

Iran Summoned the Diplomatic Representatives of the UK, France and Germany to Convey Its "Strong Protest at the Irresponsible and Provocative Approach" of the Three Countries in Convening a Closed-Door UN Security Council Meeting on Tehran's Nuclear Program

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The Habilian Association, Which Represents Families of Iranian Victims of Terrorism, Condemned Italy's Support for the Terrorist Cult Mujahedin-e-Khalq Organization (MKO) That Has the Blood of Thousands of Innocent People on Its Hands

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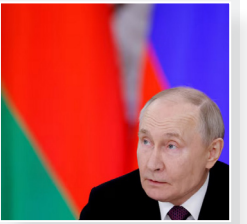
### Carpet Exports Persist Through Third Countries Amid Fierce Competition

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### New Sanctions Demonstrate U.S. Hypocrisy, Infringement of Law



TEHRAN - Iran has strongly condemned new US sanctions against Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad and some entities and vessels involved in the country's crude exports as a testament to Washington's "infringement of the law and hypocrisy."

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei made the remarks on Friday, a day after the US Treasury Department designated Paknejad and three entities engaged in the Iranian oil trade in China, and named three shipping vessels as blocked property for their use in the transactions.

The sanctions followed the delivery to Iran of a letter US President Donald Trump had written to Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. During an interview with Fox News last week, Trump threatened military action against Tehran if it did not engage in talks on a new nuclear deal.

Baghaei said the new bans refute the repeated claims by American officials about their readiness for negotiations and show the US hostility to the development, progress, and prosperity of the Iranian people.

He also noted that the US "addiction" to the policy of sanctions and pressure against independent countries violates the rule of law at the international level and poses a threat to international peace and security.

"The evil actions of the United States to disrupt Iran's economic and trade exchanges with other countries are a clear violation of the fundamental principles and rules of international law and free trade," he said.

"The Islamic Republic of Iran holds the US government responsible for the consequences and effects of such unilateral and illegitimate actions."

### Iran Rejects Talks Under U.S. Maximum Pressure



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Foreign Minister Abbas AraQchi says Iran will not engage in talks with the United States unless negotiations are free from pressure and threats.

Speaking in a recent interview with Iran newspaper, AraQchi said that Tehran will achieve nothing if it enters the talks under US President Donald Trump's so-called maximum pressure campaign.

The ineffectiveness of the policy of pressure must be proven to the US before the Islamic Republic can sit at the negotiating table on equal terms, he said, adding that Iran's strategy to counter the "maximum pressure" policy is "maximum resistance."

The top diplomat further expressed his satisfaction with the mediating role played by the Europeans in the last round of discussions aimed at lifting anti-Iran sanctions, saying the country will continue the talks with the Europeans in parallel with close consultations with Russia and China.

"But ultimately, the US must lift the sanctions. We will enter direct negotiations when we are on an equal footing, free from pressure and threats, and confident that the people's national interests will be secured," he emphasized.

AraQchi also said that Iran has a plan for possible nuclear negotiations while it engages in the ongoing indirect talks and cooperates with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and its chief Rafael Grossi.

## Beijing Meeting Urges End to Sanctions and Pressure, Calls for Dialogue

TEHRAN - Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs Kazem Gharibabadi has described Iran-Russia-China meeting in Beijing as an important step in resolving nuclear issue, calling the US's withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal "the root cause of all problems."

Gharibabadi said on Friday that putting an end to "illegal and unilateral" sanctions against Iran was among key issues of the talks during the tripartite meeting and its joint statement.

"The joint statement emphasizes the settlement of Iran's nuclear issue through political and diplomatic dialogue and stresses [the need] to end all forms of sanctions, pressure, and threats," he added.

On Friday, diplomats from Iran, Russia and China met in Beijing for talks on Tehran's nuclear program.

In a joint statement issued at the end of the Beijing meeting, China and Russia welcomed Iran's reiteration that its nuclear program is exclusively for peaceful purposes and also welcomed Iran's commitment to full compliance with its obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and Comprehensive Safeguard Agreement.

Beijing and Moscow stressed the need to fully respect Tehran's right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy as a state party to the NPT.

In 2015, Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with six world powers. However, the US's unilateral withdrawal in 2018 and its subsequent re-imposition of sanctions against Tehran left the future of the deal in limbo.

Gharibabadi said Tehran, Beijing and Moscow believe that the US unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA and lack of fulfillment of the European trioka - France, Germany and Britain - to their obligations are the root causes of the ongoing problems pertaining to the Iranian nuclear issue.

Gharibabadi also said, "Based on UN Security Council Resolution 2231, the situation of Iran's nuclear case should be declared normal as of October, and the three countries in the meeting voiced their objection to any move that would prevent the situation from becoming normal and hinder the normalization of economic and trade contacts and cooperation with Iran."

The joint statement called for relevant parties to refrain from any action that may escalate the situation, he noted.

The Iranian diplomat said the three sides agreed to continue consultations and emphasized that in case of the involvement of other countries in any possible talks, "these negotiations will solely



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focus on the nuclear issue, and non-nuclear topics will not be part of these discussions."

Iran's ambassador to Beijing also said the initiative of holding the Iran-Russia-China meeting will provide a "clear path" to countering the US lose-lose unilateralism.

"The trilateral meeting in China achieved very important and valuable agreements regarding significant international issues, including the necessity for the three countries to cooperate in countering the unilateral and bullying sanctions of the United States," Mohsen Bakhtiar said.

He said the meeting was "successfully" held in Beijing based on strategic cooperation among the three countries.

He added that Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs Kazem Gharibabadi held "very positive and constructive" consultations and discussions with other parties.

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Iran has long been subjected to Western sanctions over its nuclear activities and other pretenses, the latest of which was imposed on Thursday.

The new US administration at the White House has escalated these measures since taking office in January, reinstating the so-called "maximum pressure" policy, a campaign of hybrid warfare targeting the Islamic Republic.

Chinese and Russian diplomats called for the lifting of "unlawful sanctions" imposed against Iran, reiterating Tehran's right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy.

During talks between China, Russia and Iran in Beijing on Friday, the three countries' diplomats exchanged views on Iran's nuclear program and other international issues of common concern.

In a joint statement, they stressed "the necessity of lifting all unlawful, unilateral sanctions."

China, Russia and Iran "emphasized that the relevant parties should be committed to addressing the root causes of the current situation and abandoning sanction, pressure or threat of force".

### Enemies' Conspiracies Against Iran Will Lead Nowhere



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TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian says oil sanctions by enemies against Iran cannot harm the Islamic Republic as long as Iranians rely on the country's internal capacities, resources and assets.

Pezeshkian made the remarks at a meeting with artists and artisans from southeast Tehran province on Thursday, stressing that the enemies' conspiracies against the Iranian people will lead nowhere.

