

Iran Has Been Elected the Vice President of Executive Council of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) Despite a Bid by the United States to Block the Islamic Republic's Bid

IRAN NEWS

Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi Traveled to Saudi Arabia to Attend a Ministerial Meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to Discuss Measures to Counter the U.S. Plan for the Forced Displacement of Gazans

VOL. XXIX, No. 8222 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

SATURDAY MARCH 08, 2025 ESFAND 18, 1403

2 DOMESTIC



Russian Ambassador: Free Trade With Iran Is a Win-Win Deal

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

EU Leaders Vow to Re-Arm Europe Amid U.S. Retreat on Ukraine

> SEE PAGE 3



Iran Rejects Absurd UK Claim of Posing National Security Threat



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has refuted British officials' accusations that Tehran poses a national security threat to the UK, saying they blame the Islamic Republic for something they "excel in and master".

Britain said on Tuesday that it would require the Iranian state to register everything it does to exert political influence in the UK, subjecting Tehran to an elevated tier of scrutiny in light of what it said was increasingly aggressive activity.

"It is absurd to blame Iran for something you excel in and master: illegal interference in other nations' internal affairs!" Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei responded in a post on X Thursday.

Baghaei touched on UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer's remarks in November that he did not believe Israel was committing genocide in Gaza and Britain's role in the 1953 coup against Iran's democratically-elected government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh.

"UK government seems to be doubling down on its irrational hostile mentality regarding Iranians only to deflect from their own culpability, both as 'genocide denier' and as supporter of anti-Iran terrorism (tracing back to 1953 coup against Iran's democratically-elected govt for which UK's guilt never disappears).

"However, this is no longer the 19th century; any government that makes unfounded accusations and takes hostile actions against the Iranian nation shall be held accountable," he said.

Addressing parliament on Wednesday, UK security minister Dan Jarvis announced that he would put Iran's state, its security services and the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps into the enhanced tier of an upcoming registration scheme designed to protect against covert foreign influence.

Like in many countries, the political ruthlessness of Victorian expansionism has left Britain with an unhappy legacy of distrust in Iran.

Iranians generally blame Britain for the "Great Famine and Genocide" of 1917-1919 in Iran where approximately 2 million people and by some accounts 8-10 million out of a population of 18-20 million died of starvation and disease.

Iran Envoy Urges Joint Action With Afghanistan to Resolve Refugees Issue



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The caretaker of Iran's embassy in Kabul says Tehran and Kabul need to take joint measures to solve the issue of Afghan refugees given cordial relations between the two neighboring countries.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran seeks legal ways to resolve the issue of Afghan refugees but permanent solutions must be found for the problem of undocumented Afghan refugees," Alireza Bigdeli said in a meeting with Afghanistan's Acting Minister of Refugee and Repatriation Mawlawi Abdul Kabir.

He added that Iran seeks to legalize the presence of Afghan refugees and hailed Afghanistan's ban on human trafficking.

"Prohibition of human trafficking from Afghanistan to Iran will strengthen cooperation between the two countries," the Iranian diplomat explained.

During the meeting, Bigdeli and Abdul Kabir emphasized that the issue of refugees should be separated from political matters and stressed the importance of taking practical steps to solve the problem.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Iran factsheet for April-June 2024, Iran is host to the largest refugee population in the world, hosting 3.8 million refugees and people in refugee-like situations, generously hosting refugees for over four decades.

The factsheet noted that 99% of registered refugees live in urban areas side by side with the local communities while 1% of registered refugees live in 21 refugee settlements in 12 provinces of Iran.

President Urges Unity to Thwart Enemies' Plans



TEHRAN - In a powerful call to action, President Masoud Pezeshkian emphasized the need for unity and cohesion to counter the "sinister plans" of the nation's enemies during a visit to the cities of Pardis, Firuzkoub, and Damavand in Tehran Province on Thursday.

Speaking to local officials and managers as part of the National Unity Government's third leg of provincial tours, Pezeshkian urged Iranians to work collectively to realize the vision outlined by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and build a stronger Iran together.

Pezeshkian stressed that hope and reliance on faith would guide the nation forward. "If our hopes lie in God and we trust in our own beliefs, we will find the way," he said, adding, "Our shortcomings and sins stem from our own lack of capability and skills. Every manager, in their role, must set a goal and find a path to achieve it. Change begins within ourselves, but it must align with the straight path, not one of humiliation."

The president cautioned against placing hope in individuals rather than collective effort. "If you think I alone am the hope, you'll get nowhere. But if you see 'us' as the hope, we will succeed," he said. "Humans are fallible, and a single mistake can turn hope into despair. But if we move together and rely only on God, we will prevail. We won't be left wondering what to do if others don't join us—because that question arises only when we're divided."

Highlighting the transformative power of unity, Pezeshkian remarked, "God's blessing is turning enmity among us into kindness and friendship. Whenever we harbor discord or enmity, we stand on the edge of fire. But if we unite and trust in God, success will follow."

Praising the "remarkable and exceptional" progress in Pardis County, the president encouraged citizens to transcend limitations and focus on higher ideals. "Worship isn't just bowing our heads—it's moving toward God, toward knowledge, mercy, beauty, dignity, and all that is good," he said. "Don't pin your hopes on 'me'—place them in 'us.'"

Pezeshkian reiterated that Iran's future depends on collaboration. "Together, we will build our cities, our society, our Iran. We will rely on no one but God and deal with others based on fairness," he declared. He emphasized the need to strive tirelessly in science, technology, and economics to lead the region—a goal he acknowledged requires relentless effort and behavioral change. "With our belief, we can create a far more beautiful future and fulfill the Supreme Leader's vision," he added.

The president warned against internal strife, saying, "We must fear standing on the edge of fire by quarreling or taunting each other—that's when problems arise. Everyone who can contribute should step forward. Each of us has unique abilities, and we must believe in that."

Reflecting on his role, Pezeshkian admitted his limitations: "How can I offer guidance where hundreds of experts surpass me? Ignorance begins when someone assumes they master every skill and can plan for every city and country."

Pezeshkian's remarks came during a one-day tour of eastern Tehran Province, accompanied by government officials. His itinerary included meetings with technology and knowledge-based industry leaders, visits to agricultural and livestock stakeholders, and discussions with regional managers. This visit follows his earlier trips to Islamshahr, Baharestan, and Robot Karim on February 27, and to Shah-e Rey, Qods, and Malard on February 22, as part of his fifth provincial tour's second and first phases, respectively. To date, he has also visited Sistan and Baluchestan, North Khorasan, Khuzestan, and Bushehr provinces.

