside the far post.

"For a moment we had the game under control, but we knew that it would not be an easy match, because they were at home and they have great players," Alvarez told Movistar.

"But we know there are 90 minutes to go... it's one goal, and another game, at home with our fans." Arsenal all but ensured a quarter-final berth as they crushed a shambolic PSV 7-1 in Eindhoven.

Jurrien Timber headed Arsenal into the lead on 18 minutes before Ethan Nwaneri smashed a second. Mikel Merino, from a narrow angle, put the visitors three goals up in just the 31st minute.

Noa Lang hit back with a PSV penalty before half-time. But Martin Odegaard slotted home a rebound and Leandro Trossard dinked a goal as Arsenal scored twice in the first three minutes of the second half.

Odegaard added another with 12 minutes left and then set up defender Riccardo Calafiori, a first-

half replacement, to round off the scoring.

"We were fluid. We had enthusiasm, the drive and the hunger," Arsenal midfielder Declan Rice told Amazon Prime. "We need to keep pushing as a team with the mentality."

Aston Villa manager Unai Emery insisted his team still have work to do despite a commanding 3-1 victory away to Club Brugge.

Two late goals gave Villa the victory in Belgium to puncture the hopes of the hosts who performed so well for so long.

Leon Bailey's early opener for Villa at the Jan Breydelstadion was soon cancelled out by a Maxim De Cuyper leveller.

Club Brugge had been more than a match for their Premier League visitors, but Brandon Mechele's 82nd-minute own goal restored Villa's lead.

Marco Asensio, on as a substitute, then converted an 88th-minute penalty, his fifth goal in four games wrapping up the victory which puts the 1982 European Cup winners in a very strong position.

"I am happy but calm," Emery said.

"We are not in the quarter-finals. There are still 90 minutes to play and we are ready in case we need extra time and a penalty shoot-out because I know how many difficulties there can be in each match."

In Dortmund, Karim Adeyemi put the home team ahead on 22 minutes, meeting a clearance from a corner with a low half-volley from the edge of the penalty area and swerving his shot inside the post.

Lille gained the initiative in the second half and Hakon Haraldsson ran onto Jonathan David's pass to poke a 68th-minute equaliser.

He became the second Iclander to score in the Champions League after Eidur Gudjohnsen.

"We need to move better, be braver. We must and we can do better," Dortmund captain Emre Can told Prime Video. "The second half wasn't good at all."

Kohli Shines as India Beat Australia to Reach Champions Trophy Final



DUBAI (Dispatches) - India reached the final of the Champions Trophy with a tense four-wicket victory over Australia in the first semi-final on Tuesday after Virat Kohli starred in yet another successful chase.

The outcome means Dubai will host Sunday's final in which India will meet the winner of the other semi-final between South Africa and New Zealand in Lahore.

Australia rode half-centuries by skipper Steve Smith (73) and Alex Carey (61) to post a competitive 264 all out at a venue which has typically produced low-scoring contests in the tournament.

Player of the match Kohli (84) anchored India's chase but could not complete it. KL Rahul chipped in with an unbeaten 42 down the order as India won with 11 balls to spare.

"We were very, very clinical with the bat," India captain Rohit Sharma said.

"Yes, we got the runs at the 48th over but I thought we were very calm and composed in our chase."

Leading an injury-depleted Australia side with a second-string attack, Steve Smith elected to bat after winning the toss.

Mohammed Shami spilled a return catch from Travis Head in the first over but dismissed Cooper Connolly for a nine-ball duck in his second.

Varun Chakravarthy, part of the team's four-pronged spin attack, brought relief for his teammates, dismissing India's nemesis Head for 39.

Smith got a reprieve when he defended an Axar Patel delivery and the ball rolled on to hit the stumps but could not dislodge the bats. He got another 'life' when Shami spilled a second return catch.

Ravindra Jadeja dismissed Marnus Labuschagne and Josh Inglis and Shami returned to flatten Smith's off-stump with a full toss after the batter had charged out.

Carey was run out just when Australia looked set for a late acceleration and they eventually collapsed with three deliveries left in their innings.

Smith's counterpart Rohit (28) proved equally lucky when India began their chase and was dropped twice though he could not quite capitalise on it.

Raptors Defeat Magic on Ja'Kobe Walter Game-Winner

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Rookie Ja'Kobe Walter sank a go-ahead 3-pointer with 0.1 seconds remaining in the fourth quarter as the visiting Toronto Raptors posted a 114-113 victory over the Orlando Magic on Tuesday.

