

Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Esmail Baqaei Says the Upcoming Meeting Between Iran, China, and Russia Will Mainly Address the Issues Related to Nuclear Energy and Sanctions Removal

# IRAN NEWS

Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi Says a Letter Written by U.S. President Donald Trump Will Be Handed Over to Iran Through an Arab State

VOL. XXIX, No. 8227 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

THURSDAY MARCH 13, 2025 ESFAND 23, 1403

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### Iran Warns It Is About to Target Americans Engaged in Terror, Sabotage With Legal Measures



TEHRAN (PressTV) - A senior Iranian diplomat has announced plans by the country to impose sanctions and pursue legal actions against American individuals involved in terrorist activities, cyber sabotage, human rights violations, and other actions detrimental to Iranians and the Islamic Republic's national security.

The initiative is being coordinated by the Foreign Ministry's Department of Legal and International Affairs, in collaboration with relevant agencies and the Secretariat of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs, Kazem Gharibabadi wrote in a post on X, former Twitter, on Tuesday.

He emphasized that the effort was benefiting from existing legislation, such as the "Law on Countering Human Rights Violations and Adventurous and Terrorist Actions of the United States in the [West Asia] Region" and the "Law on Counteracting the Declaration of [Iran's] Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) as a 'Terrorist Organization' by the United States."

The drive is aimed at drawing up a comprehensive list of American individuals involved in these hostile activities, the official noted.

The objective, he said, is to sanction these individuals and initiate appropriate legal proceedings against them.

The remarks came amid incessant adversarial measures on the part of the United States against Iranian entities and individuals.

Also on Tuesday, it was reported that the US State Department's so-called "Rewards for Justice" program had recently offered a sum of up to \$15 million for alleged information contributing to Washington's attempts at targeting the IRGC.

### Iran's Participation in Multinational Drills Showcases Navy's Strength in Int'l Waters



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has emphasized that the Iranian Navy's deserving and powerful participation in the 7th Maritime Security Belt 2025 multinational naval exercises demonstrated the strength and capability of the force in operating across the international waters.

On Tuesday, the top diplomat congratulated Rear Admiral Shahram Irani, the Navy's commander, on the occasion of the successful execution of the underway exercises, and highlighted it as a clear indication of the Navy's strength and dominance on the international maritime arena.

Araqchi reiterated that the drills, which had begun earlier in the day, were a testament to the Navy's decisive attitude and its ability to operate on the global stage.

He underlined that maritime security and development likewise required an assertive presence in expansive oceanic areas.

The official, meanwhile, emphasized Iran's unwavering determination to maintain and enhance the security of the strategic and sensitive Persian Gulf region, the strategically crucial Strait of Hormuz within it, the Sea of Oman, and beyond.

He noted that the current exercises served as a reflection of this resolve, displaying Islamic Republic's commitment to the issue to those observing the country throughout the global state.

## Organizers of Illegal Gatherings Will Face Action

TEHRAN - The Iranian government spokesperson announced that authorities will take decisive action against those responsible for organizing illegal gatherings that disrupt societal order and peace.

Fatemeh Mohajeri, speaking on Wednesday on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting and in a press briefing, outlined the decisions made during the session. She stated, "Today's meeting approved the executive regulations of the Seventh Development Plan concerning the determination of water's economic value and the requirement for water-intensive industries to utilize unconventional water sources."

Mohajeri elaborated, "Another matter addressed under the Seventh Development Plan's regulations was the establishment of criteria and indicators for excessive water extraction, the installation of meters, and the timing and method for temporarily cutting water quotas. A significant portion of water consumption occurs in agriculture, and naturally, this needs to be managed. The installation of these meters will facilitate that."

The government spokesperson added, "Another decision made today involved allocating funds and bank loans to compensate for damages caused by floods in Mazandaran province in June and July 2023, which was finalized on Sunday."

Mohajeri further noted, "An amendment to Clause 9 attached to Article 3 of the Interior Ministry's budget execution guidelines was revised on Sunday. Additionally, the executive regulations for the Law on Organizing Fashion and Clothing, proposed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, were also approved."

She continued, "The Ministry of Agriculture Jihad, in line with the Seventh Development Plan, presented proposals on establishing a tracking and tracing system, packaging, and labeling raw



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

agricultural, livestock, poultry, and aquatic products, as well as assessing residues. These were approved on Sunday."

The spokesperson also addressed labor issues, stating, "Another topic was the amendment of employers' insurance premium contributions for construction workers, which the Social Security Organization is tasked with implementing. This was raised by the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour, and Social Welfare."

Mohajeri highlighted a sports-related development: "A second innovation center at the Wrestling Federation is being established and will be operational by early June 2024. This will help us better train our talented athletes, who have great potential, to compete professionally on the international stage and bring greater pride to the country."

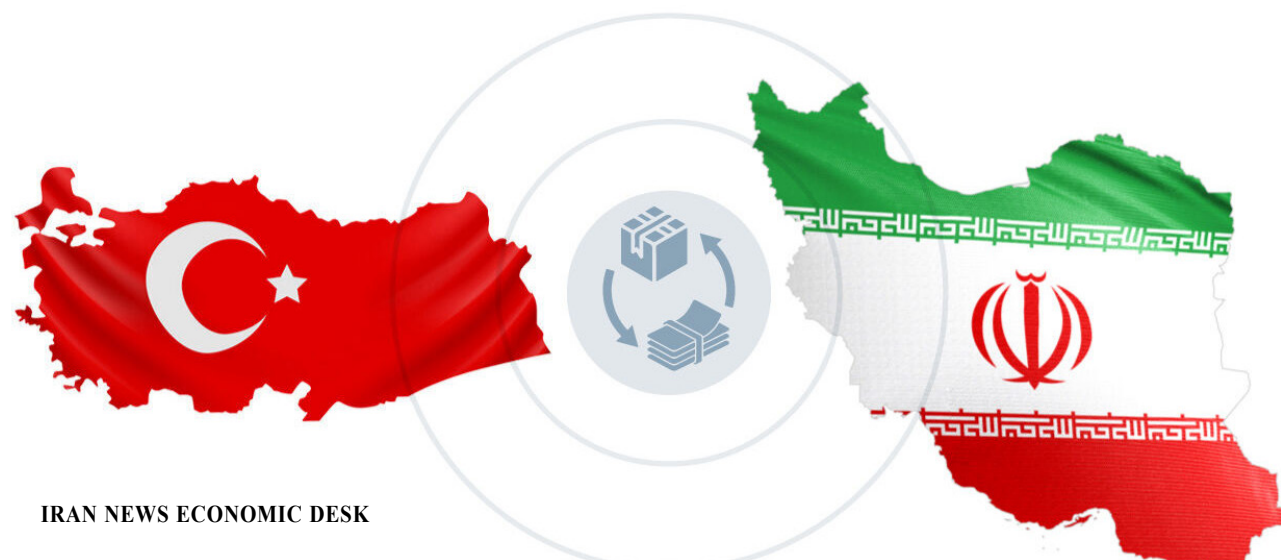
She also touched on energy management challenges, saying, "The Interior Ministry presented a report on energy management this winter, which referred to relatively difficult days that our dear compatriots experienced. Efforts were made to minimize power outages, but

despite this, people faced blackouts, and we had closures in 23 provinces for about six to seven days."

