

The Central Bank of Iran (CBI) Has Reported a Record Sale in Its Last Round of Gold Auctions Held in the Calendar Year Ending March 20, as It Sold Some 1.257 Metric Tons of Standard Gold Bars

# IRAN NEWS

Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi in a Phone Call With Netherlands' Counterpart Caspar Veldkamp Said Tehran Is Ready to Engage in Talks With European Countries Based on Mutual Respect and Common Interests

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## 2 DOMESTIC



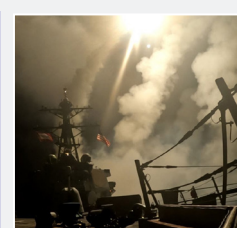
### Iran's Producer Inflation in Month of Bahman Announced

> SEE PAGE 2

## 3 INTERNATIONAL

### U.S. Launches First Yemen Strikes Under Trump

> SEE PAGE 3



### Iranian President Vows to Tackle Public Challenges with People's Support



TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian reaffirmed his commitment to serving the public during a meeting with philanthropists and charity officials on Saturday evening, emphasizing that he will not shirk his responsibilities as long as he holds office. Speaking to the gathering, Pezeshkian stressed that his administration's sole focus is addressing the needs of the people, driven by conviction rather than personal gain.

Reflecting on the persistent struggles faced by citizens, the president expressed a mix of sorrow and pride: sorrow for the ongoing hardships and pride in the selfless efforts of philanthropists working to alleviate them. He highlighted the critical role of public participation, citing past successes in healthcare infrastructure development during his tenure as a university official. Despite limited resources, his province transformed from one of the least-equipped regions to a model of progress through community involvement. Within six months, 613 health centers were built, followed by 300 to 400 more, thanks to contributions from villagers, workers, and major donors alike.

Pezeshkian showcased examples like the 500-bed Mardani Azar Hospital and a specialized cancer facility funded by philanthropist Nohari, underscoring how individual initiatives have filled gaps in public services. He argued that government alone cannot solve all problems and called for broader collaboration, dismissing the notion that progress depends solely on a few wealthy benefactors. During a recent trip to Sistan and Baluchestan, he rejected a 40-year timeline for school construction, insisting that with public support, the projects would be completed by next year—a promise now in motion.

### Iran Aims to Become Regional Energy Trade Hub



TEHRAN - In a significant policy statement, First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref declared that transforming Iran into a regional energy trade hub is a top priority for the country's 14th administration. Speaking at the inaugural meeting of the Regional Energy Trade Steering Committee on March 15, 2025, Aref emphasized that achieving this goal is a key strategy that the government intends to pursue with determination.

The meeting, held at the Vice President's office, included key committee members and focused on Iran's energy trade policies. Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad presented a detailed report on the progress of energy swap (swapping) services with neighboring countries. He highlighted how these efforts have helped address natural gas shortages in northern Iran, strengthened strategic cooperation with neighbors, and bolstered Iran's position in the regional energy market. Paknejad described the initiative as critical for resolving energy imbalances and enhancing Iran's influence in the sector.

Aref, congratulating attendees on the birth anniversary of Imam Hassan Mojtaba (AS), underscored that Iran's ambition to become a regional energy hub aligns with the country's Seventh Five-Year Development Plan. "This is a strategic objective for the 14th administration, and holding this first steering committee meeting marks a significant step forward," he said. He added that implementing this policy could mitigate energy shortages, reduce industrial losses due to energy deficits, and drive economic benefits.

## Leader Praises Rise of Committed, Revolutionary Young Poets in Hopeful Address



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In a meeting with a group of young and veteran poets, Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, expressed optimism about the growing wave of committed and revolutionary poetry, particularly among the youth. The gathering, held on the eve of the blessed birth anniversary of Imam Hassan Mojtaba (peace be upon him), the second Shia Imam.

Ayatollah Khamenei described the expansion of dedicated and revolutionary young poets as "hope-inspiring," noting that the poetry recited during the session was generally of high quality. "The increasing surge of poetry, especially among the youth, is highly promising," he remarked, citing reports of literary activities in 2024 that demonstrated the success of committed poets in meeting the year's challenges.