After Paolo Banchero made a pair of free throws to give Orlando a 113-111 lead with 4.1 seconds to play, Walter carved out just enough room on rookie Tristan da Silva and sank the go-ahead 3-pointer.

Toronto's RJ Barrett collected 21 points, nine assists and eight rebounds, and Walter joined Scottie Barnes and Jakob Poeltl with 17 points each.

Barnes also had 13 rebounds. A.J. Lawson added 13 points off the bench for the Raptors, who defeated the Magic for the second time in three days. Toronto posted a 104-102 victory over Orlando on Sunday.

Banchero scored 22 of his 41 points in the fourth quarter on Tuesday. Banchero, who made 14 of 20 shots from the floor -- including 4 of 5 from 3-point range -- also had eight rebounds,



eight assists and four steals.

Franz Wagner scored 28 points for Orlando, which was outrebounded 35-48 and outscored 38-50 in points in the paint en route to losing its fourth straight game.

Lawson made a layup and a 3-pointer on consecutive possessions to give Toronto a 107-101 lead before Banchero

single-handedly kept his team within striking distance. He made a pair of driving layups and a pair of 3-pointers to forge a tie with 33.1 seconds to play before sinking two free throws with 4.1 seconds left to give the Magic a 113-111 lead.

Toronto outscored Orlando 31-19 in the third quarter and extended its lead to 90-78 after Poeltl converted a three-point play early in the fourth quarter.

Barnes sank a 3-pointer to give Toronto a 44-43 lead with 3:01 remaining in the second before Orlando responded with an 11-5 run to end the quarter. Da Silva drained a pair of 3-pointers and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope connected from beyond the arc at the buzzer during that surge.

Meanwhile Stephen Curry led the way with 28 points, Gui Santos ignited a late surge with a 3-pointer and the Golden State Warriors outfinished the host New York Knicks for a 114-102 victory.

Tsitsipas Feeling Refreshed After Dubai Success With Mystery Racket

LONDON (Dispatches) - Stefanos Tsitsipas went nearly a year without a trophy before immediately reaping the rewards of changing his equipment as the Greek captured the Dubai Championships crown on Saturday while playing with a new "mystery" racket.

The 26-year-old's first tour title since Monte Carlo last April ended his long drought in ATP 500 tournaments and vaulted him back into the top 10 of the world rankings for the first time since May.

"These are the things we're fighting for as professional tennis players," said Tsitsipas, who climbed to number nine in the world after the latest rankings were released on Monday.



"To be owning a spot in the top 10 is definitely one of the greatest feelings a tennis player can experience. It comes with hard work and sacrifices, but I'm happy that I'm in a position where I can really celebrate."

Tsitsipas, who was ranked as high as number three in 2023 following a run to the Australian Open final that year, endured a worrying slump in recent months and lost in the opening round of his last two Grand Slams.

His all-court game was no longer a threat to opponents and losses against unheralded players began to mount, but changing his racket for Dubai added the firepower he needed to lift his 12th tour-level trophy.

F1 Champions McLaren Still the Team to Beat



MARANELLO (Dispatches) - Formula One champions McLaren will still be the team to beat when the season starts in Australia next week, Ferrari's Charles Leclerc said on Tuesday.

McLaren edged Ferrari, who now have seven times world champion Lewis Hamilton on board, to the title by 14 points last season as they were crowned champions for the first time in 26 years.

Formula One data indicated the Woking-based team were quicker than Ferrari on low fuel, with a slightly smaller advantage on race pace, in testing in Bahrain last week.

"Today I feel like McLaren remains the team to beat," Leclerc said at an event to celebrate 20 years of collaboration between Ferrari and sports brand Puma at the team's historic base in Maranello, Italy.

"However it is very difficult to be sure of the picture given in tests because we have no idea on what fuel level they are running and everything."

"Our testing went pretty well, we went through our programme which is the most important and we didn't have any bad surprises which is good as well," added the Monegasque driver.

"But the performance remains to be seen next week once we get into Australia for qualifying."

Leclerc was full of praise for his new teammate, who will be chasing a record eighth title at the age of 40.

"Obviously with Lewis there was quite a lot of attention around the team this winter break but it's great, it's normal I mean he is a legend of the sport and joining the most iconic team of the sport," he said.

"I've been focusing on myself as much as I could during this winter break to be as ready as possible for this year and I feel ready and everyone seems to be very motivated so I'm looking forward to it."