Regarding recent gatherings, Mohajeri emphasized the Interior Ministry's stance: "The ministry issued a statement asserting that those identified as organizers of illegal gatherings disrupting societal order and peace will undoubtedly face consequences."

In response to a journalist's question about the appointment of a new Economy Minister, Mohajeri said, "We have not yet reached a final decision regarding the Economy Minister."

## Iran-Turkey Trade Surges by \$7b



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Ambassador to Turkey, Mohammad Hossein Habibollahzadeh, highlighted a significant boost in bilateral trade between Tehran and Ankara, stating that the trade volume reached \$11.8 billion last year and has surpassed \$17.5 billion by February this year. He projected that this figure could climb to \$19 billion by year-end.

Habibollahzadeh, speaking at a virtual meeting of the Iran-Turkey Joint Transportation Committee, emphasized the importance of advancing transit development. "The volume of transit and transportation between the two countries has increased by \$7 billion this year," he said, adding that substantial infrastructure improvements in rail, air, maritime, and port sectors are still needed.

The ambassador noted that last year, 6 million passengers and approximately 330,000 trucks crossed between Iran and Turkey, reflecting the high volume of bilateral trade and the extensive transportation responsibilities of both nations. "Given this exchange volume, it was decided to increase the number of border crossings from three to five. Expanding rail networks and increasing flights are also on the agenda," he added.

Expressing satisfaction with the swift organization of the meeting following a recent discussion between the transport ministers of both countries, Habibollahzadeh underscored the firm resolve of Iran and Turkey to enhance transportation and logistics ties. He expressed optimism about the expansion of transport relations, anticipating key decisions to bolster collaboration between Iran's Ministry of Roads and Urban Development and Turkey's Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure.

Highlighting the role of Iran's Ministry of Roads and Urban Development as the overseer of the Iran-Turkey Economic Commission, he described it as a significant advantage, emphasizing that such cooperation could greatly impact the economic relationship between the two nations.

Saeed Rasouli, Iran's Deputy Transport Minister, pointed to the strategic positions of Iran and Turkey along the southern Caspian Sea corridor, connecting China to Europe via regional goods transported through both countries. "Transit, alongside bilateral transport issues, will be a central topic in future ministerial negotiations," he said.

Dormush Anwar, Turkey's Deputy Minister of Transport and Infrastructure, affirmed his country's readiness to deepen transport and transit cooperation, stressing the need for modern infrastructure and investments. He highlighted the importance of a rail connection project in the Cheshmeh Soraya region and further transit development between Iran and Turkey.

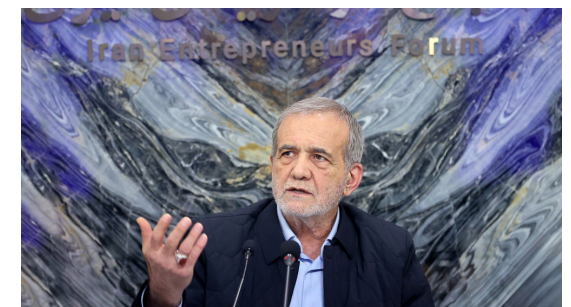
The meeting focused on maximizing transportation development in road, rail, port, and air sectors, as well as boosting transit and addressing existing cooperation challenges. Discussions covered facilities, restrictions, tolls, and taxes affecting Iranian and Turkish fleets in each other's territories, solutions for easing restrictions on Iranian fleets at shared borders, and fuel pricing for Turkish fleets in Iran.

Both sides expressed satisfaction with the launch of the Tehran-Van passenger train and explored extending the route to Ankara and Istanbul. Other topics included improving rail cargo operations, increasing rail transport volume, and resolving issues related to empty wagons. Progress on the Cheshmeh Soraya-Dil Ajuu rail link, the reconstruction of the Bazargan-Gürbulak border terminal, roads leading to Turkey's borders, and the establishment of a new border crossing at Kuzeh-Rash were also reviewed.

The meeting also addressed enhancing air relations and increasing flights, as well as fostering maritime and port cooperation and investments between Iran and Turkey.

It was agreed that an in-person session of the Iran-Turkey Transportation Committee would be held after Ramadan, either in Tehran or Ankara.

### President Pezeshkian Rejects Talks With U.S. Under Threats



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - President Masoud Pezeshkian has sharply rebuked the Trump administration's maximalist approach toward Iran, declaring that the Islamic Republic is not Ukraine and it will not negotiate with the United States under threats or coercion.

"We must maintain relationships with the world. We do not want to be estranged or quarrel with anyone, but that does not mean we will bow in humiliation before anyone," Pezeshkian stated during a meeting of the Iran Entrepreneurs Forum in Tehran on Tuesday.

"We may die with honor, but we will never live in disgrace," Pezeshkian rejected what he characterized as an ultimatum from Donald Trump, referencing a letter reportedly sent by the US president to Iran.

The letter demanded that Tehran halt its nuclear and missile programs and take other measures in exchange for sanctions relief.

"It is unacceptable for someone to come along and say, 'Don't do this, don't do that, or else.' I won't come to negotiate with you. Go do whatever you want," Pezeshkian stated.

He criticized Trump for disrespecting his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, while pressuring him to agree to a deal with Russia.

The Iranian president said Trump's conduct in his recent meeting with Zelenskyy at the White House was "truly shameful."

"If negotiations are conducted with dignity and based on mutual respect and shared interests, we will sit down and talk," he said. "But the language of threats and coercion is absolutely unacceptable."

The president underscored the importance of strengthening Iran's private sector as a means to counteract Western sanctions.

"If we do not sanction ourselves, America or anyone else will not be able to easily sanction us."

Tensions between Iran and the US have significantly worsened since Trump unilaterally withdrew from the nuclear deal, called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), in 2018.