"As long as we have the national assets of specialists, elites, producers, industrialists, and artists, we will not be worried about oil sanctions," he emphasized, referring to the capabilities of Iran's scientists, specialists, artists, and producers.

"We face problems when we lose our assets. Any nation dependent on its material resources will eventually face ruin; therefore, we must focus on human capital—producers, artists, traders, and scientists. If we support them and do not hinder their activities, threats and sanctions will be ineffective," Pezeshkian further stressed.

The Iranian president further noted that the United States is pressuring Iran since "we made ourselves reliant on oil and gas."

"As long as we depend on the resources beneath our feet, if those resources are taken away or their sale is blocked, we will be in trouble. But if we create art and produce, no power can stop us," Pezeshkian said, stressing that the government gives unconditional support for artists and is committed to providing a platform for their work.

The Iranian president highlighted human capacity for innovation, stating, "If we believe that we can solve problems with our own hands, intelligence, and abilities, no power can bring us to our knees."

"We are sitting on treasure in Iran—this land is full of treasure. It is not befitting for us to be in the state we are in now. To overcome these conditions, we need a fresh outlook, unity, and renewed support. We must envision new possibilities for ourselves, and only in this way can we live together with dignity and pride," Pezeshkian added.

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

### UNSC Meeting on Iran "Blatant Political Maneuver"



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran's ambassador to the UN has condemned the Security Council meeting on Tehran's nuclear program as a "blatant political maneuver" which misuses the world body in an attempt to "advance narrow agendas."

In a statement on Thursday, Amir Sa'ed Iravani said the meeting was an "unwarranted interference" in Iran's ongoing cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"We strongly object to this provocative and unwarranted meeting. This is not a legitimate discussion on non-proliferation—it is a blatant political maneuver and a misuse of the Security Council to advance narrow agendas," he said.

"Such actions set a dangerous precedent that undermines the Council's credibility," he added.

The closed-door meeting on Tehran's nuclear program, initiated by the UK, France and German at Washington's request, came a few days after the IAEA Board of Governors made its observations about Iran's nuclear issue.

"We categorically reject the baseless claims made by the United States, the United Kingdom and France. These countries have conveniently ignored the reality that they themselves are responsible for the current situation,

Iravani said the Security Council meeting had been held for discussing purely technical issues and thus fall exclusively within the mandate of the IAEA, which were just discussed last week at the Board of Governors in Vienna.

"There is no legitimate basis for Security Council involvement," the statement said, calling it "an unwarranted interference in the ongoing, constructive engagement between Iran and the IAEA."

"It serves only one purpose: to continue the failed and unlawful policy of maximum pressure against Iran," Iravani said, referring to US President Donald Trump's policy of targeting the Islamic Republic since taking office.

## Iran Achieves 3.7% Economic Growth in 2024, Non-Oil Trade Surpasses \$116b

TEHRAN - Iran's economy recorded a 3.7% growth rate in the first nine months of 2024, while its non-oil trade volume surged past \$116 billion, reflecting an 11.2% increase, according to Mohammad Reza Farzin, Governor of the Central Bank of Iran (CBI). In a detailed economic briefing, Farzin highlighted key achievements, including a 3.4% rise in fixed capital formation and a significant reduction in inflation from 55.7% to 35.4%, driven by controlled liquidity and monetary base growth.

Farzin emphasized that Iran's 3.7% growth outpaces regional peers like Turkey (2.8%), Saudi Arabia (1.4%), Pakistan (2.5%), and Iraq (1.4%), as well as the Middle East and Central Asia average of 2.4%. While global leaders like China and India dominate economic expansion, Europe lags with lower rates, making Iran's performance notable. However, he acknowledged the gap to the target of 8% growth, expressing hope for improvement in Q4 2024.

Despite political and security challenges—including the martyrdom of the president and ensuing uncertainties—Iran maintained steady growth. Seasonally, spring saw 3.9% growth (market price), summer dipped to 3.5%, and autumn rebounded to 3.9%, averaging 3.7% over nine months. At base price, growth was 3.1% (spring), 2.7% (summer), and 3.6% (autumn), totaling 3.1%. Farzin clarified that growth reflects value-added changes, not production declines, with non-oil sectors—agriculture, services, and industries—driving autumn's uptick.

Services, comprising 50% of GDP, significantly influenced growth, followed by industries and mining (30%), agriculture (10%), and oil (10%). Private consumption grew 3.3%, while public spending shifted from -3.4% in Q1 to 7.9% in Q3. Fixed capital formation rose steadily—2.2% (spring), 3.3% (summer), and 4.4% (autumn)—averaging 3.4%, with machinery investment boosted by foreign exchange policies.



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Non-oil trade thrived, with exports reaching \$53.3 billion (up 18.8%) and imports at \$63 billion (up 5.6%) over 11 months. Despite a \$10 billion customs trade deficit, oil exports tip the balance to a \$15 billion surplus. Total non-oil trade climbed from \$105 billion in 2023 to \$116 billion in 2024. Gold imports, part of a two-year reserve-building strategy, also contributed to this figure.

Farzin underscored efforts to support production without stifling liquidity, which rose from 24.3% in March 2024 to 27.8% in February 2025—slightly above the 25% target—due to unforeseen events and anti-lockup measures. Monetary base growth, historically high at 45.5% in April 2023, fell to 22% by February 2025, below the decades-long 25% average. Inflation dropped to 35.4% annually, though February's point-to-point rate spiked due to currency fluctuations. The CBI plans to maintain the 28,500 toman preferential exchange rate for essentials to curb inflation further.

Looking ahead, Farzin announced innovative financing for small and medium enterprises in 2025 to prevent funding gaps, with new credit policies forthcoming. Producer inflation, a leading indicator, fell from 82.6% to 26.7% by February 2025, despite a slight uptick from currency pressures, signaling potential consumer inflation relief.

Farzin concluded that all economic sectors grew in 2024, with non-oil segments leading the charge, especially in autumn. The CBI will continue its stabilization policy, balancing bank oversight with increased working capital to support producers while targeting inflation control. "We aim to refine these figures further in 2025," he said, projecting a stronger economic outlook with sustained policy adjustments.

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## Isfahan to Boost Exports with AI in 2025, Plans Production Lines in Iraq

TEHRAN - The Isfahan Chamber of Commerce is set to leverage artificial intelligence (AI) to enhance the province's exports in 2025, according to Feresteh Amini, head of the chamber's Export Development and Import Management Commission. Speaking at the commission's final meeting of 2024 on March 13, Amini revealed that AI tools will be made available to all chamber members to strengthen their presence in international markets using real-time data.

Amini outlined an innovative strategy for 2025, encouraging businesses to shift from merely exporting goods to establishing production lines abroad. The initiative will kick off in Iraq, where Esfahan's Chamber of Commerce plans to set up manufacturing units starting next year. She noted that the commission laid the groundwork in 2024 to enable more ambitious steps in 2025.

