

Foreign Ministry Summoned the British Ambassador to Tehran to Convey the Islamic Republic's Strong Protest to "Baseless" Accusations Levelled by the UK Against Tehran

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Enemy Hopes for Internal Disputes



TEHRAN - In a ceremony marking the signing of \$17 billion contracts for the pressure-boosting project at the South Pars gas field, President Masoud Pezeshkian emphasized the need to address excessive energy consumption and internal unity to counter external pressures.

Pezeshkian highlighted wasteful consumption as a societal issue, urging better management and conservation to prevent future losses. He outlined progress in energy production, including plans to end the flaring of gas in Khuzestan by next year.

The president stressed enhancing efficiency by reducing oil and gas consumption and shifting to clean energy sources like solar and wind for heating, cooling, and electricity.

Addressing external threats, particularly from the U.S. and potential sanctions under a Trump administration, Pezeshkian warned that enemies exploit Iran's internal divisions.

Pezeshkian also advocated for quicker decision-making, echoing Supreme Leader critiques of projects delayed by years, and pledged to expedite the South Pars contracts.

The president concluded by stressing the need for constructive dialogue and synergy to achieve national goals, reinforcing that unity under leadership guidance is essential to overcome Iran's challenges.

Two-State Solution Fails to Secure Palestinian Rights

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has reaffirmed Tehran's rejection of the two-state solution as a means to securing Palestinian rights, emphasizing that Iran's unwavering support for the Palestinian cause remains steadfast under all circumstances.

Speaking on Friday at an extraordinary meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) foreign ministers, convened to address Israeli aggression and crimes against the Palestinian people in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Araqchi underscored Iran's firm stance on Palestine and described Tehran's support as "indisputable."

"The uncompromising support of the government and people of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the cause of Palestine is indisputable and our steadfast commitment will not waver under any circumstances," he said.

He also dismissed the "two-state solution," advocating instead for a "one democratic state" as the only viable resolution.

"With due respect to the views of some brotherly countries on the two-state solution, the Islamic Republic of Iran maintains its view that this solution will not lead to the realization of the right of the Palestinian people," Araqchi stated.

He also emphasized Iran's position in favor of a single democratic state representing all original inhabitants of Palestine and distanced Tehran from any references to the two-state framework in the meeting.

The Iranian foreign minister also highlighted the "unspeakable pain and suffering" endured by the people of Gaza during 16 months of Israel's genocidal war, where the death toll has surpassed 48,446, with the majority of victims being women and children.

"The situation in Palestine, particularly in the Gaza Strip, is a matter of profound concern. This crisis is not only a humanitarian disaster but also a grave injustice to a nation that has been systematically deprived of its fundamental rights and human dignity for over seven decades, subjected to relentless aggression and occupation," he noted.

The top diplomat also condemned the "unwavering and unconditional support" of the US and its Western allies for Israel in its war on Gaza.

Citing Washington's military, financial, and diplomatic backing of Tel Aviv, Araqchi asserted that developments in Gaza clearly demonstrate US complicity in the crimes committed by the Israeli regime.

"The United States has once again chosen to turn a blind eye to the root causes of the crisis, prioritizing its strategic alliance with the Israeli regime over the fundamental principles of justice and human rights," he stated.

He further noted that Israel, emboldened by this unwavering support, has carried out "unimaginable atrocities that mark all major international crimes including war crimes, crimes against humanity, ethnic cleansing, racial discrimination, and genocide."



However, he noted that despite the war crimes committed in Gaza, the Tel Aviv regime continues to evade accountability, enjoying impunity for its blatant violations of international law.

Araqchi also strongly rejected the US administration's bids "to forcibly relocate the population of Gaza," calling it a "clear violation of international law, including the Fourth Geneva Convention."

He stressed that any attempt to alter the "demographic and cultural fabric of the occupied Palestine" is inadmissible and contrary to the principles of justice and international law.

"Iran also expresses its deep concern over the political and humanitarian implications of such actions for the region and the world. It simply adds insult to the injuries of the present generation, while guaranteeing an ever-lasting grief for generations to come," he warned.

Elsewhere in his speech, the Iranian diplomat reaffirmed the "inherent" right of Palestinians to defend themselves against Israeli occupation and aggression.

He emphasized that "this right is enshrined in international law and does not require the approval of any external power."

He criticized Western states for justifying Israeli crimes under the pretext of "self-defense" while simultaneously denying Palestinian resistance groups the same right.

Araqchi urged the international community to reject these "misleading narratives" and recognize Palestinian resistance groups—established to fight occupation, apartheid, and aggression—as legitimate actors under international law.

The Iranian diplomat also called for "collective sanctions against Israel" and all corporations and entities that directly or indirectly support and sustain the Israeli occupation and its crimes.

He urged at least the member states of the OIC to implement such measures as a way to pressure the Zionist regime into halting its crimes against the people of Gaza and other nations in the region.

Highlighting Israel's nearly week-long blockade of humanitarian aid to Gaza, Araqchi stressed the urgency of delivering relief to alleviate Palestinian suffering.

He proposed that this effort be accompanied by the creation of an OIC-led international campaign to finance the reconstruction of homes, hospitals, and essential infrastructure in the besieged strip.

He also called for Israel's expulsion from the United Nations, citing its repeated violations of the UN Charter, its designation of the UN Secretary-General as persona non grata, the obstruction of UNRWA's humanitarian operations, and the unprecedented killing of hundreds of UN staff in Palestine.

Araqchi proposed the establishment of an International Gaza Victims' Remembrance Day to serve as a lasting tribute to the suffering endured by the people of Gaza, ensuring that their struggle against Israeli crimes is not forgotten.

Iran Slams U.S. Maximum Pressure Policy as Crime Against Humanity



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran says Washington's continuation of its so-called "maximum pressure" policy against Tehran is tantamount to "crime against humanity," stressing that the failed policy will not yield new results for Washington.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei made the announcement on Friday, a day after U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said his country's sanctions against Iran are designed to shut down its oil industry and "collapse its already buckling economy."

He said Bessent's hostile remarks clearly indicate the continuation of hostility of American policymakers towards the Iranian people.

Baghaei pointed to the failure of the US policy of pressure and intimidation against the Iranian people at different junctures, saying it is a "clear violation of the principles and objectives of the United Nations Charter and international law which is subject to international responsibility for the US government."

The Iranian spokesperson cautioned that "it is a mistake to test the tried."