The JCPOA, reached in 2015, required Iran to implement confidence-building measures to limit its nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief.

### Yemen Resumes Ban on Israeli Ships as Deadline Passes for Reopening Gaza's Crossings



SANAA (PressTV) - Yemen announces resumption of military operations targeting Israeli vessels in key maritime regions off its coastline following the expiration of a deadline for the Israeli regime to reopen the Gaza Strip's crossings and allow aid into the war-wrecked and impoverished Palestinian territory.

The Yemeni Armed Forces issued the announcement on Wednesday, saying the strikes would resume as per a relevant decree issued by Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, leader of the country's Ansarullah resistance movement.

The Ansarullah leader had given the regime four days before reopening the crossings that Tel Aviv has shut down as a means of trying to force the Gaza-based resistance movement Hamas into releasing the rest of the Zionist captives that it holds in the coastal sliver.

The shutdown is also meant to mount immense pressure on the Palestinians in Gaza, who have already been suffering under a 15-month-plus war of genocide by Tel Aviv.

"With mediators failing to achieve these objectives (having the regime reopen the terminals and let in aid supplies), Yemen has escalated its stance in support of the Palestinian people," the Armed Forces' statement noted.

"Effective immediately, all Israeli ships are prohibited from navigating the designated operational zones, encompassing the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and the Gulf of Aden," they noted.

The forces warned that any Israeli vessels attempting to breach the ban would be targeted within the specified areas of operation.

"This prohibition will remain until the crossings into the Gaza Strip are reopened and humanitarian aid, including essential food and medicine, is permitted entry," the statement read.

# IRAN NEWS



## Iran's Civil Aviation Chief Calls for Resumption of Direct Tehran-London Flights

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The head of Iran's Civil Aviation Organization has urged the reestablishment of direct flights between Tehran and London during a meeting with Iran's new ambassador to the United Kingdom.

On Tuesday, Hossein Pourfarzaneh, Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development and President of the Civil Aviation Organization, met with Seyed Ali Mousavi, Iran's newly appointed ambassador to the UK. The two discussed ways to enhance cooperation in air transport between Iran and the UK. During the meeting, Pourfarzaneh congratulated Mousavi on his appointment and expressed hope for his success, while emphasizing the need to raise the issue of resuming direct flights between Tehran and London in negotiations with British counterparts to achieve a favorable outcome.

## Indians Did Nothing in Chabahar to Leave



TEHRAN - Masoud Daneshmand, a member of the board of directors of Iran's Transport Companies Association, told ILNA that speculation about India exiting Chabahar Port under U.S. pressure—or China stepping in to invest—is misplaced. "The reality is that the Indians never truly arrived to leave," he said, emphasizing that India has not undertaken any significant activity or added value at Chabahar Port. "They have no presence there."

Daneshmand explained that the plan was for India to activate Chabahar's Shahid Beheshti Port, but a lack of agreement with the Iranian government left the project stagnant. "The equipment brought to Shahid Beheshti remains unused and idle," he noted, pointing out a critical flaw: the port lacks a hinterland. "Some think the issue is a lack of cranes, but the real problem is the absence of infrastructure like rail and road connections. Cargo unloaded at Chabahar needs to reach its destination, but there's no road or rail network to move it."

Despite a 10-year contract between an Indian operator and Iran for Chabahar, Daneshmand said the commitments of both parties remain unclear. "We don't know what each side agreed to," he remarked. While India initially started work, bringing six cranes to the port, the lack of hinterland facilities halted progress.

Addressing the possibility of China filling the void, Daneshmand dismissed the idea. "The Chinese won't invest in Shahid Beheshti because they're heavily committed to Gwadar Port in Pakistan, which they've already made operational," he said. "China's strategy is to keep Chabahar inactive, diverting cargo and transit to Gwadar." He argued that China benefits from Chabahar's stagnation while focusing on its rival port.

However, Daneshmand noted that Gwadar also faces challenges. "Gwadar has no roads. If it only serves Pakistan, Karachi already does that. For broader transit to Afghanistan and Central Asia, it needs infrastructure it currently lacks." He highlighted a Qatari-backed railway project from Tashkent, Uzbekistan, to Mazar-i-Sharif, Afghanistan, but extending it to Gwadar would require tunneling through the formidable Hindu Kush mountains—a costly, time-intensive endeavor. "If we don't act swiftly at Chabahar, we'll hand this opportunity to Gwadar in the future," he warned.

The report underscores the stalled development of Chabahar Port and the geopolitical competition with Gwadar, highlighting Iran's need to address infrastructure gaps to maintain its strategic edge.

## Iran Expands Trade Centers in West Asian Countries



TEHRAN - Iran's Trade Promotion Organization has reported a significant increase in the number of Iranian commercial centers across West Asian countries in the current year, according to Abdolamir Rabihi, Director General of the West Asia Office of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO). In a statement to IRNA, Rabihi highlighted the key developments in Iran's trade relations with the region.

Speaking on the TPO's priorities, Rabihi emphasized promotional activities as a core focus, noting that this year saw an intensified effort in organizing exhibitions and facilitating trade delegations. "Hosting exhibitions and managing the exchange of commercial delegations were pursued with greater determination," he said. Iran established its largest pavilions at international exhibitions in Turkey, Iraq, the UAE, and Oman, showcasing its industrial and production capabilities while securing new markets in these countries.

Rabihi also pointed to a rise in the acceptance of trade delegations at the West Asia Office, with the majority arriving from Turkey, Iraq, and Oman. Delegations from the UAE, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia were also welcomed. He added that the office played an active role in attracting delegations for the Iran Expo 2023, and preparations are already underway to ensure an even more successful event next year.

In a notable development, Rabihi announced an increase in the number of Iranian commercial centers in the region. "These centers, alongside embassies and trade attachés, can significantly contribute to trade development by providing services to both the private and public sectors," he explained. In countries where Iran enjoys high trade volumes, the number of active commercial centers has either been expanded or stabilized.

## Iran Faces Political and Unfair Treatment From the West



TEHRAN - In a meeting with Switzerland's Secretary-General of Health, Barbara Schedler, on the sidelines of the 68th annual session of the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna, Hossein Zolfaghari, Iran's presidential representative and Secretary-General of the Anti-Narcotics Headquarters, declared that despite Iran's significant efforts and achievements in combating drug trafficking, the country continues to face selective, political, and unjust treatment from certain nations, particularly in the West. The statement was reported by Iran's ILNA news agency.