## Iran to Launch Shipping Line to West Africa



TEHRAN - Iran is set to establish a new shipping line to West Africa as part of an ambitious plan to boost trade ties with the continent, according to Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, Head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization.

Speaking at a press briefing outlining the agenda for the Third Iran-Africa Cooperation Summit, Dehghan Dehnavi announced that existing commercial centers in Africa will be expanded, new centers will be established, and banking collaborations will be pursued through Iran's Central Bank.

The Third Iran-Africa Cooperation Summit is scheduled to take place from April 27 to May 2, 2025, in Tehran and Isfahan, coinciding with Iran Expo 2025. Dehghan Dehnavi emphasized that the Iranian government, under the direction of the President, is committed to deepening cooperation with African nations. "The Iran-Africa Summit is a turning point in our relations," he said, noting that the Trade Promotion Organization views the event as a key platform to foster economic partnerships throughout the year.

In addition to the shipping line initiative, Dehghan Dehnavi revealed plans to strengthen trade infrastructure in Africa and enhance banking ties. He also highlighted that Iran's National Development Fund has expressed readiness to support collaborative projects, while businesses in the oil, petrochemical, mining, and agricultural sectors have signaled their willingness to launch initiatives in Africa. "We've also been authorized to boost the purchase of African goods," he added.

Hassan Abbaszadeh, Iran's Deputy Oil Minister, provided further details on the country's petrochemical ambitions. "Iran produces 80 million tons of petrochemical products annually, with 30 million tons designated for export," he stated. "Africa's diverse markets are a key target for these exports." Abbaszadeh invited African traders attending the summit to visit the Asaluyeh region, a hub of Iran's petrochemical industry, to explore its high standards firsthand.

Abbaszadeh also expressed enthusiasm for African investment in Iran's petrochemical sector and pledged support for Iranian companies looking to invest in Africa. "We welcome B2B meetings and are eager to facilitate opportunities for mutual growth," he said.

The announcements signal Iran's growing focus on Africa as a strategic trade partner, with the upcoming summit poised to solidify these ties. Further details on the initiatives are expected to emerge as preparations for the 2025 event continue.

## Iran-Eurasia Free Trade Agreement to Take Effect in 60 Days



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TEHRAN - The Iranian Embassy in Moscow has announced that the free trade agreement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) will come into force in 60 days.

According to a report by IRNA, Iran's Ambassador to Russia, Kazem Jalali, formally confirmed the agreement's approval during a phone call with Andrey Slepnev, the EAEU's Minister of Trade. This follows the completion of legal formalities by all signatory countries.

The embassy stated that both parties expressed satisfaction with the imminent implementation, viewing it as a key driver for expanding regional trade. Per the agreement's terms, it will take effect 60 days after all member states finalize their legal processes. Signed in St. Petersburg in December 2023, the deal will exempt 87% of traded goods between Iran and EAEU countries from customs duties, fostering greater economic cooperation.

Iran's Guardian Council approved the agreement on March 2, 2025, with spokesperson Hadi Tahan Nazif stating on X that it aligns with Islamic law and the constitution. Iran's parliament initially passed the bill on December 23, 2024, but addressed objections from the Guardian Council by February 5, 2025, paving the way for its ratification.

The EAEU, an intergovernmental economic union, comprises Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia. Iran, alongside Uzbekistan, Moldova, and Cuba, holds observer status. The agreement marks a significant step in strengthening Iran's economic ties with the region, promising a boost to trade and regional integration as it nears implementation.

# Carpet Exports Persist Through Third Countries Amid Fierce Competition

TEHRAN - The president of Iran's National Carpet Center, Zahra Kamani, revealed that Iranian carpets continue to reach global markets despite numerous challenges, including sanctions and internal restrictions.

Speaking to ILNA, Kamani highlighted that exports are no longer limited to official customs channels, with a portion of carpets leaving the country via suitcase trade or through intermediary nations. This resilience underscores the enduring global appeal of Iranian handwoven carpets, even as competitors like India, China, and Egypt intensify their efforts to dominate the international market.

Kamani emphasized the pivotal role of Iran's private sector in sustaining the carpet industry. "Private sector associations have long been the standard-bearers of Iranian carpets," she said. "Their personal investments have kept the industry alive, proudly raising the flag of Iranian carpets in various countries."

She called for greater collaboration among industry stakeholders, suggesting the creation of a unified platform to bring together designers, dyers, weavers, restorers, and traders. Such synergy, she argued, would enhance the visibility of each segment's capabilities and bolster the industry as a whole.

Innovation, paired with a commitment to preserving tradition, was another key focus of Kamani's remarks. She urged the industry to adopt modern technologies and innovative approaches to stay competitive, noting that Iran's rivals are leveraging advanced methods to capture market share. "Our competitors are smartly working to outpace us, while we remain stuck in traditional methods," she warned. "We have yet to fully embrace modern marketing and sales strategies." Kamani believes that integrating technologies like artificial intelligence could revolutionize the industry, provided authenticity—a hard-earned hallmark of Iranian carpets—remains intact. "I advocate for technological advancement with utmost caution to safeguard our heritage," she stressed.

Kamani identified India, China, and Egypt as Iran's primary competitors in the global handwoven carpet market. These countries have secured top rankings by modernizing their industries with cutting-edge technology. She also noted that Afghanistan and Pakistan have surpassed Iran in carpet finishing and restoration, largely due to Iran's struggles with external sanctions and internal limitations. "To foreign sanctions, we must add our own self-imposed restrictions," she remarked.

Among these domestic hurdles, Kamani singled out the currency repatriation



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law as particularly burdensome for exporters. Additionally, the temporary transit of handmade carpets is constrained by tight deadlines, while the critical areas of restoration and finishing remain neglected in Iran. Turkey, she pointed out, has capitalized on this gap, employing Iranian restorers to boost its own economy. High import tariffs on raw materials, currency fluctuations, and the inability of Iranian exporters to open letters of credit (unlike their competitors) further complicate the situation. Kamani called for export incentives to alleviate these pressures and level the playing field.

Despite these obstacles, Iranian carpets maintain a foothold in global markets. "Not all exports go through customs," Kamani explained. "Some are carried out through suitcases, others via third countries. This shows that, despite all limitations, Iranian carpets still have devoted fans worldwide."

Kamani asserted that no competitor has yet surpassed the artistry of Iranian carpets. While rivals may excel in mass production and commercial strategies, the unique appeal of Iranian craftsmanship endures. "Museums around the world still seek to acquire even a single Iranian rug," she noted proudly.

She attributed this lasting value to the superior quality of Iran's raw materials and the expertise of its weavers. Wool from regions like Kermanshah, Sirjan, and Sistan offers unmatched durability for everyday carpets, yet Kamani lamented that India has been importing Iranian wool to enhance its own products. Iran also excels in producing plant-based dyes from its rich pastures and deserts, yielding stable colors that endure for centuries. "Thanks to our materials and skilled weavers, Iranian carpets can last over 100 years," she said.