"American policymakers are not expected to achieve a different outcome from what they have obtained so far by repeating incorrect policies," Baghaei emphasized.

Iran's approach in international diplomacy is based on logic and mutual respect for securing the legitimate and lawful interests of the Iranian people, he said, adding that Iran would not accept any behavior or statement that does not align with this approach.

He emphasized that the Iranian people would continue to improve their capacities in various fields and would "respond to any illegal and inhumane pressure with resistance and perseverance."

In his speech at the Economic Club of New York, Bessent claimed that the US is deploying sanctions against Iran aggressively for "immediate maximum impact," saying US President Donald Trump's goal is to slash Iran's oil exports of 1.5 million barrels per day to a trickle.

Iran Has Not Received Any Letter From Trump Yet



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's permanent mission to the United Nations has dismissed the latest claim by U.S. President Donald Trump about sending a letter to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, proposing negotiations on a new nuclear deal.

"We have not received such a letter yet," the mission said on Friday.

In an interview with Fox Business' Maria Bartiromo on Friday, the US president claimed that he has sent a letter to Ayatollah Khamenei and proposed to negotiate with Iran on a deal on the country's nuclear program.

"I said I hope you're going to negotiate, because it's going to be a lot better for Iran," he claimed, before threatening Tehran with military action.

"I think they want to get that letter. The other alternative is we have to do something, because you can't let another nuclear weapon," he said despite Tehran's repeated stance that it does not seek to develop nukes.

In February, Ayatollah Khamenei said experience has shown that negotiations with the US have no effect on solving Iran's problems.

"Some people pretend that if we sit at the negotiating table, some problem will be solved, but the fact that we must understand correctly is that negotiating with the US has no effect on solving the country's problems," the Leader emphasized.

Later in February, Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian reiterated Tehran's openness to negotiations, but emphasized that the Islamic Republic will not give in to the pressure of bullying powers and won't engage in any negotiations under duress.

Sanctions Not Working Against Iran



LONDON (Dispatches) - The United Nations top nuclear official says the United States-led sanctions against Iran's nuclear energy program have been ineffective.

"Sanctions aren't working," Rafael Grossi, director general of the world body's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), told Bloomberg in an interview published on Friday.

"Quite obviously, the country has learned to circumvent them. The program has grown enormously, especially since 2018."

Last month, the Islamic Republic's nuclear chief, Mohammad Eslami likewise dismissed the efficacy of the illegal and unilateral bans.

The head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) reiterated that the country's enemies were not capable of preventing it from achieving its goals by imposing sanctions and exerting economic pressure on the country or assassinating its scientists, referring to the Israeli regime's targeted killing of at least seven Iranian nuclear scientists over the past decades.

"In order to achieve our goals, we don't care about the enemies' sanctions and pressure," Eslami said, adding "We will continue the path that we have drawn for ourselves to reach our goals."

Despite external pressures, Iran continues to advance its nuclear capabilities for civilian applications, including medicine and agriculture, he noted, repeating Iranian officials' invariable assertion that the country's nuclear program is solely geared towards civilian purposes.

Japan Ambassador Says Secondary Sanctions on Iran Are Unjust

TEHRAN - Japan's Ambassador to Iran, Tsukada Tamaki, has expressed concerns over the state of economic ties between Japan and Iran, attributing their underdevelopment to secondary sanctions imposed by the United States, which he deems unjust. In an exclusive interview with IRNA, Tamaki also addressed Japan's apprehensions—and those of the broader international community—regarding the unpredictability of U.S. President Donald Trump's policies.

Tamaki, who has been stationed in Tehran for about a year, has emerged as one of the most active foreign diplomats in Iran. Beyond frequent political engagements with Iranian officials, he has spearheaded numerous cultural initiatives, strengthening ties between the two nations. Speaking at the Japanese Embassy, he reflected on the current state of Japan-Iran relations and the challenges ahead.

With the 100th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Japan and Iran approaching in 2029, Tamaki emphasized efforts to make it a landmark year. "I would describe the current relationship between Japan and Iran as warm and trust-based," he said. Despite this, he acknowledged that economic cooperation falls short of its potential—a gap both nations recognize. "The strong mutual affection between our peoples and extensive interactions in cultural, scientific, academic, and non-economic fields sustain this stable and promising relationship," he added. He noted the absence of hostility or negative historical baggage, with both countries sharing mutual respect rooted in their ancient civilizations.

Tamaki highlighted fond memories of Iranian hold of Japan, such as the popular TV series Oshin (known locally as Years Away from Home), which remains a cultural touchstone, and the reputation of Japanese goods as symbols of quality. Yet, economic collaboration lags. When asked about obstacles, he pointed to international sanctions, particularly U.S. secondary sanctions, as the primary barrier. These measures penalize third-party nations like Japan for engaging in trade with Iran, creating a significant deterrent. "If a Japanese company partners with an Iranian counterpart, it risks U.S. punishment," Tamaki explained. "Private companies naturally prioritize profit and stability, avoiding such risks."

He elaborated that Japanese firms, heavily invested in the U.S. market and reliant on dollar-based transactions, are constrained by these sanctions. "Even if the Japanese government encourages trade with Iran, companies cannot conduct financial transactions due to these restrictions," he said. Tamaki was unequivocal in his stance: "I don't consider secondary



sanctions fair. Extraterritorial application of U.S. law is unjust. Every company should have the right to choose its trading partners without interference from a third country."

The ambassador's critique reflects a broader sentiment of frustration over external meddling in bilateral ties. "Iran and Japan want economic cooperation, yet a third party obstructs it," he said, questioning the equity of such interventions.

On the topic of Japan's potential role as a mediator between Iran and the U.S., Tamaki remained cautious. "I'd prefer not to comment on internal discussions with the Iranian government," he said. "But we maintain regular high-level contact and enjoy significant trust from Iran, which is a great privilege." He avoided specifics, underscoring Japan's diplomatic discretion.

Addressing whether U.S. policies disproportionately shape Japan-Iran relations, Tamaki rejected the premise. "We've maintained a high level of mutual trust, evidenced by frequent consultations at all levels," he countered. He cited the recent visit of Japan's deputy foreign minister for the 32nd round of political talks with Iranian counterpart Dr. Takht-Ravanchi, alongside ongoing dialogues on disarmament, human rights, and consular affairs. "Iran is among the countries with the most extensive governmental exchanges with Japan," he said, emphasizing the depth of their bond.