In closing, Pezeshkian underscored the importance of aligning with the Supreme Leader's vision. "If we believe in his leadership, we must prepare ourselves to achieve his goals. With effort and unity, we will foil our enemies' schemes and build Iran—together."

West's Ineffective Pressure Campaign to Backfire

TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The Western strategy of exerting pressure on Tehran to force its unilateral compliance with nuclear obligations is "not only ineffective but also counterproductive," Iran's envoy to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has warned.

Speaking at a meeting of the IAEA Board of Governors, Mohsen Naziri Asl addressed Western-sponsored censure resolutions against Tehran and the continued imposition of sanctions over unsubstantiated claims that Iran seeks nuclear weapons.

He underscored the failure of Western parties to uphold their commitments under the nuclear deal, known as the JCPOA, a failure that began with the US withdrawal from the accord in 2018 and was further exacerbated by the inability of the remaining European signatories—France, Germany, and Britain—to compensate for Washington's exit.

Naziri Asl said Iran's decision to scale back some of its commitments was a direct response to these violations, in line with Articles 26 and 36 of the JCPOA, which grant Iran the right to take remedial action if other parties fail to uphold their obligations.

He reiterated that Iran's remedial measures under the nuclear agreement will be abandoned only if sanctions by the United States, the European Union, and three European parties to the accord are lifted in a manner that is both effective and verifiable.

"Experience has shown that the policy of pressure pursued by certain parties is not only ineffective but also counterproductive."

The Iranian envoy also dismissed any attempts by the European parties to invoke the JCPOA's snapback mechanism.

Since France, Germany, and Britain—known as the E3—have themselves violated UN Security Council Resolution 2231 and the JCPOA, they lack the legitimacy to trigger the dispute resolution mechanism in response to Iran's remedial actions, the envoy argued.

"The E3 cannot pursue the same legal course against Iran, as such an action contradicts both



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

the purpose of the dispute resolution mechanism within the JCPOA and the fundamental principles of international law among civilized nations."

He said attempting to invoke the snapback mechanism would be "legally baseless, unjust, and strongly rejected."

With the JCPOA's so-called 'Termination Day' approaching, Naziri Asl urged all the IAEA member states to focus their efforts on implementing UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which enshrines the nuclear deal.

He warned against allowing years of international diplomacy and investment in the agreement to be undermined.

"It is our responsibility to preserve this achievement. We call on all member states to fully implement the provisions of Resolution 2231, including its specified timeline."

Responding to Western accusations that Iran seeks nuclear weapons, the envoy reaffirmed that Iran firmly rejects weapons of mass destruction (WMD) based on its ideological and strategic principles, considering them outdated, inhumane, and a threat to global peace and security.

Termination Day is the date when the remaining UN sanctions on Iran are scheduled to be lifted, marking a final step in the JCPOA's implementation.

Originally set for October 2025, this milestone signifies the official conclusion of restrictions on Iran's nuclear program under the deal.

However, European powers are exploring ways to trigger the snapback mechanism, using Iran's remedial measures as a pretext.

This mechanism, which is embedded in Resolution 2231, allows any signatory to re-impose UN sanctions if Iran is found to be in "significant non-compliance."

In 2020, the Trump administration attempted to activate the snapback despite having withdrawn from the JCPOA. The move was widely rejected by the international community, notably the UN Security Council.

Iran's Exports to Eurasian Economic Union Countries Surge by 22%



TEHRAN - Iran has recorded a 22% increase in exports to member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) over the first 10 months of this year compared to the same period last year, according to Akbar Godari, Director General of Central Asia, Caucasus, and Russia at Iran's Trade Promotion Organization.

In an exclusive interview with IRNA, Godari reported that Iran's total exports to EAEU countries reached \$1.631 billion in the first 10 months of 2025, up from \$1.338 billion during the same period in the previous year.

He also noted a decline in imports, stating, "Imports during this period amounted to \$1.274 billion, reflecting a 22% decrease compared to last year's \$1.627 billion."

Godari highlighted that Russia and Armenia accounted for the largest shares of Iran's exports to the EAEU. "In the past 10 months, exports to Russia totaled \$889 million, while exports to Armenia reached \$402 million," he said. Meanwhile, Belarus and Kyrgyzstan recorded the lowest export volumes, with \$17 million and \$95 million, respectively.

On the import side, Godari identified Russia and Kazakhstan as Iran's primary sources within the EAEU. "Imports from Russia amounted to \$1.154 billion, while Kazakhstan contributed \$47 million," he explained.

Reflecting on trade trends between Iran and EAEU countries from 2021 to 2023, Godari noted that Iran's exports to the bloc stood at \$1.165 billion in 2021, rising to \$1.517 billion in 2022 and \$1.702 billion in 2023. Over the same three-year period, imports from EAEU nations totaled approximately \$5.433 billion.

Godari emphasized the potential of a free trade agreement with the EAEU as a key driver for enhancing commercial ties. "The signing and implementation of this agreement will undoubtedly lead to reduced tariffs and streamlined trade, boosting Iran's share in the EAEU markets," he concluded.

Iran Confirms It Has Started Transiting Turkmen Gas to Turkey



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's oil minister says the country has started receiving gas from Turkmenistan in its northeast and delivering the same amount to its northwestern neighbor Turkey as part of a swap agreement.

Mohsen Paknejad said that the transit of Turkmen gas to Turkey would have major benefits for Iran, including the increased supply of gas to national grid customers in the northeast of the country where gas pressure normally drops because it is far from Iran's gas production centers in the south.

Paknejad said that the swap agreement would also boost Iran's position as a major regional energy hub.

"This effort is a sign of government's determination to expand energy diplomacy," he said, according to remarks covered by the Iranian Oil Ministry's news service Shana.

However, the minister indicated in his remarks that the details of the gas swap deal between Iran, Turkmenistan, and Turkey have yet to be finalized.

"One can say that this agreement has become operationalized, but we should wait until other aspects of the agreement can be publicized in the media in the future," said Paknejad.

A report published by Turkmenistan's official newspaper Neutral Turkmenistan in early February showed that the country's state-run gas company Turkmengas had signed a deal with Turkey's state-owned BOTAS to start gas exports through Iran beginning March 1.

The report said that Turkmenistan's chairman of the People's Council Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov had held a phone call with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian to praise the deal as a major development in the regional energy cooperation.

Turkmenistan's Foreign Minister Rasit Meredov visited Tehran on February 12 to meet with Pezeshkian and Paknejad.