Kamani emphasized that Iranian carpets transcend mere consumer goods. "They are works of art, not just luxury items," she said. "Iranian carpets are a global brand—we don't need to build recognition from scratch." However, she stressed the need to expand market reach beyond traditional buyers and appeal to younger generations through modern strategies.

In conclusion, while Iran's carpet industry faces stiff competition and structural challenges, its global reputation remains unrivaled. By blending innovation with tradition, Kamani believes Iran can not only preserve its legacy but also reclaim its dominance in the international market.

# Harmonizing Standards Between Iran and Russia Essential for Boosting Bilateral Trade

TEHRAN - A specialized roundtable titled "Identifying Successful Trade Methods Between Iran and Russia: Product Standards, Regulations, and Tax Systems" was held at the Tehran Chamber of Commerce to address barriers and propose solutions for enhancing commercial ties. Organized as a webinar by the chamber's International Affairs Department on March 12, 2025, the event brought together key figures from both nations to discuss prerequisites and strategies for expanding bilateral and multilateral trade.

Participants included Mehdi Sadeghi, Vice President of the Tehran Chamber, Saeed Tajik, head of the Energy Commission, Hamidreza Aloumi, head of the Arbitration Center, and Peyman Darabian, head of tax services and CEO of the chamber's training institute. Representing Russia were senior officials, including the Vice President of International Affairs and the Executive Committee Chair of Business Russia. The session focused on aligning standards, legal requirements, and tax systems to streamline trade.

Sadeghi opened the webinar, highlighting the significant growth in Iran-Russia trade in recent years. He pointed to the recently ratified Iran-Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Free Trade Agreement and the 20-year strategic partnership signed during President Masoud Pezeshkian's visit to Russia as pivotal milestones. "These agreements will gradually eliminate customs tariffs, ease goods movement, and boost trade volume," he said, stressing that understanding and adhering to product standards, laws, and tax systems are critical for success in international markets.

He emphasized the Tehran Chamber's commitment to fostering closer ties with Russia, proposing collaboration with standardization bodies, customs, and tax authorities to simplify processes and remove obstacles. Sadeghi also expressed readiness to partner with Business Russia on a one-year roadmap to enhance cooperation, facilitate information exchange, and leverage opportunities stemming from



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post-Ukraine conflict engagements, which have seen frequent delegations between the two countries.

Hessamoddin Hallaj, Deputy for International Affairs, noted that the roundtable builds on agreements from Sadeghi's recent Russia visit, aiming to refine commercial standards and tax knowledge to bolster Iranian companies' presence in Russia. Nuna Kagramanian of Business Russia called the EAEU deal a "unique opportunity," noting that 90% of goods could benefit from preferential tariffs. She suggested

joint platforms in agriculture, machinery, metallurgy, and textiles to connect producers.

Roshanali Yekta of the Iran-Russia Joint Chamber stressed digitizing certificates of origin, aligning certifications, and optimizing Russian inspectors to support trade goals under EAEU and bilateral pacts. Saeed Tajik, CEO of Iran's ISQI, underscored standard harmonization, citing a recent ISQI-ROSTEST agreement following reciprocal visits by standardization officials. He proposed a joint desk for aligning priority goods like grains and food products, leveraging Iran's ILAC and APAC memberships for global compatibility.

Hamidreza Aloumi offered the Tehran Chamber's Arbitration Center as a dispute resolution hub, avoiding third-country arbitration due to shared sanctions challenges. Peyman Darabian highlighted tax incentives, noting foreign investors can own 100% of Iranian-registered firms, with up to 50% tax exemptions for significant local investment or exports.

Russian representatives, including advisors from Business Russia and ROSTEST, shared insights on collaboration conditions, with follow-up sessions planned for deeper technical discussions. The Tehran Chamber aims to deepen economic ties through trade fairs, specialized forums, and inter-capital cooperation, signaling a robust push to elevate Iran-Russia trade in 2025.

## Iran-Afghanistan Passenger Train to Launch Soon



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TEHRAN - The Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Jabbarali Zakeri, has announced the imminent launch of a passenger train service between Iran and Afghanistan, alongside plans to transit European cargo through the Khaf-Herat railway corridor.

The Khaf-Herat rail line faced significant opposition from the previous government, particularly from the head of Iran's railway authority under the 13th administration. However, since the 14th administration took office, freight trains have begun operating on this corridor. Over this period, goods from countries such as Turkey, China, and India have been transited to Afghanistan via this route, boosting Iran's rail transit statistics. A key development is that Iran will soon facilitate the delivery of European cargo to Afghanistan through the Khaf-Herat railway.

Zakeri provided updates on the country's rail transit status and the impact of the Khaf-Herat line. "Rail connectivity and transit between Iran and neighboring countries are on the rise," he stated. The CEO of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways highlighted the growing success of cargo transport through this corridor, noting, "We've taken significant steps to enhance rail transit to Afghanistan. Every week, at least one to three trains carrying goods from various origins—including Turkey, India via the open seas to Bandar Abbas, and then onward to Afghanistan—enter Iran and are transited to Afghanistan via this rail route. Even Chinese cargo arrives by sea to Bandar Abbas and is transported to Afghanistan through our rail network."

Zakeri emphasized that these efforts align with Iran's goal of expanding transit infrastructure in the eastern part of the country. He also revealed plans to activate the passenger segment of this corridor: "The rail route from Rozanak to Herat is under construction, and once completed, passenger trains will operate between Herat and back, making it fully operational."

He further underscored the strategic importance of the Khaf-Herat line as a key export route, noting that neighboring countries rely on this corridor to transport goods, particularly to western Afghanistan. Regarding future developments, Zakeri added, "Container transport is already underway along the Bandar Abbas to Shantigh corridor, and naturally, European and Southeast Asian countries will also utilize this route."

## Iraq to Continue Importing Electricity from Iran



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TEHRAN - Iraq will maintain its electricity imports from Iran based on an existing bilateral agreement, despite the U.S. ending exemptions for such imports, according to Mostafa Rajabi Mashhadi, CEO of Tavanir, Iran's power company.

In an interview with ILNA, Mashhadi emphasized that the export contract between Iran and Iraq remains in effect, with a commitment period still outstanding. He assured that Iraq intends to uphold the agreement, ensuring continued electricity imports from Iran.

Mashhadi underscored that while exports to Iraq will persist, Iran's domestic power supply remains the top priority. "Electricity exports occur during off-peak hours and align with our commitments," he noted. Regarding outstanding payments, he revealed that negotiations between the two nations have led to an agreement to settle Iraq's recent debts promptly. A portion of these dues was already paid last month, with the remainder expected soon.