Tamaki also touched on Japan's environmental cooperation with Iran, including a 690 million yen contribution to revive Lake Urmia. This joint project with the United Nations, ongoing since 2014, addresses the lake's decline due to climate change and overuse of water for agriculture. "We're exploring efficient irrigation systems and alternative land uses to reverse this trend," he said.

Regarding Trump's return to power, Tamaki echoed global unease. "Not just Japan, but the entire world harbors doubts about Trump's policies," he said. Describing Trump as "unpredictable" rather than "unreliable," he noted the uncertainty stemming from his decision-making. However, he pointed to a recent successful meeting between Japan's prime minister and Trump, reaffirming U.S. support for Japan and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

In closing, Tamaki underscored Iran's commitment to fostering ties with Iran despite external pressures. His candid criticism of secondary sanctions and cautious optimism about navigating global uncertainties highlight the delicate balance Japan seeks in its foreign relations—a balance tested by both economic constraints and geopolitical shifts.

IRAN NEWS



Unprecedented Growth in Iran's Non-Oil Exports Over 11 Months This Year

TEHRAN (ILNA) - Seyed Ruhollah Latifi, commenting on the state of Iran's non-oil trade, announced that the country's non-oil exports have seen remarkable growth in the first 11 months of this year.

He stated that the export figures for this period are \$8.5 billion higher than the same period last year and \$4.5 billion more than the 11-month total in 1401 (2022-2023), which previously marked the highest record for non-oil exports in a single year.

Latifi further noted, "It is projected that exports for the year 1403 (2024-2025) will reach approximately \$58 billion. With this amount, the record for the country's non-oil exports, previously set in 1401, will be surpassed."

Iran Seeks Foreign Investment to Boost Trade Infrastructure With Eurasia



TEHRAN - The Vice President of the Iran-Russia Joint Chamber of Commerce, Roshanali Yekta Qarabai, emphasized the urgent need to enhance Iran's trade infrastructure with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) ahead of the implementation of a free trade agreement. Speaking to ILNA, Yekta highlighted that while Iran's trade infrastructure with Eurasian countries has improved in recent years, it remains inadequate for free trade. He pointed to significant weaknesses in transportation systems, including maritime, rail, and road networks, which require substantial upgrades.

Yekta stressed that the government should have acted earlier to bolster infrastructure before the free trade law was ratified. With Iran positioned as the easiest route to open waters for landlocked Eurasian nations, the potential for increased cargo traffic through the country is immense. However, he warned that the government must adopt a clear strategy to harness this opportunity effectively.

Addressing the country's chronic lack of construction funds, Yekta proposed attracting investors from EAEU member states as a viable solution. "The absence of sufficient budgets has already caused significant damage," he noted, adding that domestic resources alone cannot cover the costs of infrastructure development. He underscored that foreign investment is a globally accepted practice and essential for Iran, which, despite having skilled engineers and technical expertise, lacks the capital to fund such projects independently.

Yekta also raised concerns about the multi-tiered exchange rates for the Russian ruble in Iran, a currency widely used in transactions with Eurasian countries. He explained that the fluctuating rates—currently 10,260 IRR on the open market versus 6,000 IRR on the NIMA rate—create confusion and hinder trade. Unlike past challenges tied to external factors, these financial hurdles now stem from domestic policies, with the ruble still unavailable for trading in Iran's agreed currency market.

Iran Aims to Showcase Brands in Global Stores, Highlights Importance of AI

TEHRAN - Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization, emphasized the need for Iranian brands to penetrate global markets and appear on the shelves of major international stores. Speaking at the National Brand Conference, an event celebrating Iran's top commercial brands, Dehnavi stressed that export success hinges on delivering products directly to foreign consumers, thereby generating significant added value for the country.



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

Dehnavi announced the establishment of a permanent branding secretariat in Khorasan Razavi Province, signaling a move to decentralize efforts from the capital. He highlighted the province's potential to become a hub for brand development and infrastructure, urging that the initiative extend beyond an annual event. "Khorasan Razavi can serve as a center for strengthening national brands, especially if we delegate this work to the private sector," he said.

Dehnavi acknowledged Iran's industrial progress but raised a critical question: "How many internationally acclaimed brands do we have, and how well-known are our brands regionally and globally?" He admitted that Iran's performance in this area has been lackluster, stating, "To be fair, we have not done well and are far from optimal results."

Shifting focus to exports, Dehnavi called for a strategic pivot toward securing a foothold in target markets. "Exporting isn't just about selling abroad; it's about reaching the end consumer. We should see Iranian brands in major global stores," he said, pointing to the country's innovative and modern food industry as a prime candidate for international expansion. He cited saffron as an example, insisting it should be marketed globally under Iranian brand names—a

key pillar of the Trade Promotion Organization's strategy.

The deputy minister of industry, mining, and trade urged Iranian companies to align their products with the preferences of target markets and invest in international identity-building and advertising. He described the nationalization of the branding conference as a step toward establishing an identity beyond Iran's borders, expressing hope that future events would honor brands that succeed abroad.

Despite limited budgetary resources, Dehnavi pledged the organization's support, promising to facilitate processes and assist Iranian firms. He concluded by addressing emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), noting their growing importance. "The world is undergoing fundamental changes. Many of our current methods may soon become outdated, requiring us to adopt new approaches," he warned, urging stakeholders to prioritize AI and technological innovation.

Meanwhile addressing the event, the Deputy Minister of Industry, Mining, and Trade (EMT) said: "Pricing is a blight on branding, and the government, through pricing, eliminates the motivation for competition."

Mohammad Sadeh Mofatteh stated at the National Brand Conference (a national event to introduce and honor the country's top commercial brands): "A brand is a significant asset for economic enterprises, and sometimes a brand becomes representative of an entire country. For example, today, more than South Korea itself, we recognize the Samsung brand, and some of us may not even know that Samsung is a Korean brand."

He added: "Therefore, a brand is intertwined with our national identity, and an Iranian brand represents the entirety of Iranian identity."

Iran, Russia, Belarus Launch Tourism Development Initiative



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Civil Aviation Organization and his Russian counterpart have agreed to harmonize regulations, expedite cooperation in the aviation industry, boost tourism development, and draft joint airport-related legislation during a meeting in Moscow.

Hossein Pourfarzaneh, Iran's Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development and head of the Civil Aviation Organization, met with Dmitry Yarov, head of Russia's Civil Aviation Authority. The meeting, attended by aviation officials from both nations, focused on enhancing bilateral cooperation in aviation and flight standards.