IRAN NEWS



Iran, Iraq Emphasize Enhanced Cooperation in Oil and Electricity Sectors

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Oil Minister and Iraq's Electricity Minister have underscored the need to expand collaboration between the two nations in the fields of oil, gas, petrochemicals, and electricity.

According to the Iranian Oil Ministry, Mohsen Paknejad, Iran's Oil Minister, met with Ziyad Ali Fazel, Iraq's Electricity Minister, on Wednesday, March 5, 2025, at the Oil Ministry's headquarters for discussions.

During the meeting, both sides highlighted the deep historical, cultural, religious, and political ties between Iran and Iraq, emphasizing the importance of strengthening energy relations. The ministers also focused on fostering interaction and partnership in the areas of oil, gas, petrochemicals, and electricity as key priorities for bilateral cooperation.

Tehran Hosts Iran-Turkmenistan Talks on Joint Trade Zones under ECO Framework



TEHRAN - The Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) Secretariat in Tehran hosted the first bilateral meeting between Iran and Turkmenistan under the ECO working group tasked with establishing joint trade zones (JTZs). The session brought together representatives from relevant ministries and organizations of both nations to discuss the creation of a shared commercial region aimed at boosting economic ties.

The talks focused on developing a legal framework for JTZs, promoting cross-border trade, enhancing economic collaboration, and drafting a roadmap for implementation. Syllabardy Nurberdiyev, ECO Deputy Secretary-General, outlined Turkmenistan's proposal for the initiative, emphasizing its potential to deepen economic relations among member states. "The establishment of a joint trade zone will serve as a cornerstone for stronger economic bonds within the ECO region," he stated.

Officials from both sides reaffirmed their commitment to advancing regional trade through a structured and legally sound framework. Discussions also highlighted the importance of attracting investment, streamlining cross-border commerce, and improving logistics in the designated trade zone. The meeting concluded with an agreement to finalize the ECO-proposed draft, laying the groundwork for a bilateral accord and identifying a potential JTZ along the Iran-Turkmenistan border.

Technical insights were provided by directors from the transport, communications, and trade sectors, as well as the ECO Secretariat's legal advisor. The initiative reflects a broader push to strengthen economic integration among ECO members, with Iran and Turkmenistan poised to lead the effort. This development marks a significant step toward enhancing regional connectivity and prosperity.

The ECO, headquartered in Tehran, continues to serve as a platform for fostering cooperation among its ten member states across Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Middle East.

Russian Ambassador: Free Trade With Iran Is a Win-Win Deal

TEHRAN - In a significant development for economic ties between Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Russia's Ambassador to Tehran, Alexey Dedov, hailed the recently approved free trade agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the EAEU as a "win-win" deal that promises mutual benefits for all parties involved.

Speaking to the BRICS TV network on Thursday, Dedov expressed optimism about the agreement's imminent implementation following its ratification by Iran's Guardian Council.

The ambassador emphasized that the agreement, which eliminates customs tariffs on 87% of goods traded between Iran and the EAEU, will pave the way for enhanced exports from Iran to a market of 190 million people. "This free trade agreement facilitates customs procedures and technical regulations, creating favorable conditions for Iranian goods in the EAEU market, while the same applies to EAEU exporters accessing Iran," Dedov noted. He described the deal as a mutually beneficial arrangement designed to serve the interests of the people in both regions.

The agreement's approval process in Iran concluded on March 2, 2025, when Hadi Tahan Nazif, spokesperson for Iran's Guardian Council, announced that the bill—previously passed by the Iranian parliament on December 22, 2024—complied with Islamic law and the constitution after addressing earlier objections. The EAEU, comprising Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, with Iran among its observer states alongside Uzbekistan, Moldova, and Cuba, had already finalized its internal legal procedures, according to Andrei Slepnev, the EAEU's trade minister. The agreement, initially signed on December 25, 2023, in St. Petersburg, will take effect two months after Iran completes its legal ratification process.

Beyond trade, Dedov highlighted the broader implications of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty signed by the presidents of Russia and Iran. Responding to a question from BRICS TV, he explained that Article 34 of the treaty promotes cultural, artistic, and educational collaboration, including the establishment of a Russian cultural center in Tehran under an agreement dated April 13, 2021. Preparations are underway, with Russia's federal agency Rosstrudnichestvo actively seeking a suitable location for the center.

A key cultural event on the horizon is Russia Culture Week, scheduled for



June 2025 in Iran. Dedov underscored that the treaty reinforces long-term cooperation in higher education, science, and technology, with joint scientific projects, seminars, conferences, and exhibitions already in progress. "This treaty both solidifies the current high level of bilateral relations and creates momentum for fruitful collaboration in cultural, scientific, and educational fields," he said.

Dedov also outlined several ongoing joint initiatives between Russia and Iran. In the nuclear energy sector, the two nations are collaborating on the construction of Units 2 and 3 of the Bushehr nuclear power plant, alongside projects in radiopharmaceuticals for medical diagnostics and treatment. Additionally, a June 2024 memorandum between Russian and Iranian gas companies aims to build a pipeline to supply Russian natural gas to Iran, with active steps already being taken toward its realization. Russia is also involved in developing Iran's oil fields and the North-South International Transport Corridor, including the Rasht-Astara railway project.

The ambassador forecasted a 15% increase in Russia-Iran trade turnover for 2024 compared to 2023, with further growth expected in 2025. This optimism is bolstered by plans for the upcoming Russia-Iran Joint Economic Commission meeting, to be hosted by Russia later this year, which aims to inject fresh impetus into bilateral trade.

Dedov pointed to efforts to establish an independent payment system and shift to national currency settlements, as outlined in Article 20 of the strategic partnership treaty signed on January 17, 2025, in Moscow. Iran's Shetab banking network cards are now accepted in Russia, with Russia's Mir cards expected to launch in Iran soon, simplifying commercial transactions and expanding trade opportunities.

On the international stage, Iran's membership in BRICS since January 2024 has strengthened its ties with Russia. Dedov emphasized shared values within the group, including respect for sovereignty, international law, and mutual support, noting Iran's keen interest in innovative economic cooperation—a stance Russia fully supports.

As both nations deepen their partnership across trade, culture, and infrastructure, the free trade agreement and strategic treaty signal a robust framework for sustained collaboration, poised to yield significant economic and diplomatic dividends in the years ahead.

Iran, Russia Agree to Boost Export of Iran's Aviation Engineering Services



TEHRAN - Hossein Pourfarzaneh, Iran's Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development and head of the Civil Aviation Organization, met with Dmitry Yadrov, Russia's Deputy Minister of Transport and head of the Federal Air Transport Agency, during a visit to Moscow. The discussions aimed to enhance aviation cooperation between the two nations.