Zolfaghari highlighted Iran's robust anti-narcotics efforts, noting that over the past five years (2019-2024), Iranian authorities have seized approximately 5,000 tons of various illicit drugs. He credited intelligence-based operations for increasing the risks for traffickers, forcing international smuggling networks to shift their routes to maritime pathways in pursuit of profits. However, these efforts have come at a steep cost, with around 60 personnel from Iran's anti-narcotics agencies losing their lives in the line of duty over the same period.

Discussing legislative reforms, Zolfaghari pointed to amendments in Iran's anti-narcotics laws aimed at rehabilitation and reducing harm. "Articles 15 and 16 of the Law on Combating Narcotic Drugs focus on reforming and rescuing individuals from the scourge of addiction, providing treatment frameworks," he said. He further explained that under Article 45, individuals convicted of drug-related crimes—such as transportation, production, distribution, or cultivation—are no longer subject to the death penalty unless specific conditions are met, including armed involvement, leadership in trafficking networks, prior convictions, or exceeding legal thresholds.

Zolfaghari outlined Iran's comprehensive strategies, which encompass demand reduction, harm reduction, treatment, rehabilitation, and societal reintegration of recovering addicts. A key initiative, the Comprehensive Primary Addiction Prevention Document, has been developed and implemented, targeting 40% of Iran's population to reduce the incidence of addiction. Prevention programs focus on families, educational institutions, workplaces, and local communities.

"Ensuring access to narcotics for medical and scientific purposes, in line with the three international conventions, while preventing their diversion to illegal markets, is an integral part of Iran's balanced strategy," Zolfaghari emphasized. This approach aims to minimize the negative consequences of drug abuse and enhance public health.

Iran's harm reduction efforts include mobile teams and centers providing sterile needles, food, hygiene kits, bathing facilities, overnight shelters, and low-threshold methadone access to homeless addicts, the impoverished, and those with sexually transmitted diseases. These initiatives have successfully curbed the spread of HIV among intravenous drug users, Zolfaghari noted.

The country has also expanded treatment options, with the Comprehensive Treatment Program Document promoting diverse modalities such as methadone, buprenorphine, opium tincture, and psychosocial interventions, offered through outpatient and residential facilities. Currently, 7,200 addiction treatment centers—ranging from residential to outpatient and inpatient—employ around 42,000 specialists. Additionally, 276 psychiatric hospitals, including specialized pediatric and general facilities, have been equipped with over 10,000 beds to treat patients addicted to methamphetamine and other stimulants, ensuring broader access to care.

Zolfaghari underscored that over 80% of harm reduction and treatment programs are managed by the private sector and non-governmental organizations. In recognition of these scientific advancements, Iran established the Regional Center for Addiction Treatment Studies in Tehran in 2021, in collaboration with the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC).

He credited initiatives like the "Life Supporters" scheme with controlling the transmission rates of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis C, and other bloodborne diseases linked to drug use, including injection, over the past five years, alongside stabilizing the prevalence of drug use nationwide.

Despite these accomplishments, Zolfaghari lamented the lack of international support. "According to well-documented UNODC reports, Iran has made significant strides in all dimensions of the global drug problem and remains a steadfast partner to the international community," he said. "Yet, Iran faces selective, political, and unfair treatment from some countries, especially in the West." He accused these nations of imposing unilateral sanctions instead of providing technical or material assistance, as mandated by the principle of shared responsibility, while others withhold aid in areas like demand reduction under baseless pretexts.

Zolfaghari argued that the West, particularly Europe, must collaborate constructively with Iran to reduce its own drug-related costs stemming from Afghanistan, the primary source of narcotics in the region. He extended an invitation to the Swiss delegation to visit Tehran and observe Iran's efforts firsthand.

In response, Barbara Schedler acknowledged the strong bilateral ties between Switzerland and Iran, noting recent ministerial meetings at the World Health Assembly. She praised Iran's anti-trafficking efforts, stating, "We understand Iran's geographical challenges and the resulting difficulties." Schedler highlighted Switzerland's appreciation for Iran's harm reduction programs, which align with her country's focus on keeping addicts alive and treating them, and expressed readiness to exchange experiences.

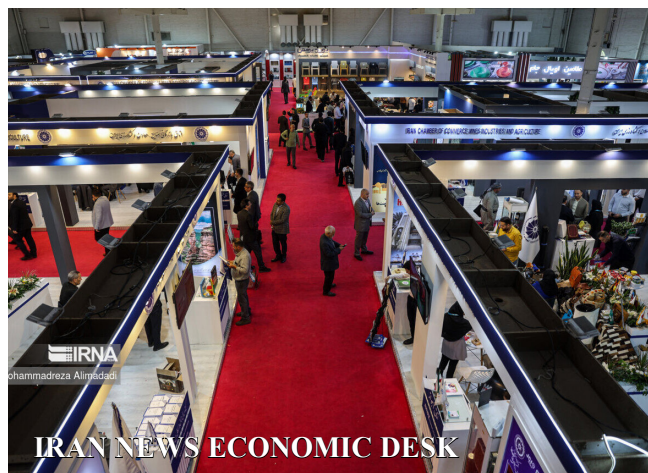
The meeting underscored Iran's call for greater global cooperation and recognition of its sacrifices in the fight against narcotics, amid ongoing tensions with Western nations.

## Sanctions and Financial Hurdles Impede Serious Steps in Trade

TEHRAN - In a recent statement, Mousa Aqae, the head of the Iran-Uzbekistan Joint Chamber of Commerce, highlighted the persistent challenges posed by sanctions and banking issues, asserting that as long as these obstacles remain, Iran cannot take significant strides in foreign trade. The remarks were reported by the Iranian state news agency IRNA, citing the Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture of Iran.

Aqae reflected on Iran Expo 2024, noting that while the event attracted over 3,000 foreign visitors, many of them were not professional traders. He emphasized the critical role of joint chambers of commerce in inviting targeted foreign guests to such events. "In Iran Expo 2024, we had a large number of foreign visitors, but many were not professional traders," he said. Looking ahead to Iran Expo 2025, Aqae expressed hope that collaboration between the Iran Chamber of Commerce, joint chambers, and embassies of target countries would ensure a more refined selection of attendees, prioritizing professional traders.

Despite limited resources, Aqae stressed the need for purposeful action at Iran Expo 2025, stating, "The expo undoubtedly contributes to enhancing our export capabilities. Many visitors are astonished



when they see our potential." He added that such events serve as a platform for public diplomacy, allowing foreign traders to discover the capabilities of Iranian companies firsthand.