The two sides committed to taking concrete steps toward aligning regulations to accelerate collaboration in the aviation sector. One key agreement was the development of a joint airport regulation framework, which will also be incorporated into Iran's aviation laws to standardize airport equipment and operations.

Building on a memorandum of understanding signed three months ago, both parties agreed to elevate their cooperation in aviation and flight standards based on higher-level directives and documents. Following Pourfarzaneh's return to Iran, a higher-level memorandum is scheduled to be signed in April.

Following his visit to Russia, Hossein Pourfarzaneh arrived in Belarus on Friday morning, where he held talks with Sergei Dubin, Belarus' Deputy Minister of Transport, Igor Glob, head of Belarus' Civil Aviation Organization, and Alireza Sane'i, Iran's Ambassador to Belarus.

The discussions centered on expanding bilateral cooperation in tourism by leveraging the existing capacities of both countries. Held with participation from deputy officials and representatives of the aviation organizations of Iran and Belarus, the meeting resulted in agreements to strengthen ties in the aviation industry and promote tourism relations.

Pourfarzaneh expressed gratitude for the warm hospitality of Belarus' Deputy Minister of Transport and Civil Aviation Organization, as well as their efforts in organizing specialized meetings. He emphasized that mutual cooperation in tourism could significantly boost the economies of both nations, noting that many Iranian tourists are keen to visit Belarus. He added that Iran currently has over 3,400 travel agencies under the supervision of its Civil Aviation Organization, ready to collaborate on tourism programs between Iran and Belarus.

Iran Ranks 127th in Global Ease of Doing Business: A Warning for Investment



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's global ranking of 127th in the Ease of Doing Business index, coupled with a score of 4.63 in the Economic Freedom Index—placing it 158th out of 165 countries—has raised significant concerns about the country's investment climate.

Navid Amjad, head of the Entrepreneurship, Knowledge-Based Economy, and Business Environment Improvement Commission at the Tabriz Chamber of Commerce, described these rankings as "highly unfavorable" during a recent commission meeting. He warned that the decline in Iran's standing increases investment risks, according to a report by Iran Chamber of Commerce Online (Otaghironline).

Amjad stressed the urgency of improving Iran's ranking despite internal and external sanctions, emphasizing the need for collective efforts to enhance the conditions for starting and managing businesses. He highlighted the importance of monitoring the business environment, urging a shift in methods to ensure faster, more accurate, and reliable data collection. He called on provincial institutions to swiftly present actionable plans to reform and improve the business climate in East Azerbaijan.

The commission chair also underscored the need for cultural shifts among economic stakeholders, encouraging active participation in business environment surveys. "If executive bodies integrate these questionnaires into their client respect initiatives, it would foster a culture of engagement, increase response rates, and improve the credibility of results," Amjad noted.

Globally, the Ease of Doing Business index is a critical measure for investment attractiveness, with the International Monetary Fund establishing benchmarks in this area. In Iran, the National Center for Business Environment Studies, Monitoring, and Improvement—formed in 2017 under the Ministry of Economic Affairs—aims to bolster the private sector and enhance the business landscape.

Amjad expressed optimism that with collective participation, East Azerbaijan's business environment could see significant progress. He urged stakeholders to aim not just for national averages but to benchmark against top-performing provinces. The meeting, attended by representatives from the private and public sectors, focused on identifying key indicators and challenges to improve the province's business climate, reinforcing the Tabriz Chamber's commitment to economic development.

Iran's Tourism Industry Faces 50% Decline in Travel Ahead of Nowruz 1404



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's tourism sector is grappling with a staggering 50% drop in inbound, outbound, and domestic travel as the country approaches the Nowruz holidays in 1404 (starting March 20, 2025). According to a recent report by ILNA, the sudden surge in foreign exchange rates has deterred many Iranians from planning trips, pushing families to opt for camping and picnics instead of booking tours or hotel stays.

Hormatollah Rafiei, President of Iran's Association of Travel Agencies, told ILNA that the tourism industry is in a state of disarray. "With less than two weeks until the New Year and the Nowruz holidays, many travel agencies report they've been unable to attract clients," Rafiei said. He highlighted a troubling trend: agencies are not only struggling to sell tickets to domestic travelers but are also unable to serve foreign nationals, exacerbating the industry's woes.

ILNA's investigation revealed that the exorbitant cost of travel within Iran is a key factor driving this decline. For instance, a trip to Kish Island—a popular domestic destination—costs approximately 50 million tomans (around \$1,000 USD at current unofficial rates) per person, including airfare and hotel stays. For a family of four, this balloons to 200 million tomans, a prohibitive expense for many households amid economic instability.

Rafiei lamented that Nowruz 1404 is shaping up to be a "bitter" holiday for travel agencies compared to the previous year. "The tourism industry is regressing," he said. "All the tools at our disposal are moving in a direction that harms Iranian tourism." Official reports also confirm that the country's formal accommodation facilities, such as hotels, remain underbooked, signaling a broader crisis.

The primary culprit, according to Rafiei, is the unchecked rise in exchange rates and the plummeting value of the Iranian rial. "The lack of currency stability is the biggest reason for the decline in inbound, outbound, and domestic tourism," he explained. "People don't know whether they should travel at all, and even those who still prioritize travel can't make firm plans under these conditions."

Rafiei criticized domestic policies for making travel unaffordable. He pointed to the government's failure to regulate exchange rates and the imposition of heavy taxes on the tourism sector—measures that contradict global norms where tourism and transportation are often tax-exempt. In Iran, a recently passed law exempts sea, rail, and road travel from taxes but excludes air travel, driving up flight costs. "This is unheard of elsewhere in the world," Rafiei said. "Heavy taxation

increases the price of travel packages, airfares, and hotel rates, which is the greatest damage to our industry."

Adding to the chaos, some players in the tourism supply chain are reportedly attempting to charge foreign tourists in dollars instead of rials—a practice Rafiei condemned as illegal and damaging. "We don't have the right to do this," he said. "Unfortunately, some of this mess is self-inflicted by decision-makers in the industry who pass shortsighted policies."

Rafiei recounted meetings with foreign ambassadors, where he urged reciprocal tourism flows. "We send tourists to your countries, so you should send some to Iran," he told them. Their response was telling: while they welcomed Iranian visitors, they stressed that Iran must moderate its travel costs to remain competitive. "At first, we thought travel to Iran was cheap due to the rial's low value," Rafiei admitted. "But after calculating, we realized how expensive it has become."