Addressing potential U.S. pressure affecting Iran's electricity trade with other countries, Mashhadi dismissed concerns about exports to Turkey and Russia. He confirmed that negotiations with both nations are ongoing, expressing optimism about finalizing electricity trade deals in the near future. "Talks with Turkey and Russia are progressing, and we hope to see results soon," he said.

This development highlights Iraq's reliance on Iranian electricity amid regional energy dynamics, even as the U.S. tightens sanctions. Iran, meanwhile, continues to balance its domestic needs with export commitments, while expanding its energy partnerships with neighboring countries like Turkey and Russia. The resolution of Iraq's debts and the prospect of new trade agreements signal a strengthening of Iran's position in the regional energy market.

## Zelenskiy Says Turkey Is a Partner in Security Guarantees

ANKARA (Dispatches) - President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said on Thursday that Ukraine saw Turkey as a partner in security guarantees for his country, and added that Kyiv was ready to ratify a free trade agreement between the states. NATO member Turkey has balanced ties with Kyiv and Moscow since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. It has maintained good ties with both, supporting Ukraine militarily and backing its territorial integrity, while refusing to join sanctions on Russia. The Reuters Daily Briefing newsletter provides all the news you need to start your day. Sign up here. As Europe scrambles to bolster its own defence and security, while seeking guarantees for Kyiv under any possible ceasefire deal with Moscow urged by Washington, Turkey has emerged as a key potential security partner.



## U.S. Judges Order Trump Administration to Reinstate Thousands of Fired Workers



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Federal judges in California and Maryland on Thursday ordered U.S. President Donald Trump's administration to reinstate thousands of probationary federal workers who lost their jobs as part of mass firings carried out at 19 agencies.

The back-to-back rulings were the most significant blow yet to the effort by Trump and top adviser Elon Musk to drastically shrink the federal bureaucracy. Government agencies face a Thursday deadline to submit plans for a second wave of mass layoffs and to slash their budgets.

U.S. District Judge James Breder in Baltimore agreed, with 20 Democratic-led states that 18 of the agencies which had fired probationary employees en masse in recent weeks violated regulations governing the laying off of federal workers.

Breder's restraining order applies to, among other agencies, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and the U.S. Agency for International Development, all three of which have been in the deregulatory and cost-cutting cross-hairs of the Trump administration.

Other agencies covered by the judge's order include the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Interior, Labor, Transportation, Treasury and Veterans Affairs.

While the administration argued it dismissed each of the employees for performance or other individualized reasons, the judge said that was not true, which would make the job cuts a form of mass layoff necessitating advance notice to the states, who have obligations to assist their newly unemployed citizens.

## Global Displacement to Rise by 6.7m People by End of Next Year



GENEVA (Dispatches) - Some 6.7 million additional people are expected to be newly displaced around the world by the end of next year, the Danish Refugee Council said on Friday, just as aid cuts from key donors like the United States take effect.

The U.N. refugee agency said last year that the number of forcibly displaced people around the globe stood at over 117 million people and warned that number could rise.

"These are not cold statistics. These are families forced to flee their homes, carrying next to nothing, and searching for water, food, and shelter," said Charlotte Slente, secretary general of the Danish Refugee Council in a statement.

Twenty-seven countries account for nearly a third of all global displacements. The projection is based on an AI-driven model that predicts displacement trends by analysing over 100 indicators including factors such as security, politics and economics in those countries.

It forecasts that about a third of new displacements will be from Sudan, which is already the world's worst refugee crisis after nearly two years of war. Another 1.4 million people are expected to be forcibly displaced from Myanmar, the report said.

U.S. President Donald Trump is cutting billions of dollars in foreign aid programmes globally as part of a major spending overhaul by the world's biggest aid donor.

# Putin Suggests U.S. Ceasefire Idea for Ukraine Needs Serious Reworking

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday that Russia supported a U.S. proposal for a ceasefire in Ukraine in principle, but sought a number of clarifications and conditions that appeared to rule out a quick end to the fighting.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has left hundreds of thousands of dead and injured, displaced millions of people, reduced towns to rubble and triggered the sharpest confrontation for decades between Moscow and the West.

Putin's heavily qualified support for the U.S. ceasefire proposal looked designed to signal goodwill to Washington and open the door to further talks with U.S. President Donald Trump.

But Putin said many crucial details needed to be sorted out and any agreement must address the root causes of the conflict. Russia called its 2022 invasion a "special military operation" designed to "denazify" Ukraine and halt an expansion of NATO.

"We agree with the proposals to cease hostilities," Putin told reporters at the Kremlin. "The idea itself is correct, and we certainly support it." "But we proceed from the fact that this cessation should be such that it would lead to long-term peace and would eliminate the original causes of this crisis."

He went on to list a slew of issues he said needed clarifying and thanked Trump, who says he wants to be remembered as a peacemaker, for his efforts to end the war. Both Moscow and Washington now cast the conflict as a deadly proxy war that could have escalated into World War Three.

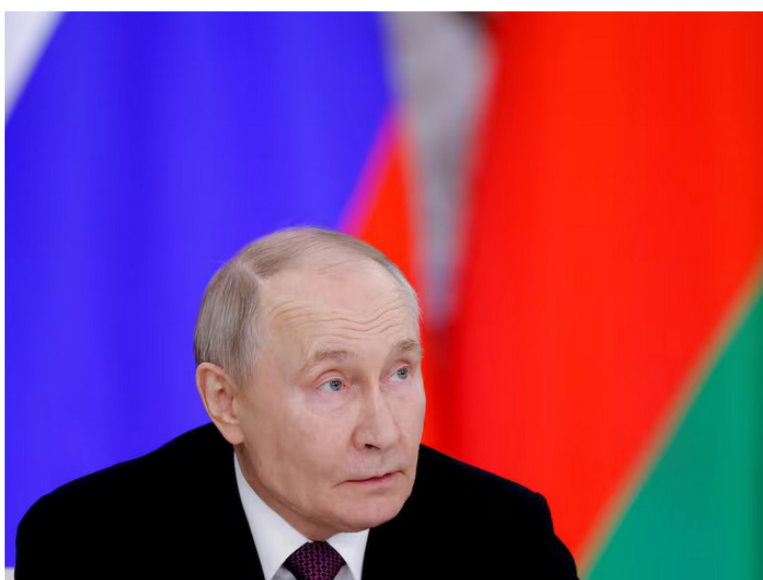
Trump, who said he was willing to talk to the Russian leader by phone, called Putin's statement "very promising" and said he hoped Moscow would "do the right thing."

Trump said Steve Witkoff, his special envoy, was engaged in talks with the Russians in Moscow on the U.S. proposal, which Kyiv has already agreed to.