However, Aqae pointed out a major barrier to capitalizing on this interest: "Traders from various countries visit Iran, witness our capabilities, and show great enthusiasm for cooperation and signing contracts. But due to FATF issues and sanctions, we cannot initiate serious collaboration." The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) restrictions and ongoing sanctions continue to limit Iran's ability to engage fully in international trade.

To address these challenges, Aqae called for stronger government-level negotiations, noting that some issues cannot be resolved solely by the private sector. "These problems require agreements at the governmental level," he said.

In preparation for Iran Expo 2025, the Iran-Uzbekistan Joint Chamber of Commerce is actively inviting Uzbek traders and organizing events, including B2B meetings with Iranian counterparts, to foster trade ties despite the existing constraints.

## Iran, UNICEF Discuss Water and Energy Management Solutions



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - A joint meeting between Mohammad Vali Alaeddini, head of international affairs at Iran's Ministry of Energy, and Monika Nilsson, acting head of UNICEF's Tehran office, focused on devising practical strategies to enhance community resilience against water scarcity, mitigate disaster risks, and promote education on sustainable energy. The discussions under code 1609137, aimed to bolster systemic capacities in water, renewable energy, and environmental health.

The session addressed key areas, including operational solutions to strengthen resilience amid water shortages and expand sustainable energy education. Proposals included organizing training sessions and activities to analyze challenges in these sectors. Specialized training to enhance capacity in water and renewable energy management was also emphasized.

A major focus was the need for extensive studies on the impacts of water scarcity and climate change on water resources, personal hygiene, and environmental health. The meeting underscored the importance of supporting research on priority issues like drought, cost-effective water supply and purification technologies, and practical responses to water supply challenges. Plans were made to launch a pilot project based on research outcomes in water and energy resource management.

Disaster risk reduction in the water and energy sectors was another key topic. Ensuring access to essential supplies for emergency preparedness and response, as well as guaranteeing safe water quality, were highlighted. Training programs to boost crisis readiness were also proposed.

The meeting featured suggestions to improve community resilience to water scarcity and advance sustainable energy. These included supporting water, environmental health, and energy infrastructure; conducting data-driven studies on water and energy consumption patterns; developing a "communication for development" strategy to promote resource management culture; and designing community-based models to enhance water and energy use behaviors.

## Tehran Chamber President Warns of Tougher Business Climate in 2025



TEHRAN - Mahmoud Najafi Arab, President of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce, has forecasted a bleak outlook for Iran's business environment in the coming year, citing sluggish economic growth and mounting challenges.

Speaking at the 25th meeting of the Chamber's Board of Representatives, he referenced data from the Statistical Center of Iran showing that GDP growth in the first nine months of 2024 (at constant 1400 prices) was only 3.1% with oil and 2.2% without oil—well below the 8% target set by Iran's Seventh Development Plan. This report was published by ILNA news agency under code 1608804.

Najafi Arab praised the Tehran Chamber's top ranking among Iran's chambers in 2023 and noted its advocacy efforts, including a January letter to the Industry Minister addressing power and gas shortages. "Four of our ten demands were approved on March 2 by the First Vice President, despite resistance from other ministries," he said. The Seventh Development Plan aims for 8% annual GDP growth, with 35% from productivity gains and 65% from investment, requiring a 22.6% yearly rise in capital formation. It also targets reducing inflation from its current high to 9.5% by the plan's end, alongside sector-specific goals: 5.5% growth in agriculture, 9% in oil, 8.5% in industry, and 6.5% in services.

Yet, the 3.1% and 2.2% growth rates reveal a significant gap. "We're far from the 8% target," Najafi Arab warned, predicting a harsher business climate in 2025 due to escalating issues:

Trump's Policies: His election as U.S. President could revive sanctions targeting Iran's oil exports, disrupting currency markets, budgets, and inflation.

European Moves: Proposals to trigger UN sanctions via the "snapback" mechanism loom for next year.

Regional Tensions: Middle East instability heightens economic and political risks.

Energy Shortages: This year's mild winter still saw widespread shutdowns, crippling businesses and education.

Pollution: Air quality issues forced school closures, threatening long-term productivity.

Budget Woes: Deficits have led to misuse of the National Development Fund, increased borrowing, and neglected infrastructure.

## Pope Francis Stable and Out of Danger

VATICAN CITY (Dispatches) - Pope Francis remains stable after almost four weeks in hospital with pneumonia, the Vatican said declining to speculate on when he might go home, the day after doctors indicated he was no longer in danger. The 88-year-old head of the world Catholic Church has been in Rome's Gemelli hospital since February 14 with pneumonia in both lungs, suffering several respiratory crises that sparked real fear for his life.

But on Tuesday evening—a day after indicating that he was out of imminent danger—the Holy See said that the pope's condition continued to be stable.

"It is clear that the situation remains stable... and with these slight improvements within a framework for doctors that remains complex," the Vatican said.



## Greenland's Center-Right Opposition Wins Election Dominated by Trump



PARIS (Dispatches) - Greenland's pro-business opposition Demokraatit party, which favors a slow approach to independence from Denmark, won Tuesday's parliamentary election that was dominated by U.S. President Donald Trump's pledge to take control of the island.

Demokraatit secured 29.9 percent of the votes with all ballots counted, up from 9.1 percent in 2021, ahead of the opposition Naleraq party, which favours rapid independence, at 24.5 percent.

All six main political parties support independence but differ on how and when it could be achieved. A January poll suggested a majority of Greenland's inhabitants similarly support independence, but are divided on timing.

Since taking office in January, Donald Trump has vowed to make Greenland – a semi-autonomous territory of Denmark – part of the United States, saying it is vital to US security interests, an idea rejected by most Greenlanders.

The vast island, with a population of just 57,000, has been caught up in a geopolitical race for dominance in the Arctic, where melting ice caps are making its resources more accessible and opening new shipping routes. Both Russia and China have intensified military activity in the region.

"People want change ... We want more business to finance our welfare," said Jens-Frederik Nielsen, Demokraatit's leader and a former minister of industry and minerals.

"We don't want independence tomorrow, we want a good foundation," Nielsen told reporters in Nuuk.

He will now hold talks with other parties to try and form a governing coalition.

The scramble for Greenland: can Danish dependency resist Trump pressure?

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## Kyiv Targets Russian Capital With Massive Drone Barrage



SAPRONOVO (Dispatches) - Ukrainian drones smashed into high-rise apartment blocks on the outskirts of Moscow in the early hours of Tuesday, with both sides saying it was the largest attack on the Russian capital of the three-year conflict.