The visit builds on the signing of a bilateral agreement on flight standards and airworthiness, as well as the broader Iran-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty. Under the new agreement, both sides will recognize each other's aviation standards, paving the way for Iranian companies to export technical and engineering services to Russia.

Iran's Ambassador to Russia, Kazem Jalali, hosted the Iranian delegation on Tuesday evening, where talks focused on elevating the level of cooperation in the aviation transport sector.

Previously, Dmitry Yadrov had praised the quality of Iranian companies' maintenance work on Russian passenger aircraft. In an exclusive interview with IRNA in Moscow, Yadrov revealed that Aeroflot, a major Russian airline, had sent one of its planes to Iran for maintenance, with highly satisfactory results. "Based on Aeroflot's assessment, the quality of the Iranian companies' work in maintaining airworthiness is excellent," he said, adding confidence that Russian firms would continue this collaboration due to domestic demand.

Role of Makran Port in Boosting Iran's Maritime Market Share



TEHRAN - In a statement, Hamidreza Abaei, advisor to the CEO of the Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO) and executive director of Iran's Comprehensive Ports Plan, emphasized the critical role of the Makran Port Complex in enhancing Iran's maritime market share. Speaking at the eighth meeting of the specialized working group on the Makran Port Complex Comprehensive Plan, Abaei highlighted the port's potential to address operational and capacity shortages amid harsh sanctions. He noted that transforming the Makran Port into a hub capable of accommodating large vessels would strengthen transshipment operations and bolster Iran's maritime service capabilities for both its hinterland and foreland regions.

Abaei stressed the importance of maintaining professional conduct within industries and avoiding interference in the specialized affairs of ports and maritime operations. He urged the Budget and Planning Organization to foster integration and coordination by collaborating with the Sea-Based Development Council and the Makran Coast Development Council. This collaboration, he said, should aim to establish a unified strategy and actionable policies outlined in short-term, medium-term, and long-term plans.

Abaei identified the interference of certain organizations in specialized maritime and port affairs as a significant challenge in the comprehensive study of the Makran megaport project. He also underscored the urgent need to develop road and rail transport infrastructure in underdeveloped regions to support the port's growth.

Commenting on the potential market for petrochemical refining companies, Abaei emphasized the Makran Port Complex's role in meeting international, national, and local demands. He called on all industries with export-oriented strategies to formally submit their product and commodity demands to the PMO. Abaei described the project as a national endeavor requiring a collective, determined effort and significant investment. He urged the Budget and Planning Organization, the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade (MIMT), and the Industrial Development and Renovation Organization to align their efforts in determining the market size for this large-scale oceanic port.

Key resolutions from the meeting included drafting a comprehensive plan to develop road and rail transport infrastructure, devising strategies to attract foreign investors, and addressing and halting interference by unrelated organizations in specialized maritime and port affairs.

Over 50% of Road Accidents Due to Human Error



TEHRAN - More than half of road accidents and fatalities in Iran stem from human error, according to Mohammadreza Zafarghandi, Iran's Minister of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education.

Speaking on Thursday, the minister emphasized the critical role of raising public awareness and altering societal behavior through cultural and artistic initiatives to address this alarming statistic.

In a ceremony marking the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Zafarghandi highlighted the importance of cultural campaigns in reducing road accidents. He welcomed initiatives like the "No to Accidents" campaign, underscoring that collaboration with artists and influential figures could significantly influence public behavior. "Art, media, and prominent individuals can play a key role in transforming societal attitudes," he said, calling it an essential priority requiring special attention.

"When human error accounts for over 50% of accidents, it's clear that effective communication and cultural outreach—especially through artists and artistic tools—can positively impact public consciousness," Zafarghandi explained. "This approach can serve as a warning and encourage people to drive with greater care and caution."

While advocating for cultural initiatives, the minister stressed that they are only part of the solution. "Other factors, such as road safety, vehicle standards, and related issues, must also be addressed," he noted. "Together, these elements form a comprehensive strategy to reduce road fatalities."

Zafarghandi expressed optimism about achieving tangible results in the short term through a unified national effort. "What we can accomplish quickly is fostering a national resolve to tackle road accidents," he said. "Artists, athletes, and all those who influence public behavior must step up." He described this effort as both a social responsibility and a public good, pointing out that nearly 20,000 people lose their lives in road accidents annually in

Iran. "Thousands of families, especially during Nowruz (Persian New Year), face grief instead of celebration. Even reducing a fraction of these losses would be a significant step toward public health and family security," he added.

The minister called for comprehensive cooperation among responsible institutions, media, cultural organizations, and the public. "Reducing accidents and fatalities requires synergy across society," he said. "Educational programs, awareness campaigns through art and media, stricter traffic laws, and enhanced enforcement must work in tandem to curb these troubling figures."

The "No to Accidents" campaign was officially launched with the signing of the MoU between Zafarghandi and Seyed Abbas Salehi, Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The agreement aims to leverage artistic and media resources to promote road safety and reduce casualties nationwide.

According to the MoU, this collaboration aligns with directives from Iran's President to implement preventive measures against road accidents. It seeks to harness the power of print, electronic, and social media to shape public opinion and foster a culture of safety. The "National No to Accidents! Safe and Healthy Travel" campaign, valid from March 1, 2025, to April 20, 2025, will focus on producing and disseminating educational content to reform driving habits and enhance travel safety.

Key provisions of the MoU include joint efforts in creating and sharing content—such as information, data, and rational insights—and distributing it across various media platforms. The initiative also emphasizes producing educational advertisements to promote safe driving practices.

Zafarghandi praised ongoing efforts and urged cultural and media activists to take a proactive role in improving road safety culture. "This campaign is a vital step toward preventing losses and fostering a safer society," he concluded.

With a national commitment and the support of media and influencers, Iran aims to address the devastating toll of road accidents and pave the way for a safer future.

Iran Showcases 12 Booths at Berlin Tourism Fair to Counter Iranophobia



TEHRAN - Iran is set to make a significant mark at the ITB Berlin 2025, one of the world's leading international tourism exhibitions, with a pavilion featuring 12 booths dedicated to promoting the country's rich cultural, historical, and natural attractions. Mohammad Hossein Soufi, CEO of Iran's Touring and Automobile Club, told IRNA that this participation offers a vital opportunity to challenge negative stereotypes and combat Iranophobia by presenting an authentic narrative of Iran as a diverse and welcoming tourism destination.