The U.S. president said those discussions on Thursday would show if Moscow was ready to make a deal. "Now we're going to see whether or not Russia is there, and if they're not, it'll be a very disappointing moment for the world," he said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said Putin was preparing to reject the ceasefire proposal but was afraid to tell Trump.

"That's why in Moscow they are imposing upon the idea of a ceasefire these conditions, so that nothing happens at all, or so



that it cannot happen for as long as possible," Zelenskiy said in his nightly video address.

European Union foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said on Thursday she thinks Russia will likely say yes to a ceasefire but with conditions.

Speaking with Reuters on the sidelines of the G7 Foreign Ministers' summit in Canada, Kallas said the U.S. has told members it understands that Russia may be playing a game to extend the process by blurring the picture.

Any delay would give Russia more time for its troops to push the last Ukrainian forces out of Russia's western Kursk region. Moscow also demands that Kyiv permanently cede territory claimed by Russia, a position that Ukraine rejects.

Ukraine and its allies describe Russia's 2022 invasion as an imperial-style land grab, and Zelenskiy has repeatedly vowed to defeat Russian forces. Russian forces control nearly a fifth of Ukraine's territory and have been edging forward since mid-2024.

Trump said his administration has been discussing what land Ukraine would keep or lose under any settlement, as well as the future of a large power plant.

He did not name it but was likely referring to the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia facility in Ukraine, Europe's largest nuclear plant. The two sides have accused each other of risking an accident at the plant with

their actions.

Putin portrays the conflict as part of an existential battle with a declining and decadent West which he says humiliated Russia after the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 by enlarging the NATO military alliance and encroaching on what he considers Moscow's sphere of influence, including Ukraine.

Putin said Russian forces were moving forward along the entire frontline and that the ceasefire would have to ensure that Ukraine did not seek to use it simply to regroup.

He also said he might call Trump to discuss the issue.

The United States agreed on Tuesday to resume weapons supplies and intelligence sharing with Ukraine after Kyiv said it was ready to support a ceasefire proposal.

The Saudi state news agency said Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman spoke to Putin by phone and told him the kingdom remains committed to supporting a political resolution in Ukraine.

# Armenia, Azerbaijan Announce Agreement to Sign Peace Deal

BAKU (Dispatches) - Armenia and Azerbaijan on Thursday said they had agreed to sign a peace deal after decades of conflict, with Armenia agreeing to surrender its claim over the primarily Armenian-populated Karabakh region. While numerous peace talks have failed in the past, major concessions on behalf of Armenia breathe new life into efforts for normalisation between the neighbouring countries.

Azerbaijan and Armenia said Thursday that they had wrapped up talks aimed at resolving the Caucasus neighbours' decades-long conflict, with both sides agreeing on the text of a possible treaty.

A deal to normalise ties would be a major breakthrough in a region where Russia, the European Union, the United States and Turkey all jostle for influence.

Baku and Yerevan fought two wars for control of Azerbaijan's Armenian-populated region of Karabakh, at the end of the Soviet Union and again in 2020, before Azerbaijan seized the entire area in a 24-hour offensive in September 2023.

Both Armenia and Azerbaijan have repeatedly said a comprehensive peace deal to end their long-standing conflict is within reach, but previous talks had failed to reach consensus on a draft agreement.

"The negotiation process on the text of the peace agreement with Armenia has been concluded," Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov told reporters.

"Armenia has accepted Azerbaijan's proposals on the two previously unresolved articles of the peace treaty," he said.

Armenia's foreign ministry later confirmed that in a statement, saying: "Negotiations on the draft agreement have been concluded" and "the Peace



Agreement is ready for signing."

Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan hailed it as an "important event", saying Yerevan was "ready to begin discussions on the place and time for signing the peace agreement".

"We believe this text is a compromise, as a peace agreement should be," he told reporters.

France's President Emmanuel Macron welcomed the announcement, writing on X that "there are now no remaining obstacles to the signing of a peace treaty ... which should pave the way for a lasting peace in the South Caucasus."

But in a hint at enduring tensions, Armenia criticised Azerbaijan for making a statement unilaterally rather than issuing a joint one.

Pashinyan has recognised Baku's sovereignty over Karabakh after three decades of Armenian separatist rule, a move seen as a crucial first step towards a normalisation of relations.

Armenia also last year returned to Azerbaijan four border villages it had seized decades earlier.

Nearly all ethnic Armenians - more than 100,000 people - fled Karabakh after its takeover by Baku.

Tensions over the conflict have also driven a wedge between Armenia and Russia, with Yerevan accusing its ally of not doing enough to support it.

Armenia last year suspended its participation in the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) over the bloc's failure to come to its aid in the conflict with Azerbaijan.

Russia, the United States and the European Union have all tried to play a mediating role at various times in the conflict.

Pashinyan said Thursday that two points in the draft peace agreement had remained unresolved up to now.

One key issue was "non-deployment of third-party forces" along the countries' shared border, he said.

There were also disagreements over plans for both sides to mutually withdraw legal cases from international judicial bodies.

The two countries have been locked in legal battles at the International Court of Justice, the International Criminal Court and the European Court of Human Rights over allegations of rights violations committed before, during and after their armed conflicts.

Azerbaijan's "next expectation from Armenia is constitutional amendments", Bayramov said.

Baku is demanding that Armenia remove from its constitution a reference to its declaration of independence, which asserts territorial claims over Karabakh. Any such amendments to Armenia's constitution would require a referendum.

# Pro-Palestinian Protesters Take Over Trump Tower in New York

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Hundreds of Jewish demonstrators overran New York's Trump Tower on Thursday in support of Palestinians as well as detained Palestinian student campaigner Mahmoud Khalil.

Wearing matching red T-shirts emblazoned with "Jews say stop arming Israel," the group protested for over an hour inside the Manhattan skyscraper, where President Donald Trump's family business is headquartered and he has a personal residence.

The building was also where Trump memorably rode down a golden escalator in 2015 to announce his first run for president.

Police said they arrested 98 people, marching under the banner of the group called Jewish Voice for Peace, for crimes including trespassing.

The group, which apparently caught security and police off guard, chanted "fight Nazis, not students," a reference to Trump's crackdown on foreign students involved in pro-Palestinian protests.

Police loaded detained protesters on buses, including a repurposed city bus, in front of the Gucci store at the foot of the tower as a helicopter and drone flew overhead.

Across town at Columbia University, where Khalil had been a student, administrators announced they had issued "multi-year suspensions, temporary degree revocations, and expulsions" of students who had occupied a campus building last year during demonstrations against Israel's war in Gaza.

The short statement did not provide further details, such as who had been sanctioned, but comes less than a week after the Trump administration cut \$400 million in federal funding for the university, accusing it of not sufficiently addressing anti-Semitism.



It also comes days after Khalil, a recent graduate and one of the protest leaders, was detained by immigration authorities.

The Trump administration has moved to revoke Khalil's green card, accusing him of leading "activities aligned with Hamas", the militant group whose October 7, 2023 attack triggered the war.