The Kremlin condemned the attack, which comes just hours before top US and Ukrainian officials sat down for talks in Saudi Arabia and after three years of Russian aerial barrages on Ukrainian cities.

Kyiv said the attack should push Russian President Vladimir Putin to accept its call for a halt to long-range aerial strikes, a proposal Moscow has previously ruled out.

Ukrainian and US diplomats were set to meet for talks on ending the conflict, with Kyiv saying it would try to get Washington — which has resumed talks with Moscow under President Donald Trump — on board with the idea.

The attack killed at least three people and wounded several more, Russian officials said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov denounced Kyiv targeting "residential houses", claiming its forces only hit military infrastructure, despite near daily attacks on Ukraine's civilian areas and thousands of Ukrainian civilians killed by its offensive.

Moscow's army said it intercepted 337 Ukrainian drones across the country in what Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyanin called the "most massive enemy drone attack on Moscow."

# Ukraine Accepts U.S. Ceasefire Proposal, Backs Immediate Negotiations With Russia

KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine endorsed an American proposal for a 30-day ceasefire and agreed to immediate negotiations with Russia in crunch talks in Jeddah after three years of grinding war.

The positive response from Ukraine prompted President Donald Trump's administration to lift a freeze on military aid and to predict the beginning to an end of the conflict.

With Trump stunning allies by applying intense pressure on Kyiv and reaching out to Moscow, Ukrainian officials came to talks in Saudi Arabia eager to make up and had proposed a partial truce on air and sea attacks.

Trump's advisors pressed for more and said Ukraine agreed to their proposal for a full month-long ceasefire in a war that has claimed tens of thousands of lives.

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"Today we made an offer that the Ukrainians have accepted, which is to enter into a ceasefire and into immediate negotiations," US Secretary of State Marco Rubio told reporters after around nine hours of talks in an ornate hotel in Jeddah.

"We'll take this offer now to the Russians and we hope they'll say yes to peace. The ball is now in their court. "If they say no then we'll unfortunately know what the impediment is to peace here," Rubio said of Russia, which launched a full-scale invasion of its smaller neighbour in February 2022.



Zelenskyy quickly thanked Trump over the "positive" ceasefire proposal made in Jeddah and said the United States must now work to persuade Russia.

"The American side understands our arguments, perceives our proposals, and I want to thank President Trump for the constructive conversation between our teams," Zelenskyy said in his evening address.

Rubio said the United States would immediately resume military assistance and intelligence sharing it had cut off to pressure its wartime partner following a disastrous February 28 meeting between Trump and President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

In Washington, Trump said he was ready to welcome Zelenskyy back to the White House and may speak to President Vladimir Putin this week.

Asked by a reporter about the prospects of a comprehensive ceasefire in Ukraine, Trump answered: "Well, I hope it will be over the next few days, I'd like to see."

"I know we have a big meeting with Russia tomorrow and some great conversations hopefully will ensue."

In a joint statement, Ukraine and the United States said they would conclude "as soon as possible" a deal securing U.S. access to Ukraine's mineral wealth, which Trump demanded as compensation for billions of dollars in US weapons under his predecessor Joe Biden.

Zelenskyy was supposed to sign the deal at the White House before the dramatic on-camera showdown, in which Trump and Vice President JD Vance dressed down the wartime leader and accused him of ingratitude.

# Pakistan Security Forces Free Hostages After Deadly Balochistan Train Assault

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Three people were killed and around a hundred hostages freed by Pakistani troops yesterday after armed militants attacked a train carrying over 450 passengers in the country's southwestern Balochistan province.

It was not immediately clear how many people remained on board the train as security forces continued operations overnight.

Before seizing the train Tuesday afternoon, militants blew up the railway track, forcing it to a halt in a remote area.

"People began hiding under the seats in panic. The militants separated the men from the women. They allowed me and my family to go because I told them I'm a heart patient," 49-year-old Allahditta told AFP from a makeshift hospital at the train station in Mach.

"I was on the train with my father and brother when militants took us hostage. They let me go but they are still there," added a 32-year-old woman, who asked not to be named.

Interior minister Mohsin Naqvi said security forces had rescued over 100 people, adding that 16 "terrorists" had been killed.

Security sources told AFP that the "clearance operation is ongoing", after reporting heavy gunfire between militants and security forces.

The assault was immediately claimed by the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), a separatist group behind rising violence in the province which borders Afghanistan and Iran.

Muhammad Kashif, a senior railway government official in Quetta, the capital of the province, earlier told AFP that "over 450 passengers onboard" had been taken hostage.



Some of the passengers were freed by the militants and walked for hours to reach the nearest railway station, from which they boarded other trains to Mach.

The driver of the train, a police officer and soldier were killed in the assault, according to paramedic Nazim Farooq and railway official Muhammad Aslam, both at Mach railway station.

In a statement, the BLA said gunmen bombed the railway track before storming aboard the train.

"The militants swiftly took control of the train and have taken all passengers hostage," said the statement released to media.

The incident happened around 1:00 pm (0800 GMT) in rural Sibi district, near to a city station where the train had been due to stop.

The train had left Quetta for Peshawar, in northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa—a more than 30-hour journey—at around 9:00 am.

The area is a mountainous region making it easier for militants to have hideouts and plan attacks.

Security forces have been battling a decades-long insurgency in impoverished Balochistan, which militant groups claim is being exploited by outsiders, with wealth from its natural resources syphoned off with little benefit to the local population.

But violence has soared in the western border regions with Afghanistan, from north to south, since the Taliban took back power in 2021.

Pakistan accuses the Taliban government in Kabul of offering safe haven to militants to plan attacks. The Taliban government denies the charge.

The BLA have launched larger scale attacks in recent months, including holding a motorway overnight and identifying travellers from outside the province and shooting them dead.

BLA militants also killed seven Punjabi travellers in February after they were ordered off a bus.

In November, the BLA claimed responsibility for a bombing at Quetta's main railway station that killed 26 people, including 14 soldiers.

# Macron Calls on Allies to Plan Credible Security Guarantees for Ukraine at Paris Talks

PARIS (Dispatches) - Military and NATO leaders from more than 30 countries met in Paris Tuesday where French President Emmanuel Macron urged them to draft a plan "to define credible security guarantees" for Ukraine in a post-ceasefire deal. The president's remarks came as Ukraine agreed to a 30-day truce with Russia during parallel talks mediated by the U.S. in Saudi Arabia.