The ITB Berlin exhibition, held annually from March 4-6 (14-16 Esfand in the Persian calendar), attracts over 100,000 visitors, 190 participating countries, and more than 5,600 exhibitors. This year's theme, "The World of Travel is Here," aligns with Iran's goal of leveraging the event to highlight its tourism potential. The Iranian pavilion, largely driven by private sector involvement, will feature a variety of programs, including multilingual video clips showcasing Iran's scenic beauty, professional brochures and catalogs, and cultural gifts such as handicrafts for visitors.

Soufi emphasized that the 12 booths, allocated to private tourism agencies, aim to attract international visitors by showcasing Iran's unique offerings, from adventure tourism and ecotourism to health and religious travel. The event will also host negotiation sessions, fostering collaboration between Iranian representatives and global tourism professionals, potentially paving the way for new partnerships and increased inbound tourism.

"Iran's presence at ITB Berlin is a chance to display our cultural diversity and tourism assets, which many international travelers are still unfamiliar with," Soufi stated. He highlighted the exhibition's role in countering negative media portrayals and fostering international cooperation, noting that it provides a platform to connect directly with travel agencies, tour operators, and investors. By offering multimedia content, virtual tours, and face-to-face interactions, Iran aims to reshape perceptions and promote itself as a safe, hospitable destination.

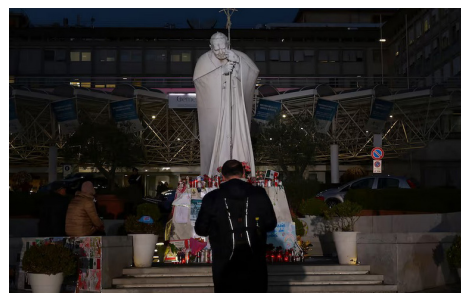
The exhibition, regarded as a cornerstone of the global tourism industry, draws thousands of specialists, potential tourists, and investors annually. Soufi underscored that Iran's active participation could significantly boost its tourism brand, addressing challenges like negative propaganda through a positive, firsthand portrayal of the country. "ITB Berlin allows us to bypass biased narratives and share real experiences of travelers who leave Iran with unexpectedly positive memories," he added.

Pope Francis in Stable Condition

VATICAN CITY (Dispatches) - Pope Francis on Thursday sent his first audio message since being hospitalized for double pneumonia nearly three weeks ago, expressing thanks "from the bottom of my heart" to well-wishers around the world who have offered their support.

A brief, two-line message recorded by Francis from Rome's Gemelli hospital earlier on Thursday was played during a nightly prayer service for the pope in St Peter's Square at the Vatican.

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your prayers in the Square for my health," said the pope, speaking in his native Spanish, and pausing every few words to take a deep breath. "May God bless you."



IRAN NEWS

Trump Delays Tariffs for Goods Under Mexico, Canada Trade Deal



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. President Donald Trump suspended on Thursday tariffs of 25% he had imposed this week on most goods from Canada and Mexico, the latest twist in a fluctuating trade policy that has whipsawed markets and fanned worries about inflation and growth.

The exemptions for the two largest U.S. trading partners, expire on April 2, when Trump has threatened to impose a global regime of reciprocal tariffs on all U.S. trading partners.

Trump, who imposed the levies on Tuesday, had mentioned an exemption only for Mexico earlier on Thursday, but the amendment he signed later that day covered Canada as well. The three countries are partners in a North American trade pact.

In response, Canada will delay a planned second wave of retaliatory tariffs on C\$125 billion (\$87.4 billion) of U.S. products until April 2, Finance Minister Dominic LeBlanc said in a post on X.

For Canada, the amended White House order also excludes duties on potash, a critical fertilizer for U.S. farmers, but does not fully cover energy products, on which Trump has imposed a separate levy of 10%.

A White House official said that was because not all energy products imported from Canada are covered by the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement on trade that Trump negotiated in his first term as president.

Trump imposed the tariffs after declaring a national emergency on January 20, his first day in office, due to deaths from fentanyl overdoses, saying the deadly opioid and its precursor chemicals make their way from China to the United States via Canada and Mexico.

Trump has also imposed tariffs of 20% on all imports from China as a result. China said it would "resolutely counter" pressure from the United States on the fentanyl issue, urging the United States to resolve the abuse of the drug itself.

Russian Attack Damaged Gas Production Facilities



KYIV (Dispatches) - Russian forces targeted Ukraine's energy and gas infrastructure in their latest drone and missile attack, Ukraine's energy minister said on Friday.

"Once again, energy and gas infrastructure in various regions of Ukraine has come under massive missile and drone fire," Energy Minister German Galushchenko said in a statement on Facebook.

"Wherever possible, rescuers and power engineers are working to eliminate the consequences. All necessary measures are being taken to stabilise power and gas supplies," he added.

The attack damaged natural gas production facilities of Ukraine's state-run oil and gas firm Naftogaz, the company said in a statement.

"Production facilities that ensure gas production were damaged. Fortunately, there were no casualties," Naftogaz said via the Telegram messaging app.

Terнопil Governor Viacheslav Nehoda said the attack struck a critical industrial facility in the western region and announced possible limits on gas supplies. Ukraine's air defence shot down a missile and there were no reported casualties, he said in a post on the Telegram messaging app.

In the northeastern city of Kharkiv, Russian forces struck a civilian enterprise and injured at least five people, according to its governor Oleh Synchubov.

In the northern region of Chernihiv, an attack damaged one of the production facilities, according to its governor Viacheslav Chaus who did not provide additional details.

The governor of the western region of Ivano-Frankivsk, Svitlana Onyschuk, said the air defence repelled an attack on infrastructure facilities. She reported no damage or casualties.

EU Leaders Vow to Re-Arm Europe Amid U.S. Retreat on Ukraine

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - EU leaders shaken by the prospect of US disengagement agreed to boost the bloc's defenses at a crisis summit Thursday, as Washington said talks with Kyiv were back on track to secure a ceasefire with Moscow.

Rallying around Ukraine after Volodymyr Zelensky's White House blow-up with President Donald Trump, European countries greenlit a plan to "re-arm Europe" against the perceived threat from Russia.

"We are moving decisively towards a strong and more sovereign Europe of defense," Antonio Costa, who heads the Council of the EU's 27 states, told reporters after the talks.

"We are putting our money where our mouth is."

Leaders endorsed the European Commission's aim to mobilize about 800 billion euros (\$860 billion) for defense spending, committing to examine "as a matter of urgency" its proposal to provide members with EU-backed loans of up to 150 billion euros.