His arrest has triggered outrage from critics of the Trump administration as well as free speech advocates, including some on the political right, who say such a move has a chilling effect on freedom of expression.

At Trump Tower, filmmaker and Columbia Professor James Schamus told AFP "New York Jews are coming out to demand the release of Mahmoud Khalil and demand that our Jewishness not be weaponized to steal the rights of American citizens and to end our democracy."

"The Trump-Musk regime has made it clear that they are not charging Mahmoud Khalil with any crime, that they are accusing him of having opinions that they say 'align with Hamas'," he added ahead of the protest action.

Confused tourists visiting the skyscraper took pictures and milled around as police attempted to clear protesters, with an officer delivering a large box of MaxCuff plastic cable ties.

"It was suspicious when all these people came in and none went to the restaurant," said a Trump Tower employee who declined to be named.

Police Chief John Chell said the protest passed off without injuries or damage and that the atrium had been cleared of protesters within two hours.

## Fernandes Hat-Trick Caps Man United Win Over Sociedad



PARIS (Dispatches) - Bruno Fernandes netted a hat-trick as Manchester United beat Real Sociedad 4-1 in their Europa League last-16 second leg on Thursday, while Tottenham bounced back to edge AZ Alkmaar 3-2 on aggregate.

Rangers knocked out Jose Mourinho's Fenerbahce 3-2 on penalties as Chelsea saw out a 1-0 home win against Copenhagen to ensure their place in the last eight of the Europa Conference League.

Two spot-kicks and a late arrowed finish from Fernandes sent Man Utd into the quarter-finals by a 5-2 aggregate margin against 10-man Sociedad.

"We need to help him win titles, because he deserves it," Man Utd manager Ruben Amorim told TNT Sports of his captain.

"It was a good performance. The physicality was there... Even without the sending-off, you felt that the team were going to win this game."

A 10th-minute penalty gave the visitors the lead at Old Trafford before Fernandes converted from 12 yards in the 16th and 50th minutes.

Jon Aramburu saw red shortly after the hour and Man Utd took full advantage with Fernandes rifling in a third three minutes from time and Diogo Dalot rubber-stamping an emphatic victory in injury-time.

Amorim's side will meet Lyon in the next round. Goals in either half from Wilson Odobert and James Maddison in London earned Spurs a 3-1 win against

AZ Alkmaar.

Odobert powered home following sloppy AZ defending to get Spurs level on aggregate in the 26th minute, after the first leg finished 1-0 to the Dutch side.

Maddison put the hosts 2-0 up three minutes into the second period with an arrowed finish before Peer Koopmeiners responded after the hour to level the tie again.

Odobert grabbed his second and Spurs' third on the night in the 74th minute to set up a quarter-final meeting with Eintracht Frankfurt.

After losing the first leg in Istanbul 3-1, Fenerbahce fought back at Rangers to win 2-0.

Polish winger Sebastian Szymanski produced two cute finishes in the 45th and 73rd minutes to force extra-time with the aggregate score locked at three-apiece.

But three missed spot-kicks by the Turkish side handed Rangers a 3-2 win in the shoot-out and a last-eight clash with Athletic Bilbao.

"We deserved to win over 90 minutes, we deserved to win after 120 minutes, we were the best team by far," said Mourinho.

"We did everything to win. The ref and the VAR decided that we should go to penalties.

"Congratulations to Rangers but I think my team deserves everything from me, from our supporters and even from Turkey as a country."

## Curry Hits 4,000th 3-Pointer in Win Over Kings

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Stephen Curry became the first player in NBA history to make 4,000 career 3-pointers as the Golden State Warriors extended their winning streak to a season-best six games with a 130-104 victory over the Sacramento Kings in San Francisco.

Curry was able to play a supporting role with 11 points for the Warriors, who led wire-to-wire and had eight players score in double figures. Draymond Green made four 3-pointers and scored a season-high 23 points.

Jonathan Kuminga returned after missing 31 straight games with an injured right ankle and scored 18 points in 20 minutes off the bench. Moses Moody added 17 points and a career-high six assists, Buddy Hield scored 16 points, Gary Payton II had 11, and Gui Santos and Quinten Post chipped in 10 apiece.

DeMar DeRozan led Sacramento with 23 points and seven assists. Keon Ellis scored 18 points, Zach LaVine added 14, Jake LaRavia had 13 and Trey Lyles finished with 11.

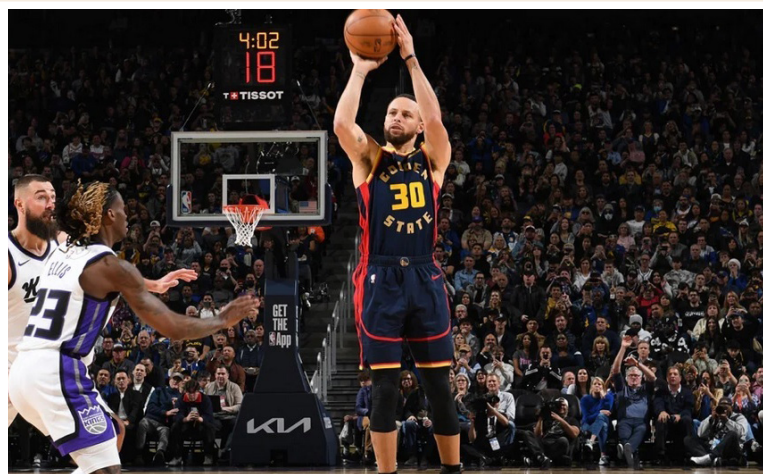
The Warriors won for the 13th time in their past 15 games while shooting 57.7 percent from the field, including 22 of 39 (56.4 percent) from 3-point range.

Sacramento has lost three straight and four of its past five.

Golden State led 30-18 at the end of the opening quarter after shooting 7 of 13 from 3-point range for the period.

The Warriors extended their lead to 57-34 on Santos' trey with 5:35 left in the second quarter before Sacramento pulled within 61-51 at the half after closing on a 17-4 run.

The Kings carried the momentum into the third quarter and cut the



deficit to 67-63 before Curry scored five straight points, including the 4,000th 3-pointer of his career with 8:19 left in the period.

Golden State held a 96-83 advantage at the end of the third and stretched its lead to 115-98 on consecutive dunks by Kuminga, the second with 5:28 left.

The Warriors maintained control and led 120-110 when both teams rested their starters with 3:22 remaining.

Sacramento played without Domantas Sabonis, who missed his sixth straight game with a strained left hamstring.

Meanwhile Coby White scored 31 points as the Chicago Bulls earned a fourth straight win by beating the visiting Brooklyn Nets

116-110 on Thursday night.

The Bulls won for the sixth time in nine games and earned a fourth straight victory for the first time since Nov. 30-Dec. 8, 2023, thanks to White, who produced his fourth 30-point showing this season.