This pricing disparity has hit inbound tourism hard, with agencies now unable to sell tickets to foreigners—a violation of international travel norms, according to Rafiei. "We can't legally charge different rates to foreign nationals for the same services," he said.

Domestically, the situation is equally grim. Travel agencies are reporting a sharp drop in Nowruz bookings, with many complaining to the association about dwindling reservations. "Travel is gradually being erased from household budgets," Rafiei warned, noting that years of effort to elevate Iran's tourism industry are unraveling.

Comparing this year to previous ones, Rafiei noted that Nowruz 1403 already saw a 50% drop from the 42 million trips recorded in 1402. He predicts a similar decline for 1404, with inbound tourism nearing "almost zero" and outbound travel stagnating. Even domestic travel has shifted abroad—Turkey, for instance, has seen a surge in Iranian visitors, overtaking Russia and Germany as the top source of tourists. "A trip to a Turkish village like Van, not even a major destination, is cheaper than traveling within Iran," Rafiei explained.

Without private-sector involvement in decision-making, Rafiei sees little hope for recovery. "The government isn't supervising or controlling this mess," he said, citing lax oversight of travel agencies and exploitative practices that leave travelers stranded or overcharged.

As Nowruz 1404 approaches, Iran's tourism industry braces for another lackluster season, with economic turmoil and policy missteps threatening its survival.

Over 500m Tons of Cargo Transported Across Iran with a 4% Increase



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Road Maintenance and Transportation Organization reported that more than 545 million tons of cargo were transported across the country via its road network during the first 11 months of the current year, marking a 4% increase compared to the same period last year.

According to ILNA, Mehrdad Hamdollahi, Director General of the Goods Transportation Office at the organization, highlighted that from the beginning of the year until the end of February, a total of 545.4 million tons of goods were moved through the country's road infrastructure. He noted that 82 active freight terminals and transportation hubs across various regions have supported these operations.

Hamdollahi elaborated that, during this period, 21 million tons of essential goods were transported from Iran's ports to various destinations nationwide via road networks. Additionally, over 104 million tons of agricultural, livestock, and food products, as well as more than 182.8 million tons of construction and mineral goods, were moved across the country's transportation routes.

The director general also provided insights into the fleet supporting these logistics efforts, stating that more than 460,000 cargo vehicles, with an average age exceeding 18 years, are currently operational in the road transport sector. He emphasized the scale of human and logistical resources involved, noting that over 565,000 drivers and 5,561 companies and institutions are actively engaged in goods transportation across Iran's provinces.

Furthermore, Hamdollahi revealed that 243,573 pickup trucks, with an average operational age of over 13 years, have been licensed by the Road Maintenance and Transportation Organization and are contributing to cargo transport activities.

This significant transportation activity underscores Iran's ongoing efforts to bolster its road-based logistics network, despite an aging fleet, as it continues to meet domestic and regional demands.

Pope Francis Faces Long Road to Recovery

VATICAN CITY (Dispatches) - Three weeks to the day after being admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital, Pope Francis is still struggling to shake off the double pneumonia that has battered his already fragile health. The 88-year-old pontiff has not been seen in public since entering hospital, and the Vatican has given no indication of when he might come out, or when he could resume anything like his usually demanding work schedule. The road to recovery is likely to be long and fraught with danger, said medical experts who are not involved in his care and were speaking in general terms about his condition.



U.S. Mulls How to Ease Russia Energy Sanctions Quickly If War Ends



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. government is studying ways it could ease sanctions on Russia's energy sector as part of a broad plan to enable Washington to deliver swift relief if Moscow agrees to end the Ukraine war, according to two sources familiar with the matter. Reuters had reported earlier in the week that the United States was drawing up plans to potentially lift Russian sanctions on select entities and individuals, but it was not clear at the time whether the initiative would include Russia's enormous oil and gas industry.

Russia is among the world's largest oil and gas producers, and the U.S. has sought to starve Russia of the cash it needs for the war effort by targeting the industry with sanctions, and by leading a multilateral effort to cap the price of Russian oil exports to \$60 a barrel.

The White House has asked the Treasury Department to explore options for easing energy sanctions ahead of expected talks between President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin to end the Ukraine war, the two sources said, speaking on condition of anonymity.

That work would allow Washington to roll back the sanctions quickly in the event of a peace deal, according to the sources, who made clear the effort should not be read as an indication that the U.S. would lift the sanctions without Russian concessions.

Trump says he plans to meet with Putin in Saudi Arabia in coming weeks to negotiate a deal to end the three-year-old Ukraine war, and analysts say relaxing the sanctions represents a likely centerpiece of any agreement.

Trump on Friday also raised the prospect of imposing more large-scale U.S. sanctions on Russia and called on both countries to get on with negotiating a peace deal.

Trump's threat came after Russian forces hit Ukrainian energy and gas infrastructure overnight. The Russian attack was the first since the U.S. paused aid and intelligence sharing with Ukraine.

OIC Backs Egyptian Alternative to Trump's Controversial Gaza Takeover



JEDDAH (Dispatches) - The Organization of Islamic Cooperation on Friday endorsed an Arab League counter-proposal to U.S. President Donald Trump's controversial plan to take over Gaza and displace its residents, two ministers told AFP.

The decision by the 57-member grouping came at an emergency meeting in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, three days after the Arab League ratified the plan at a summit in Cairo.

The Egyptian-crafted alternative to Trump's widely condemned takeover proposes to rebuild the Gaza Strip under the future administration of the Palestinian Authority.

"The emergency ministerial meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation adopted the Egyptian plan, which has now become an Arab-Islamic plan," Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty said, in comments echoed by his Sudanese counterpart.

"It is certainly a very positive thing," Abdelatty said.

Trump triggered global outrage by suggesting the US "take over" Gaza and turn it into the "Riviera of the Middle East", while forcing its Palestinian inhabitants to relocate to Egypt or Jordan.

At Tuesday's summit in Cairo, Arab leaders also announced a trust fund to pay for Gaza's reconstruction and urged the international community to back it.

"The next step is for the plan to become an international plan through adoption by the European Union and international parties such as Japan, Russia, China and others," Abdelatty said.

"This is what we will seek and we have contact with all parties, including the American party."

However, the counter-proposal does not outline a role for Hamas, which controls Gaza, and was rejected by both the United States and Israel.

The plan "does not meet the expectations" of Washington, State Department spokeswoman Tammy Bruce told reporters on Thursday.

Trump's Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff gave a more positive reaction, calling it a "good-faith first step from the Egyptians".