The defense plan eases fiscal rules to allow states to spend much more - at a time when Germany's chancellor-in-waiting Friedrich Merz is embracing radical reforms to fund the country's rearmament.

France's President Emmanuel Macron has likewise called for a defense spending surge and suggested extending France's nuclear deterrent to European partners.

European governments are under pressure to step up defense as Trump questions whether the United States - the guarantor of Europe's security since World War II - should continue its central role in NATO.

The U.S. leader once again called that commitment into question on Thursday, complaining that its allies "should be paying more".

Trump's pivot away from the United States' transatlantic partners comes as he seeks a rapprochement with Russia to end the Ukraine war - raising fears Kyiv could be forced into an unfavorable deal.

EU leaders welcomed President Zelensky in Brussels in a show of support, a week after his bust-up with Trump led to the United States cutting off military aid and intelligence sharing with Kyiv.

Declaring that Ukraine had to be in the "strongest possible position" to secure a "just and lasting peace" a leaders' statement repeated calls for "robust and credible security guarantees" to deter future Russian aggression.

The text - backed by 26 of 27 states, given the expected opposition of Hungary's nationalist Prime Minister Viktor Orban, an ardent Trump supporter - stressed that "there can be no negotiations on Ukraine without Ukraine".



capital Riyadh. Witkoff said the meeting would take place in Riyadh or Jeddah.

Zelensky said that Ukrainian and American negotiators had "resumed work".

"We hope that next week we will have a meaningful meeting," he said.

In his bid to salvage cooperation with Washington, Zelensky declared himself ready to work towards a peace deal under Trump's "strong leadership" and to finalize an accord on US access to Ukrainian mineral resources.

Trump's outreach to Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the three-year war - sidelining both Kyiv and its European partners - has thrown Europe into crisis mode.

It has also helped draw Britain closer to the EU, five years after leaving the bloc.

Britain's Prime Minister Keir Starmer is working with Macron to rebuild bridges between Trump and Zelensky and together they have pitched a one-month truce "in the air, at sea and on energy infrastructure".

They have called for a "coalition of the willing" to help secure a ceasefire, with a British official saying Thursday talks with around 20 countries were underway.

Several European states have said they would be willing to deploy troops to Ukraine as a "security guarantee".

Russia reiterated, however, that it would not accept European forces in Ukraine, nor a merely temporary ceasefire, saying a "final settlement" was needed.

"We are very thankful that we are not alone," Zelensky said.

The meeting brought no major new aid announcements, with several EU states arguing that Europe currently has enough money committed to meet Kyiv's needs, despite the US freeze on aid.

Norway, a non-EU member, announced, however, that it will more than double its aid for 2025 to bring the total to \$7.8 billion.

After last week's diplomatic incident, Zelensky has scrambled to mend fences with Trump, and the US envoy on the Russia-Ukraine conflict announced Thursday that new negotiations were planned.

Declaring himself pleased by Zelensky's "apology", US envoy Steve Witkoff said he intended to travel to Saudi Arabia to speak to Ukrainian negotiators about an "initial ceasefire" with Russia and a "framework" for a longer agreement.

In Kyiv, a senior official said Ukrainian and US delegations were expected to meet Tuesday in the Saudi

Hamas Says Trump's Threats Spur Netanyahu to Evade Gaza Ceasefire Deal

CAIRO (Dispatches) - Hamas said U.S. President Donald Trump's repeated threats against Palestinians constituted support for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to back out of the Gaza ceasefire and intensify the siege of Gazans.

Trump demanded in a social media post on Wednesday that Hamas "release all of the hostages now, not later," including the remains of dead hostages, "or it is OVER for you".

Towards the end of that statement, Trump addressed the "people of Gaza" and said "you are DEAD" if hostages continued to be held in the Palestinian enclave.

Human rights advocates and United Nations Special Rapporteur on Occupied Palestinian Territories Francesca Albanese condemned Trump's rhetoric on warnings to the population of Gaza, saying it amounted to encouraging collective punishment, which is illegal under international law.

Trump's threats coincided with news that a U.S. envoy had held secret talks with Hamas, apparently departing from a decades-old U.S. policy of not negotiating with the Islamist Palestinian faction deemed an extremist organization by Washington.

"Trump's repeated threats against our people represent support to Netanyahu to evade the agreement and tighten the siege and starvation against our people," Hamas spokesperson Abdel-Latif Al-Qanoua said in a text message to Reuters.

"The best track to release the remaining Israeli prisoners is by... going into the second phase (of the ceasefire) and compelling it (Israel) to adhere to the agreement signed under the sponsorship of mediators," he said.

The Gaza ceasefire deal that took effect in January calls for the remaining hostages to be freed in a second phase, during which final plans would be



negotiated for an end to the war.

The first phase of the ceasefire ended on Saturday, and Israel has since imposed a total blockade on all goods entering the enclave, demanding that Hamas free remaining hostages without beginning the negotiations to end the Gaza war.

Palestinians say the blockade could lead to starvation among the 2.3

million people living in Gaza's ruins.

Trump made his new threats after a White House meeting on Wednesday with a group of hostages who had been released in the first phase of the ceasefire deal.

"I am sending Israel everything it needs to finish the job, not a single Hamas member will be safe if you don't do as I say," he said in his social media post. "Also, to the People of Gaza: A beautiful Future awaits, but not if you hold Hostages. If you do, you are DEAD! Make a SMART decision. RELEASE THE HOSTAGES NOW, OR THERE WILL BE HELL TO PAY LATER!"

Rights groups, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, have repeatedly called on Hamas to release hostages.

"It (Trump's statement) is implying or suggesting that using military force and punishing the entire population of Gaza would be permissible in light of the unlawful decision of armed groups to continue to hold Israeli civilians hostage," Omar Shakir, the Israel and Palestine Director at Human Rights Watch, told Reuters in an interview.

In a televised speech, Hamas armed wing spokesman Abu Ubaida said Israel's threats to resume the fighting or tighten the Gaza blockade would not secure the release of hostages, adding that the group was "ready for all possibilities".

"The enemy's threats in war and blockade would only bring them disappointment and will not lead to the release of its prisoners (hostages)," said Abu Ubaida.

"We tell all those concerned that we have signs of life of all the remaining living hostages of the enemy and any escalation on Gaza will most likely result in the killing of some enemy prisoners (hostages) as in many previous cases."

Israel has accused Hamas of killing hostages the militant group said had died in Israeli military strikes on Gaza.

Major Powers Should Not Bully the Weak

BEIJING (Dispatches) - Beijing will "resolutely counter" U.S. pressure on tariffs and the fentanyl issue, China's foreign minister said on Friday, adding that major powers "should not bully the weak", in a veiled swipe at the Trump administration's foreign policy.