A week after scoring 44 against the Orlando Magic, White made 12 of 24 shots as the Bulls rallied from a 10-point fourth-quarter deficit by outscoring the Nets 34-18 in final period.

Kevin Huerter added 18 points, including the go-ahead putback around Brooklyn center Nic Claxton that broke a 101-101 tie with 3:54 left. He also converted two three-point plays in a span of 33 seconds to put Chicago ahead 113-105 with 1:05 left.

The Bulls' Tre Jones also contributed 18 to go along with six rebounds and six assists in place of Josh Giddey, who sprained his right ankle Monday and sat out. Julian Phillips chipped in with 16 for Chicago, which shot 45.6 percent from the floor.

Cam Thomas amassed 24 points and 10 assists for the Nets, who lost for the ninth time in 10 games and blew a double-digit lead for the third time in four games. Tyrese Martin added 19 points and Claxton collected 18 points and 14 rebounds for the Nets.

Cameron Johnson tallied 16 points and Ziaire Williams finished with 11 as the Nets got only four points from D'Angelo Russell and shot 44.8 percent as a team.

After Huerter's three-point plays, the Nets got the lead down to 114-110 on a short jumper by Claxton with 16.3 seconds left, but Phillips finished it off at the line for Chicago.

## Ceremony Held to Honor World Karate Champions



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - A grand ceremony to honor the world's top karate champions was held at the Pharos Global Economic Development Group's convention hall, celebrating the achievements of athletes who have brought pride to Iran on the global stage.

The event was organized under the leadership of the World Shotokan Federation representative and the Asian President of the WMMF Karate Federation, with prominent figures and world champions in attendance.

Among the notable attendees were Dr. Ahmad Mohammadi Sohevari, Asian President of the WMMF Karate Federation; Master Ahmad Safi, founder of the WMMF style and Iran's representative to the WSKF Shotokan Federation; and Master Majid Safi, head of Iran's Parakarate Committee. The ceremony highlighted the contributions of these individuals and the athletes they have guided to success.

Speaking on the sidelines of the event, Ahmad Safi expressed his delight, stating, "We are thrilled to host champions, coaches, and leading karate figures today. These individuals have played a vital role in Iran's victories at the Deaf Olympics, Parakarate Deaf competitions, and Asian and World Karate Championships at the national team level." He noted that the honored group secured 11 medals in Asian Parakarate, along with two gold and one bronze at the Deaf Olympics.

Dr. Ahmad Mohammadi Sohevari also praised the athletes, saying, "You are a source of pride. Your courage in sports has made you champions and continues to bring honor to Iran worldwide." Dr. Saeed Omrani, another prominent figure at the event, added, "Your chivalrous spirit as champions deserves recognition. Your ethical conduct in sports upholds Iran's dignity, inspiring Iranians across the globe."

The ceremony also saw the presence of distinguished karate masters, including Asghar Taherabadi, Bahman Hasanzadeh, Mehdi Ahmadi, Arash Kiamehr, Reza Safi, Mohammad Mohammadi Sohevari (a lawyer), and Ali Ganji, inspector of Iran's Calligraphers Association.

At the conclusion of the event, international champions and coaches were celebrated with certificates of appreciation, valuable poetry books, and prestigious awards. Honored athletes included Mehdi Khodabakhshi, Ali Maskini, Ali Rahimi, Amir Reza Barzoui, Reza Besharatikia, Esmail Mo'tamedi, Mohamad Mehdi Khoshnavaz, Ali Reza Heydari, Hafez Hafezikia, Rahim Golmohammadi, Abolfazl Chehreqani, Negar Farahani Vashqani, Milad Sadeqzadeh Ebrahimpour Kashani, and Mohammad Hossein Saedi.

In a special segment, distinguished international coaches and masters—Asghar Taherabadi, Majid Safi, Bahman Hasanzadeh, Reza Safi, Mehdi Ahmadi, and Arash Kiamehr—were also recognized for their outstanding contributions. The ceremony underscored the importance of karate in promoting Iran's legacy of excellence and sportsmanship on the world stage.

## Norris Edges Verstappen to Set Pace in Practice



MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Lando Norris fired a warning shot to outpace world champion Max Verstappen and top the timesheets in first practice for the season-opening Australian Grand Prix, with Lewis Hamilton 12th on his Ferrari debut.

McLaren's Norris powered round the Albert Park circuit in fine weather with a best time of one minute 17.252 seconds on soft tyres ahead of Williams' Carlos Sainz in a session red-flagged twice.

The second incident saw Haas rookie Ollie Bearman smash into the barriers and lose his rear right wheel in an accident that left debris littering the track.

He climbed out uninjured and was heard on the radio saying: "I'm sorry."

Norris grabbed the lead from Sainz with barely a minute left, leaving Ferrari's Charles Leclerc third ahead of Norris's teammate Oscar Piastri.

Red Bull's Verstappen was fifth, 0.444 adrift, with Alex Albon in the other Williams sixth.

Seven-time world champion Hamilton cautioned this week that everything at Ferrari was different to his old team Mercedes and there could be a transition period while he settles in.

He appears to have his work cut out, ending 0.819 off the pace.

The Mercedes pair of George Russell and Kimi Antonelli were seventh and 14th respectively.

## Alcaraz Still on Track for Indian Wells Three-Peat

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Carlos Alcaraz moved closer to a rare Indian Wells "three-peat" as he breezed past an exhausted Grigor Dimitrov 6-1 6-1 to reach the quarter-finals, while Madison Keys tallied a 15th straight victory by beating Donna Vekic 4-6 7-6(7) 6-3.

Alcaraz, who is bidding to become the third man to win the event three times in a row after Roger Federer and Novak Djokovic, handled the blustery conditions far better than the Bulgarian 14th seed.

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Dimitrov was showing signs of fatigue from his three-hour third-round match earlier in the week and could do little to stop the Spanish world number three, who next faces Argentine Francisco Cerundolo.

"Today with the conditions, it was really tough for us both. I had to survive," he told the ATP Tour.



"I always say in these conditions, you have to survive no matter what. I'm very happy that I was able to play long rallies. I got a good rhythm, even with the conditions, so I'm just really happy to get through."

Alcaraz did not face a break point in the first set as Dimitrov scraped together a handful of winners against more than a dozen unforced errors.

Four-times Grand Slam champion Alcaraz dropped only four of his first-serve points in the second set and snuffed out the three break-point chances Dimitrov had in the fifth game to advance, closing it out with a precision-placed forehand winner.

Australian Open champion Keys maintained her hot streak with a win over 19th seed Vekic to set up a meeting with the Swiss wildcard Belinda Bencic.

Vekic, the silver medalist in Paris, showed terrific defence in winning the first set, fending off three break points in the second game and another in the fourth.