Rabha Seif Allam, of the Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies in Cairo, said Egypt was seeking "broad support" for its proposal.

"This is an attempt to build a broad coalition that refuses the displacement" of Palestinians from Gaza, she said.

Trump's plan has already united Arab countries in opposition, with Saudi Arabia also hosting Arab leaders two weeks ago to discuss alternatives.

The OIC also readmitted Syria, which was suspended in 2012 early in the civil war under Bashar al-Assad, following the long-time ruler's toppling in December.

"This decision represents an important step towards Syria's return to the regional and international communities as a free and just state," a Syrian foreign ministry statement said.

Scores Killed as Syrian Forces Seek to Crush Alawite Insurgency

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Syrian security forces battled for a second day to crush a nascent insurgency by fighters from Bashar al-Assad's Alawite sect, with scores reported killed as the Islamist-led government faced the biggest challenge yet to its authority.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported that more than 180 people had been killed in two days of violence in the coastal region of western Syria, which is heavily populated by members of the Alawite minority.

They included at least two dozen male residents of the Alawite town of Al Mukhtareyah killed by gunmen on Friday, the Observatory and two Alawite activists said, citing contacts in the region and video footage from the scene.

In his first comments on the violence, interim President Ahmed al-Sharaa said government forces would pursue "remnants" of the ousted Bashar al Assad government and bring them to trial. He also said those who assault civilians would be held accountable.

"We will continue to pursue the remnants of the fallen regime ... We will bring them to a fair court, and we will continue to restrict weapons to the state, and no loose weapons will remain in Syria," Sharaa added in a pre-recorded speech.

Syrian authorities said the violence began when remnants loyal to Assad launched a deadly and well-planned attack on their forces on Thursday.

The violence has shaken Sharaa's efforts to consolidate control as his administration struggles to get U.S. sanctions lifted and grapples with wider security challenges, notably in the southwest, where Israel has said it will prevent Damascus from deploying forces.

The oil-rich northeast of the country also remains outside state control, held by a U.S.-backed Kurdish-led group.

Syrians took to the streets on Friday to rally in support of the government in Damascus and other cities.

Saudi Arabia and Turkey, both allies of the government, also signalled their backing, while the U.N. envoy to Syria said he was alarmed by the clashes and killings, including of civilians.

Russia, which was a major backer of Assad but has sought to build ties



with the new government, called on all leaders of the country to stop the bloodshed.

Iran, formerly Assad's closest ally, said it "strongly opposes insecurity, violence, killing and harming innocent Syrians from every group and tribe."

Images from Al Mukhtareyah showed at least 20 men lying in close proximity - some bloodied - by the side of a road in the town centre. Reuters was able to verify the location in the video, but not when it was filmed or by whom.

Alawite activists, speaking on condition of anonymity, blamed the killings on gunmen affiliated with the Islamist ruling authorities.

Syrian state news agency SANA, citing a security source, said "individual violations" had been perpetrated after unorganized crowds had headed to the coastal region following the attacks on government security personnel.

"We are working to stop these violations," the source said.

A prominent Alawite cleric, Sheikh Shabaan Mansour, 86, was killed on Friday with his son in the village of Sahlab in western Syria, according to two Alawite sources. Residents there accused fighters aligned with Damascus of killing them.

The violence spiralled on Thursday when the authorities said groups of Assad-aligned militias targeted security patrols and checkpoints in the

Jableh area and surrounding countryside, before spreading.

Moussa al-Omar, a Syrian media figure close to the country's new leadership, told Reuters that tens of thousands of fighters in Syria's newly constituted security forces had been deployed to the coast in the operation and order had been largely restored as of Friday night.

He said the crackdown was "a message to anyone in the south or east of Syria that the state ... is capable of a military resolution at any time even as it seeks peaceful solutions."

Curfews were declared on Friday in the coastal cities of Tartous and Latakia, SANA said. Security forces mounted combing operations in both cities and nearby mountains.

Alawite activists say their community has been subjected to violence and attacks, particularly in rural Homs and Latakia, since Assad was overthrown in December after decades of repressive family rule and civil war.

While Sharaa has pledged to run Syria in an inclusive way, no meetings have been declared between him and senior Alawite figures, in contrast to members of other minority groups.

"The chaos and paroxysm of killings will undermine the confidence of both foreign states and Syrians in his government and its ability to steer Syria out of this difficult phase," said Joshua Landis, head of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

A group of Alawite clerics, the Alawite Islamic Council, blamed the violence on the government, saying fighters had been sent to the coast "with the pretext of (combating) 'regime remnants,' to terrorise and kill Syrians." It called for the region to be put under U.N. protection.

Saudi Arabia condemned "crimes being undertaken by outlaw groups" in Syria and their targeting of security forces.

Turkey, a close ally of Syria's new government, also stated its support for Damascus, saying, "The tension in and around Latakia, as well as the targeting of security forces, could undermine the efforts to lead Syria into the future in unity and solidarity."

General Among Dozens Killed in Attack on UN Helicopter Evacuation in South Sudan



NAIROBI (Dispatches) - A South Sudanese general and dozens of soldiers were killed on Friday when a United Nations helicopter trying to evacuate them from the northern town of Nasir came under attack, the government said.

The United Nations said the incident, which could deal a blow to an already fragile peace process, was "utterly abhorrent" and a possible war crime.

The U.N. crew was trying to airlift soldiers following heavy clashes in Nasir between national forces and the White Army militia, a group which President Salva Kiir's government has linked to forces loyal to his rival and First Vice President Riek Machar.

In a national address announcing the deaths of General Majur Dak and other soldiers, Kiir said Machar had assured him and the U.N. representative that the general would be safe and that the rescue mission should fly to Nasir to evacuate him and his men.

Information Minister Michael Makuei told reporters that "approximately 27" troops were killed. A U.N. crew member was among the dead.

It was not immediately clear if the helicopter was hit as it was in the air or if the attack took place while it was still on the ground.

Machar's spokesman Puok Both Baluag declined to comment on the attack. Machar's party has previously denied involvement in the recent fighting in Nasir. The head of the U.N. Mission in South Sudan (UNMISS), Nicholas Haysom, said the attack was "utterly abhorrent" and may constitute a war crime under international law.

"We also regret the killing of those that we were attempting to extract, particularly when assurances of safe passage had been received. UNMISS urges an investigation to determine those responsible and hold them accountable," he said.