Top diplomat Wang Yi also presented China as a reliable global power in the midst of geopolitical turmoil and U.S. President Donald Trump's withdrawal from international institutions, part of a clear appeal from Beijing to Europe and countries in the Global South.

The U.S. levied an additional 10% tariff on Chinese imports this week over the continued flow of the deadly opioid fentanyl into the country, threatening to worsen an escalatory spiral of trade actions.

"If one side blindly exerts pressure, China will resolutely counter that," Foreign Minister Wang Yi said at a press conference on the sidelines of China's annual parliamentary meeting.

The U.S. "should not repay kindness with grievances, let alone impose tariffs without reason," Wang added, referring to the "various assistance" Beijing has



provided Washington on tackling the flow of fentanyl precursor drugs into the U.S. No country can suppress China on the one hand and develop good relations with China on the other, said Wang, when asked how China would engage with the Trump administration over the next four years.

Such a "two-faced" approach is not helpful to stable ties, he said, without identifying any individual in the U.S. administration.

Wang's largely subdued remarks on the U.S., without mentioning Trump once by name, suggested Beijing wishes to keep the prospect of potential future trade talks alive, said Wen-Ti Sung, a Taiwan-based nonresident fellow at the Atlantic Council's Global China Hub.

"They want to pursue any room for de-escalation with Trump when it comes to trade," Sung said. "One way of doing it is to keep the level of rhetorical intensity down to manageable size to preserve room for manoeuvre for both sides."

On resolving the Ukraine war, China wants to achieve a "fair, lasting and binding peace agreement" acceptable to all parties, Wang Yi said.

Liverpool Smash and Grab Stuns PSG in Champions League



LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool snatched a late winner to beat Paris Saint-Germain away 1-0 in the first leg of their heavyweight Champions League last-16 tie, while Bayern Munich took charge with a 3-0 win over German rivals Bayer Leverkusen.

French league leaders PSG dominated at the Parc des Princes but couldn't make their superiority count and Harvey Elliott struck three minutes from time after replacing Mohamed Salah with Liverpool's only shot on target.

Khvicha Kvaratskhelia had a goal ruled out for offside in the first half but Arne Slot's side defended resolutely to keep PSG at bay and are in a strong position to advance to the quarter-finals going into next week's second leg at Anfield.

Liverpool goalkeeper Alisson Becker made several crucial saves as PSG had 28 attempts on goal but could not replicate the finishing that had allowed them to score 21 goals in their last five Champions League outings.

"It was probably the performance of my life," Alisson told TNT Sports.

"To go away with a win over here was probably a bit more than we deserved," added Slot.

If Liverpool finish the job at home next Tuesday, they could face Aston Villa in the quarterfinals, but PSG coach Luis Enrique said his side will have "nothing to lose".

"We deserved to win clearly, we created a lot of chances," said the Spaniard. "Football is unfair many times and you have to accept that."

Harry Kane scored twice as Bayern closed in on the last eight with a first win over Xabi Alonso's Leverkusen in seven matches.

The England captain headed in Michael Olise's superb cross to give Bayern the lead at the Allianz Arena. Jamal Musiala added a second early in the second half when Leverkusen goalkeeper Matej Kovar let an innocuous delivery into the box from Joshua Kimmich slip from his grasp.

Bayern lost Manuel Neuer to injury before the night went from bad to worse for Leverkusen, who had Nordi Mukiele sent off.

Kane rounded off the scoring from the penalty spot following a VAR review after he was impeded by Edmond Tapsoba.

"It was a really big step in the right direction. We've struggled against this side over the last couple of years," Kane told DAZN.

A downbeat Alonso admitted it would take a remarkable turn of events for Leverkusen to overturn the deficit.

"In football we've seen big miracles quite often and we almost need one," he said.

Barcelona edged past Benfica 1-0 in Lisbon thanks to Raphinha's second-half strike despite playing most of the game with 10 men.

Teenage defender Pau Cubarsi was sent off midway through the first half for a foul as the last defender, but Barcelona clung on and Raphinha drilled home after 61 minutes to give the five-time European champions a slim advantage.

"I said to the (team) chapeau, I'm very proud," said Barcelona coach Hansi Flick.

"After the 22nd minute with 10 players it was not easy, and this is a big win."

Inter Milan seized control of their tie against Feyenoord as Marcus Thuram and Lautaro Martinez scored in a 2-0 win in Rotterdam.

France striker Thuram hooked in a cross from Nicolo Barella slightly against the run of play late in the first half, with Lautaro Martinez lashing in a second on 50 minutes.

"We had to suffer a bit tonight but we didn't have to for long," said Inter coach Simone Inzaghi.

"We were together when we needed to be. We know the challenges that the second leg will bring, but I am very happy."

Feyenoord knocked out Inter's city rivals AC Milan in the play-off round but have since changed coaches, with former Arsenal and Manchester United striker Robin van Persie returning to take charge of his hometown club.

LeBron Breaks 50,000 Scoring Barrier, Curry Sparks Warriors



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - LeBron James became the first player in NBA history to score 50,000 career points, extending his lead as the league's all-time record scorer by reaching a milestone tally that may never be surpassed.

The Los Angeles Lakers superstar went into the game against the New Orleans Pelicans with 49,999 regular and postseason points after a 17-point performance in Sunday's win over the Los Angeles Clippers.

It did not take long for the 40-year-old NBA icon to get the solitary point needed to reach the 50,000-point barrier.

James, who is in dazzling form in the 22nd season of a glittering career, gathered a pass from Luka Doncic and unfurled a sublime 25-foot three-pointer to move to 50,002 points with the Crypto.com Arena crowd roaring their acclaim.

James finished with 34 points, eight rebounds and six assists while Doncic delivered another impressive display with 30 points and 15 assists as the Lakers went on to win 136-115 - their seventh straight victory.

"I'm not going to sugar-coat it - it's a hell of a lot of points," James said afterwards when asked about his 50,000-point scoring milestone.

"I'm super blessed to be able to put up that many points in my career in the best league in the world and against the best players in the world - it's pretty special."

James had passed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's previous all-time regular-season scoring record of 38,387 points in 2023 - itself a record that had stood for 39 years.

James is now nearly 6,000 points clear of Abdul-Jabbar's total career points tally of 44,149, with Karl Malone third (41,689 points) and the late Kobe Bryant fourth with 39,283 points.

Michael Jordan is fifth on the all-time scoring list with 38,279.