French President Emmanuel Macron on Tuesday called on military chiefs from across Europe and beyond to draw up a plan "to define credible security guarantees" for Ukraine in the event of a ceasefire, the presidency said.

His appeal, in a closed-door Paris meeting of top brass from more than 30 allied states, came as Ukraine endorsed an American proposal for a month-long ceasefire and agreed to immediate negotiations with Russia, in pivotal talks in Jeddah.

Macron has sought to rally a European response to Washington's shock policy shift in US-Russia relations.

The Paris meeting gathered representatives from 34 countries – most of them from Europe and NATO, but also from Australia, New Zealand and Japan.

There was no representative from the United States, which is the leading member of NATO.



"This is the moment when Europe must throw its full weight behind Ukraine, and itself," Macron told the meeting, according to the Élysée.

"In view of the acceleration of peace negotiations," it was necessary to start planning to "define credible security guarantees" to make a lasting peace in Ukraine a reality, the French presidency reported Macron saying.

Macron has teamed up with British Prime Minister Keir Starmer to lead efforts to form a "coalition of the willing" to enforce an eventual ceasefire in Ukraine.

According to the Élysée, the military chiefs of staff from European and NATO nations – including Britain and Turkey – agreed that the security guarantees "should not be separated from NATO and its capabilities".

Such guarantees should be "credible and long-term, and should be accompanied by unflinching support for the Ukrainian army", according to the Élysée.

More than three years since Russia invaded its neighbour, Europe is scrambling to boost its defences and break free from dependence on the United States.

It has been unsettled by Trump renewing contacts with Russian leader Vladimir Putin and criticising Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, raising fears that the US president may try to force Ukraine to accept a settlement favouring Russia.

Trump has also suspended military aid and intelligence-sharing with Kyiv.

## PSG Beat Liverpool; Barcelona, Bayern and Inter Also Win



PARIS (Dispatches) - Paris Saint-Germain beat Premier League leaders Liverpool on penalties at Anfield to book their place in the quarterfinals of the Champions League.

PSG beat Liverpool 1-0 on the night on Tuesday to level the aggregate score at 1-1. Ousmane Dembele scored 12 minutes into the second-leg match after a blunder by the Liverpool defence. Mohamed Salah scored Liverpool's first penalty but Darwin Nunez and Curtis Jones saw their spot kicks saved by Gianluigi Donnarumma.

Desire Doue, who won gold at the Olympic Games with France last year, became the youngest scorer of a winning penalty in the Champions League to send PSG through.

In a reverse of the first leg, Liverpool dominated on the night and struck the post through Jarell Quansah's drive, while drawing a number of saves from the PSG keeper in normal time.

Barcelona, Bayern Munich and Inter Milan all also booked their places in the next round of Europe's premier competition.

Barcelona cruised past Benfica with Raphinha scoring twice and Lamine Yamal once in a 3-1 win at home.

The Catalan club advanced 4-1 on aggregate score after last week's 1-0 victory and will play either Borussia Dortmund or Lille in the quarterfinals.

Raphinha's double made him the leading scorer in the Champions League this season with 11 goals. He had scored the lone goal last week in Lisbon.

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The Brazil forward put Barcelona ahead in the 11th, then Yamal added to the lead in the 27th before assisting in Raphinha's second goal in the 42nd to become the youngest player to score and assist in a Champions League match at 17 years, 241 days.

"My teammates make things much easier for me," Yamal said. "It was a good goal but sometimes these things come off and sometimes they don't. For the assist, I tried to shoot and Raphinha turned it into a goal."

Nicolas Otamendi scored for Benfica in the 13th to become the third-oldest scorer in a Champions League knockout game at the age of 37 years, 27 days, according to UEFA. Yamal's goal meant he became the second-youngest.

After a 3-0 first-leg win, Bayern Munich had no trouble advancing past German rival Bayer Leverkusen. Bayern made it to the last eight a record 23 times in the Champions League era after a 2-0 win at Leverkusen to advance 5-0 on aggregate.

Inter moved on past Feyenoord with a 2-1 victory at San Siro to advance 4-1 on aggregate. Bayern and Inter will meet in the last eight.

Harry Kane scored his 10th Champions League goal of the season and set up another as Bayern Munich cruised into the quarterfinals.

Leverkusen never looked likely to overturn the three-goal deficit from the first leg, even before Kane bundled in the ball at a free kick in the 52nd after Leverkusen's Patrik Schick misjudged an attempted clearance.

Kane set up Alphonso Davies for Bayern's second goal with a flicked cross in the 71st as the all-German rivalry became a one-sided contest. Bayern could have scored more as Jamal Musiala hit the crossbar with one shot and the post with another.

A goal at the start of each half saw Inter easily advance, with Marcus Thuram scoring a stunning eighth-minute opener. The Inter forward received the ball midway inside the Feyenoord half and then weaved his way into the area before unleashing a powerful effort into the top right corner.

Jakub Moder levelled from the penalty spot shortly before half-time after being tripped by Hakan Calhanoglu.

Inter restored its advantage on the night six minutes into the second half with a penalty of its own, which Calhanoglu converted after Mehdi Taremi was fouled by Thomas Beelen right in the corner of the area.

## Hamilton to Make Ferrari Debut



MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Lewis Hamilton will launch his bid to win the drivers' championship at a third Formula One team when he makes his much-anticipated debut for Ferrari in the season-opening Australian Grand Prix on Sunday.

Formula One's most successful team have not won a championship since the 2008 constructors' title and Hamilton, moving from Mercedes to Maranello, arrives chasing a record eighth.

Hamilton's switch has already sent fans into a frenzy in Italy and Melbourne's big Italian community will be out in force at Albert Park as the lakeside circuit hosts the opener for the first time since 2019.

Ferrari, runners-up to McLaren in the 2024 constructors' championship, celebrated a 1-2 in Melbourne last year when Carlos Sainz, who has since moved to Williams, won the race ahead of teammate Charles Leclerc.

McLaren, however, may be set to steal Hamilton's thunder after encouraging performances in winter testing with F1 data showing they were quickest on low fuel in Bahrain and had an advantage over Ferrari on race pace.

That would have been music to the ears of Australian fans cheering for McLaren's Oscar Piastri as he looks to become the first home driver to win the race since it was added to the F1 world championship calendar in 1985.

The Melbourne native finished fourth last year at Albert Park behind third-placed teammate Lando Norris.

Briton Norris, the bookmakers' pre-season favourite for the championship, may well be Piastri's biggest obstacle to a drought-breaking win for Australia.