Ukrainian Forces Fighting Inside Russia Are Almost Surrounded

KYIV (Dispatches) - Thousands of Ukrainian troops who stormed into Russia's Kursk region last summer in a shock incursion are nearly surrounded by Russian forces there, in a major blow to Kyiv which hoped to use its presence there as leverage over Moscow in any peace talks.

Ukraine's situation in Kursk has deteriorated sharply in the last three days, open source maps show, after Russian forces retook territory as part of a gathering counteroffensive that has nearly cut the Ukrainian force in two and separated the main group from its principal supply lines.

The precarious situation for Ukraine comes after Washington suspended its intelligence sharing with Kyiv and raises the possibility that its forces may be forced into a politically awkward and psychologically difficult retreat back into Ukraine, or risk being captured or killed.

The battlefield reversal comes at a time when Kyiv is under mounting U.S. pressure to agree to a ceasefire with Moscow and as Russian forces continue to advance along parts of the front line inside Ukraine, even as Ukrainian forces stage a fightback in one area.



"The situation (for Ukraine in Kursk) is very bad," Pasi Paroinen, a military analyst with the Finland-based Black Bird Group, told Reuters.

"Now there is not much left until Ukrainian forces will either be encircled or forced to withdraw. And withdrawal would mean running a dangerous gauntlet, where the forces would be constantly threatened by Russian drones and artillery," he said.

"If Ukrainian forces are not able to restore the situation quickly, this could be the moment where the Kursk salient begins to finally close into an encircled pocket."

There was no official confirmation of the Russian thrust from the Russian Defense Ministry or the Ukrainian military, both of which tend to report battlefield changes with a delay.

Yan Matveev, another military analyst, said on Telegram that Ukraine had a difficult choice to make.

"The only argument in favor of holding the bridgehead is political. To use the remnants of the bridgehead for bargaining. And also a little morale - after all, a retreat is a retreat..." he said.

Zverev Stunned by Griekspoor at Indian Wells



INDIAN WELLS (Dispatches) - Tallon Griekspoor upset top seed Alexander Zverev 4-6 7-6(5) 7-6(4) in a marathon second round clash at Indian Wells. The Dutchman collapsed on the court after converting his sixth match point to end an absorbing three hour, seven minute affair under sunny skies on Stadium One court. "I'm incredibly proud. It was such a mental battle to beat him," Griekspoor said after claiming the win over the German, who had dominated their head-to-head matchups coming into the contest. "I beat him once but then lost the next six times so it was such a mental thing. Happy to finally get it out of the way." Zverev served for the match in the second set but was unable to get over the line and Griekspoor edged him in the second set tiebreaker to force a decider. Griekspoor failed to convert five match points with the match on his racket at 6-5 in the third but regrouped to take the deciding tiebreak. It was Griekspoor's first win over a top five opponent in 19 attempts. "Finally," Griekspoor wrote with a smiley face on the TV camera lens after the hard-fought victory. Griekspoor will face big-serving Frenchman Giovanni Mpetshi Perricard in the third round. Zverev has struggled with his form and is 4-4 since losing to world number one Jannik Sinner in the Australian Open final in January. "I'm just not playing good tennis at the moment. It's as simple as that," he told reporters. "I'm not playing a level that I want to play, definitely not playing anywhere near what I played in Australia. "I'm just disappointed with my game." The world number two said he would need to go back to the drawing board. "Right now it's not clicking. I have to find a way to make that happen." Fourth seed Casper Ruud fell to American Marcos Giron 7-6(4) 3-6 6-2 in the other big upset of the day.

Giron was ecstatic after shocking the Norwegian, leaping into the air and shouting as the crowd erupted after reaching the third round of the tournament for a second time. "That was an amazing win. It will be one I look back on with amazing memories," Giron said. "To do it here at my favorite tournament is special. It was the tournament I came to when I was younger and it was an amazing atmosphere." Popular 10th seed Tommy Paul eased past fellow American Tristan Boyer 6-3 6-1 in front of a packed stands on court three and will face Britain's Cameron Norrie, who defeated 23rd seed Jiri Lehecka 3-6 6-4 7-5. Eighth seed Stefanos Tsitsipas failed to convert his first match point while his opponent was down on the court but ultimately prevailed 6-2 6-4 over Thiago Seyboth Wild. Dane Holger Rune, seeded 12th, will face 18th seeded Frenchman Ugo Humbert in the third round after they both enjoyed straight-sets victories on Friday. On the women's side, Iga Swiatek got her title defense off to a hot start in the desert, dominating Frenchwoman Caroline Garcia 6-2 6-0. The Polish second seed will next face Ukrainian Dayana Yastremska, who upset Tunisian Ons Jabeur in straight sets earlier in the day. Elena Rybakina was sharp in her first match at Indian Wells since winning the title in 2023, taking out Suzan Lamens of the Netherlands 6-3 6-0. The big-serving Rybakina, who was born in Russia but represents Kazakhstan, missed the tournament last year due to illness. She will face Britain's Katie Boulter in the third round after the 25th seed beat Irina-Camelia Begu of Romania 6-7(2) 6-3 6-0. Ukraine's 18th seed Marta Kostyuk and a pair of Czechs - 15th seed Karolina Muchova and Katerina Siniakova - also advanced to the third round of the WTA 1000 event.

Liverpool Braced for Three Finals as Slot Calls for Anfield Noise



LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool manager Arne Slot said he was looking forward to three finals, starting with the Premier League match at home to bottom side Southampton, and hoped Anfield would be at its loudest as his side look to stretch their lead at the top. Liverpool can move a provisional 16 points clear of second-placed Arsenal if they beat a Southampton side who have just two league wins this season. The Gunners, who will have two games in hand by Sunday, visit Manchester United in that day's late game. With a crunch set of fixtures ahead, Liverpool cannot afford to take their foot off the gas as they prepare for Paris St Germain in the Champions League last-16 return leg on Tuesday and a League Cup final against Newcastle United on March 16. "Three finals to be played this week, so a week to look forward to for all the fans. I hope, I truly hope, the fans will be at their loudest tomorrow, not in the final or (against) PSG but tomorrow," Slot told reporters on Friday. "I have to convince my players we play three finals and I hope that I influence our fans a bit too. They cannot come in five minutes before kick-off. I hope it is filled half an hour before kick-off and the players get their reward for their performance. "I see their creative songs, let's hear them tomorrow. I am in the crowd tomorrow," added Slot, who will be forced to sit in the stands due to a touchline ban. Liverpool could be without Cody Gakpo as the forward recovers from an ankle injury. The 25-year-old Netherlands international missed Wednesday's trip to French champions PSG, which Liverpool won 1-0 after a smash-and-grab display. Gakpo's return would have been a welcome sight for Slot, whose side registered one shot on target against PSG. Gakpo has scored 16 goals and registered five assists in 38 matches in all competitions for the Merseyside club this season. "He didn't train yesterday, so let's see if he can train with us today. A close call. It's not a long-term injury, but he still had a bit of pain yesterday so he was not able to train," said Slot, who knows his side were fortunate to win in Paris. Harvey Elliott scored in the 87th minute just 47 seconds after coming on for Liverpool, who had Brazil goalkeeper Alisson Becker to thank for helping them survive PSG's onslaught.