Among active NBA players, only Kevin Durant with just over 35,000 points - roughly 15,000 points behind James - makes the top 10.

Lakers legend Earvin Magic Johnson led the tributes to James' achievement.

Time for American Men to Step Up

INDIAN WELLS (Dispatches) - Taylor Fritz said it will take an American man winning a Grand Slam for men's tennis to truly break through to the younger generation at home and that it is time for the men to step up and match the results of the U.S. women.

No American man has won a Grand Slam since Andy Roddick at the U.S. Open in 2003 and they are hoping to end that drought this year with five players in the top 25.

"It's great that we are building the tennis culture in the U.S.," Fritz told reporters at Indian Wells.

"That's something that I wanted to contribute to help my whole career."

"I think the women have been doing an incredible job of that for a long, long time, and I think the guys kind of need to step it up a little bit."

"Honestly, I think it's going to take one of us winning a Slam to really get that spike of young fans on the men's side of things."

Fritz, who won Indian Wells three years ago for the biggest title of his career, said tournaments around the world need to do more to attract younger fans, including those who may not be familiar with the sport.

"I think something like the Australian Open does a great job of that," he said.

"People just go there to have a great time. It's not necessarily so much about the tennis. You watch the tennis but there are a million of things to do while you're there."

American women have been doing their part to grow the game at home, with newly minted Australian Open champion Madison Keys and 2023 U.S. Open winner Coco Gauff among the three



U.S. women in the top five.

World number four Jessica Pegula said those Grand Slam titles have had an impact.

"That's definitely a big change," she said.

"Having Coco and Maddy win Slams over the last couple of years as Americans is huge for women's tennis or for women's tennis in America."

Meanwhile former champion Naomi Osaka was sent packing from Indian Wells after a 6-4 6-4 first-round defeat by Colombia's Camila Osorio.

The Japanese four-time Grand Slam champion never looked comfortable against Osorio's dynamic shotmaking and piled up the unforced errors on a cool evening in the California desert.

After a near flawless first set from Osorio, Osaka fended off a match point at 5-3 in the second to stay alive, much to the delight of the fans.

Nerves appeared to get to Osorio as she attempted to serve out the match in the next game, where she double faulted twice and fell behind 0-40.

She regrouped, however, saving four break points in the game and crushing a forehand winner that caught the line to advance, celebrating with a dance on the court under the lights.

"First, good evening everyone, I'm Camila Osorio," she said with a laugh in an on-court interview.

"It's crazy for me, it's a dream come true. I really wanted to play on this court and was really excited and looking forwards to playing a champion like Naomi, so I can't believe it."

World number 53 Osorio becomes the first Colombian woman to beat a former world number one. She takes on 22nd seed Clara Tauson of Denmark in the second round.

It was Osaka's first match since withdrawing from the Australian Open third round due to an abdominal strain.

Osaka, who beat Daria Kasatkina in the Indian Wells final in 2018 for her first career title, appeared to struggle with the consistency of her ball tosses and accuracy off both wings.

Man United Held to 1-1 Draw at Real Sociedad

PARIS (Dispatches) - Manchester United drew 1-1 away to Real Sociedad in the first leg of their Europa League last-16 tie on Thursday, while Tottenham suffered a 1-0 loss at Dutch side AZ Alkmaar.

Joshua Zirkzee drilled in from just outside the area to give United the lead on 57 minutes in San Sebastian but Mikel Oyarzabal levelled from the spot after Bruno Fernandes was punished for a handball.

Zirkzee cut a distraught figure after missing the decisive penalty in last week's FA Cup shootout loss to Fulham and has endured a testing first season at United, whose only remaining hope of silverware is in the Europa League.



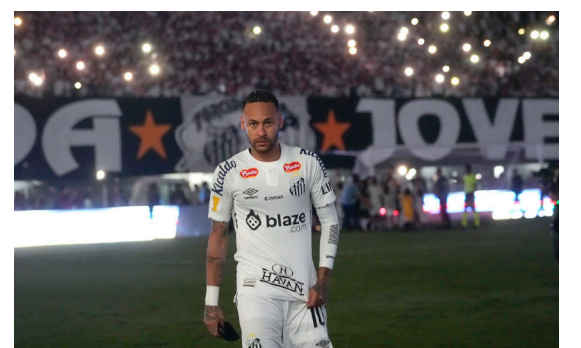
He scored for the first time in Europe this term, unleashing a sharp low drive from 20 yards after being teed up by Alejandro Garnacho's inviting pass.

But Ruben Amorim's side could not hold on to their advantage as Fernandes handled at a corner, with Oyarzabal confidently converting his spot-kick.

Andre Onana made two excellent saves to keep United level as Real Sociedad pressed for a winner, leaving the tie evenly poised ahead of next week's second leg.

"I felt until the penalty we had control of the game and then I think the penalty changed a little bit the momentum," Amorim told TNT Sports.

Neymar Returns to Brazil Squad After Stellar Form at Santos



BRASILIA (Dispatches) - Brazil have recalled Santos forward Neymar for this month's World Cup qualifiers against Colombia and Argentina after more than a year, the soccer federation announced on Thursday.

The 33-year-old sustained a knee injury in Brazil's World Cup qualifier against Uruguay in October 2023 and has struggled to get back to his best and secure a spot in the squad.

After a disappointing spell at Saudi Pro League side Al-Hilal, Neymar returned to his boyhood club Santos in January, scoring three goals and providing three assists in seven matches which has caught the eye of Brazil coach Dorival Junior.

Asked how much game time Neymar would be given in the World Cup qualifiers, Dorival told reporters: "It's a situation to be analysed. He's already played 90 minutes in two matches for Santos."

"In some of those games, he was substituted in the final moments. (His minutes in the games) will decide the spell he's going to have now, the way he's going to perform here. We'll analyse how he's doing."

Neymar has 128 caps and a record 79 goals for his country, surpassing Pele's tally of 77.

He was part of Brazil's gold medal-winning squad at the 2016 Rio Olympic Games and also helped them finish runners-up to Argentina at the 2021 Copa America.

Brazil, who are fifth in the CONMEBOL table with 18 points from 12 games, host Colombia on March 21 and visit Argentina five days later in a match that could see Neymar come up against former Barcelona and Paris St Germain teammate Lionel Messi.

The top six teams qualify directly for the World Cup.

"We're going to prepare in the best possible way to face these opponents," Dorival said.

"I have no doubt that these will be two great games, with teams that are in the top positions in the competition. We have enough quality to go for great results."

"We're very close to a breakthrough, and there's a lot of confidence that this will happen. Everything will happen, we just have to be patient."