Though Hamilton's Ferrari debut and McLaren's pre-season form have dominated the buildup, Red Bull's defending champion Max Verstappen will launch his bid to become the second man to win five drivers' titles in a row following Michael Schumacher.

## Alcaraz Rolls Into Indian Wells Fourth Round

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Carlos Alcaraz kept his Indian Wells "three-peat" campaign on track with a pristine 6-2 6-4 win against Canadian Denis Shapovalov in the third round, as a crowd of Americans fed off the home fans to reach the final 16.

The second-seeded Spaniard Alcaraz was never in doubt as he won the first five games, sending over 10 winners in the first set alone, as Shapovalov - who was fresh off a confident win in Dallas - struggled to find his usual intensity.

The four-times major winner never faced a break in a nearly flawless second set and he held to love in the final game, clinching the affair in under 90 minutes with a mighty overhead smash.

"I knew at the beginning of the match that I had to be really focused. I had to start the match really strong, knowing it was going to be a really tough battle," said Alcaraz.

Alcaraz wants to become only the third man to win three straight titles at the Masters 1000 tournament after retired great Roger Federer and former number one Novak Djokovic, who crashed out in the second round.

"I'm just really pleased about my performance today, about everything I have done," said Alcaraz. "Few things that I have to improve, but I'm really happy."

Alcaraz will face Grigor Dimitrov in the round of 16 after the Bulgarian 14th seed beat Frenchman Gael Monfils 7-(6) 4-6 7-(6) in a three-hour battle.

Right-handed Dimitrov was 3-1 up in the third set when his



forehand smashed into his left thumb, leaving it bleeding. He continued after receiving treatment but lost the next three games, before fighting back to force a tiebreak and seal the win.

Belarusian world number one Aryna Sabalenka used her powerful serve to wallop Italian Lucia Bronzetti 6-1 6-2, bringing her best form to the tournament after suffering early exits at the Qatar Open and in Dubai.

It took little time for Sabalenka to find her footing, as she sprinted through the first set and quickly recovered after dropping her serve early in the second. She will play British

lucky loser Sonay Kartal next.

"It wasn't as easy as the score looks like. It was tough conditions out there, and happy with the way I managed that," she said.

Players battled tricky winds in the California desert, as Americans Coco Gauff, Madison Keys, Taylor Fritz and Ben Shelton gave the home fans plenty to cheer about with compelling third-round victories.

Third seed Gauff overcame late nerves to beat Greek Maria Sakkari 7-(6) 6-2, getting over the finish line even as she produced six double faults in the final game before closing it out on her sixth match point with a forehand winner.

"Except the last game I thought I played a great match. Just trying to look at the positives," said Gauff, who had revenge on her mind after losing to Sakkari in the semi-final last year.

"Obviously I was a bit disappointed with the last game but that's just the perfectionist in me."

She will next play Swiss Belinda Bencic, whom she has beaten twice before, most recently in the round of 16 in Melbourne this year.

"It was a bit tricky conditions. I think we were both struggling a little bit with finding the rhythm, and I was just trying to stay solid on my end of the court," said Gauff.

Newly minted Australian Open champion Keys saved 12 of the 15 break points she faced to beat Belgian Elise Mertens 6-2, 6-(7) 6-4, securing her 14th straight match victory.

## Argentina Starts Trial Over Death of Soccer Icon Maradona



BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) - Argentina began a long-awaited trial on Tuesday of the medical team for soccer star Diego Maradona, over four years after his death in 2020, in a case that has riled emotions in the South American country where the World Cup winner is still revered.

Maradona's family, lawyers and his former nurses, brain surgeon and psychiatrist accused of homicide by negligence, arrived at the court on the outskirts of capital city Buenos Aires in what promises to be a drama-filled and lengthy saga.

Outside the San Isidro appeals court, fans held up placards with the message "Justice for D10S," using a nickname based on Maradona's shirt number and the Spanish word for God.

"They killed him, and today they will have to deal with it here," Maradona fan Sergio Gimenez said outside the court.

Maradona, immortalized in Argentina in huge murals and tattoos, is considered one of the greatest soccer players ever.

Seven members of the medical team are due in court in a trial expected to last several months. An eighth member faces a trial by jury in July.

Maradona died at home in November 2020 from heart failure at age 60 while recovering from surgery to remove a blood clot days earlier. His medical team reject the charges of "simple homicide with eventual intent" in the treatment of the former Boca Juniors and Napoli player.

Prosecutors read out the indictment to a packed courtroom that included Maradona's ex-wife and several of his children, where they described the conditions of care received by the late star as "calamitous, reckless, deficient, unprecedented."

They alleged that protocols were broken by medical professionals and that the home where Maradona was recovering from surgery was described as a "theater of horror" where nobody did what was required.

## Cavs Tie Team Record With 15th Straight Win

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Darius Garland had team highs of 30 points and eight assists as Cleveland rallied for a 109-104 victory over the visiting Brooklyn Nets, the Cavaliers' 15th consecutive win.

Jarrett Allen added 23 points and 13 rebounds as Cleveland matched the longest win streak in franchise history, which the current group set to begin the season. Evan Mobley had 21 points, nine boards and six assists while Max Strus chipped in 10 points for the Cavaliers, who trailed by as many as 18 points.

Cam Thomas' 27 points led Brooklyn, while Cameron Johnson put up 17 and Ziaire Williams had 14. Noah Clowney added 12 points off the bench for the Nets, who dropped their eighth game in nine tries.

Pacers 115, Bucks 114: Tyrese Haliburton knocked down a 3-pointer and a free throw in the final seconds to propel Indiana past visiting Milwaukee in Indianapolis.



Pascal Siakam led Indiana, which ended a three-game skid, with 25 points and 12 boards. Benedict Mathurin added 17 points and Haliburton scored 14.

Brook Lopez scored 23 points for Milwaukee, which lost its third in a row. Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 19 points and added 17 boards but committed the foul on Haliburton's 3-pointer.

Pelicans 127, Clippers 120: Zion Williamson had his second career triple-double while leading a balanced scoring effort as host New Orleans defeated Los Angeles.

Williamson finished with 22 points, 12 assists and 10 rebounds just 11 days after recording his first triple-double. CJ McCollum posted 23 points and seven assists, Trey Murphy III had 21 points, Karlo Matkovic added 15, Jose Alvarado had 14, Bruce Brown scored 12 and Jordan Hawkins added 11 for the Pelicans, who ended a four-game skid.