Woods Not Among 144-Player Field at The Players Championship



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Tiger Woods is not entered in the 144-player field for The Players Championship, which begins next week at the Stadium Course at TPC Sawgrass with 48 of the top 50 in the Official World Golf Ranking. Woods had until Friday evening to decide if he would participate, but sent strong signals during an interview at Tuesday's TGL event that he was unlikely to enter. This is the final year of his automatic eligibility for the tournament, earned with a win at the 2019 Masters. Two-time defending champion Scottie Scheffler will attempt to become the first three-time winner of The Players since Jack Nicklaus (1974, 1976, 1978), and the first player to win a PGA TOUR event three consecutive years since Steve Stricker (John Deere Classic, 2009-11). Woods cited the recent death of his mother, Kultida, and his work on the PGA Tour policy board as limiting factors to his desire to work on his golf game. "This is the third time I've touched a club since my mom passed, so I haven't really gotten into it," Woods told Sports Illustrated. "My heart is really not into practicing right now. I've had so many other things to do with the tour and trying to do other things. "Once I start probably feeling a little bit better and start getting into it, I'll start looking at the schedule." The last official tournament Woods played was a missed cut at the 2024 Open Championship last July. Woods, continuing to recover from a 2021 car crash, underwent a sixth back procedure in September, passed up the Hero World Challenge, then joined his son, Charlie, at the PNC Championship in December.

Grizzlies Close Strong to Snap Skid With Win Over Mavericks

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Ja Morant scored seven of his game-high 31 points in the final 1:35 to lift the visiting Memphis Grizzlies past the injury-depleted Dallas Mavericks 122-111. The Grizzlies closed the game on a 14-3 run to snap a four-game losing streak. Desmond Bane added 27 points and a career-high 16 rebounds for Memphis, which got 17 points and eight rebounds from Brandon Clarke and 13 rebounds from Zach Edey. The Mavericks, who lost their fourth straight, were led by Brandon Williams, who scored a career-high 31 points off the bench, and Naji Marshall, who finished with 29 points and a career-best 17 rebounds. Klay Thompson added 15 points. The Mavericks, who lost nine-time all-star guard Kyrie Irving to a season-ending knee injury in a loss Monday to the Sacramento Kings, led 107-104 with 6:23 to go after two Marshall free throws. They scored only four points the rest of the game as Morant and Bane combined for 16 of the Grizzlies' final 18 points. Memphis played without all-star forward Jaren Jackson Jr., who has been out since suffering a left ankle injury in Monday's loss to the Atlanta Hawks. The Grizzlies erased a five-point deficit early in the third quarter behind a 9-0 run. Santi Aldama's fastbreak layup gave Memphis a 59-55 lead. Dallas battled back behind Marshall, who had 16 points in the



quarter. Dante Exum banked a 3-pointer at the buzzer that gave the Mavericks a 94-89 lead entering the fourth. Dallas led 53-50 at the half, despite shooting 36.7 percent. Before Friday's game, the Mavericks released a statement on Anthony Davis and his progress from an adductor strain suffered in his first, and only, game with the Mavericks following a trade that sent 25-year-old superstar Luka Donicic to the Los Angeles Lakers. "A recent re-evaluation of Mavericks forward/center Anthony Davis, who has missed the last 10 games due to a left adductor strain, indicated that Davis is improving daily and has therefore

been cleared for more dynamic on-court movements." Also, Caleb Martin made his Dallas debut in the first quarter. He had been sidelined with a hip injury since coming over from Philadelphia in a trade last month. Meanwhile Immanuel Quickley scored a season-best 34 points and the Toronto Raptors defeated the visiting Utah Jazz 118-109. Scottie Barnes added 22 points, 12 rebounds, six assists and three blocks for the Raptors, who have won three straight. Ja'Kobe Walter scored 14 points, but did not play in the second half because of a right quadriceps strain. Jared Rhoden chipped in 14 points and Jamison Battle added 11. Walker Kessler had 18 points along with career bests in rebounds (25) and blocks (eight) for the Jazz, who have lost four straight overall and 11 consecutive on the road. Keyonte George also scored 18 and Kyle Filipowski and Collin Sexton added 17 apiece. Brice Sensabaugh added 11 and Cody Williams scored 10. The Raptors used their speed and defensive pressure to race out to an early 12-point lead but Filipowski came off the bench to score 10 points and help cut Utah's deficit to 28-27 after one quarter. The Jazz tied the game early in the second quarter before the Raptors regained their composure and continued to apply pressure. Toronto led by 12 after Walter's running jumper with 53 seconds remaining and led 57-46 at halftime.

India Chasing Champions Trophy History, NZ Ready to Scrap

BENGALURU (Dispatches) - India are heavy favorites to claim a record third Champions Trophy in Dubai on Sunday but Rohit Sharma's men face a New Zealand side with plenty of firepower in the first major white-ball final between the teams in a quarter of a century. India, who refused to play in host nation Pakistan, have produced clinical performances to win all four of their matches in the United Arab Emirates, including a 44-run group-stage victory over the Black Caps last weekend. The 2002 and 2013 champions have excelled on pitches offering turn, while the batting group led by Virat Kohli has excelled under pressure with masterful run-chases in victories over Bangladesh, Pakistan and Australia.



India are on the verge of winning back-to-back International Cricket Council trophies following last year's Twenty20 World Cup triumph but coach Gautam Gambhir is focused only on Sunday. "We still have one more game to go," he told reporters. "We know we're a good one-day side. The most important thing is the way we've played throughout this competition. "The hunger, the commitment and the eagerness to try and do something special for the country is always there." With Mohammed Shami filling in superbly for injured pacer Jasprit Bumrah, and all-rounder Hardik Pandya offering valuable batting depth, Rohit was delighted with the form of key players going into the title decider.