Highlighting poetry's unique role, the Leader called it an unparalleled medium and art form that other media have failed to overshadow. "The more poetry advances and the number of skilled poets grows, the more cause for joy there is," he said, adding that alongside quantity, quality must also improve. He urged poets not to settle for their current achievements, suggesting that the present era could produce figures akin to legendary Persian poets like Saadi, Hafiz, and Nezami. Unlike the pre-revolutionary era under the Pahlavi regime, when great poets were often disregarded, today's poets enjoy significant social respect and media attention, creating fertile ground for nurturing talent.

Ayatollah Khamenei praised the contemporary Persian poetic language as unprecedented, forged in the revolutionary period, and a foundation for the emergence of new poetic giants. He emphasized the influence of a poet's inner character on their work, advising young poets in particular to adhere to piety, intellectual principles, and religious dignity. "The Quran encourages poets to engage in abundant remembrance of God because a purer soul produces purer poetry," he explained.

The Leader also underscored the importance of drawing from the rich treasury of Persian literary heritage while maintaining the traditional chastity of romantic poetry. "There's nothing wrong with love poetry that reflects a poet's tender emotions, but in Persian tradition, it has always been chaste and noble. Do not let it stray into shamelessness or impropriety," he cautioned.

He encouraged poets to craft meaningful themes and avoid commonplace or trivial expressions, noting that poetry excels when it combines profound lessons with eloquent, heartfelt language. The current abundance of inspiring social themes, he said, offers poets a vibrant opportunity. Poems honoring martyrs like Qassem Soleimani, Ebrahim Raisi, Hassan Nasrallah, and Yahya Sinwar—recited during the session—demonstrate poetry's power to keep such figures alive in public memory. Similarly, verses exploring monotheism, wisdom, and insight remain valuable and resonate with audiences.

Ayatollah Khamenei commended the tradition of opening poetry collections with praise for God as a model worth emulating. However, he criticized certain television programs where prominent poets critique the works of younger ones, arguing that this risks lowering poetry's prestige and commercializing talent. "Poetry should be broadcast on radio and TV, but in a way that preserves the poet's dignity," he stressed.

During the meeting, 36 poets presented works spanning religious, social, and political themes. Before the evening prayers, several poets personally conversed with the Leader and offered him their compositions.

The event underscored Ayatollah Khamenei's vision of poetry as a vital cultural force, with Iran's revolutionary youth poised to carry forward its legacy. As the nation navigates its contemporary challenges, the Leader's words reflect a belief in poetry's enduring capacity to inspire and elevate society.

### Iran Slams Baseless and Deceitful G7 Accusations



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iran has condemned as "completely baseless and deceitful" the recent accusations leveled at the country by the Group of Seven (G7) industrialized countries and the European Union.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei denounced the claims made by the G7 foreign ministers and the EU foreign policy chief about Iran's behavior in the region as a clear distortion of truth and malicious projection.

He also slammed the illegal, irresponsible, and interventionist acts of G7 member states in West Asia, especially their military, financial, or political support for Israel. G7 members, he added, must be held accountable for their improper conduct in West Asia and their complicity in gross violations of international humanitarian law and human rights in Palestine.

The top diplomats of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the UK and the United States, and the EU foreign policy chief met in Canada earlier this week.

On Friday, they issued a joint statement, in which they alleged that Iran is the "principal source of regional instability," saying it must never be allowed to acquire nuclear arms. They also made anti-Iran claims regarding the ongoing war between Russia and Ukraine.

Baghaei stressed that Iran's nuclear activities are in accordance with the country's technical and industrial needs, as well as its international rights and obligations under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Safeguards Agreement.

The G7's concerns about Iran's nuclear program are "unfounded" and merely reflect the "political approach" of certain members of the bloc, he emphasized.

Meanwhile, Baghaei highlighted Iran's leading role in promoting a West Asia free of nuclear weapons, saying Israel is the sole obstacle to achieving this goal.

### U.S. Has No Authority or Business Dictating Iran's Foreign Policy



TEHRAN (PressTV) - Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has asserted that the US government has no authority to dictate the Islamic Republic's foreign policy.

In a post on X on Sunday, Araqchi stated that the era of US control over Iran's foreign policy ended with the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which saw the overthrow of the US-backed Pahlavi regime in Iran, headed by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, known as the 'Shah.'

"The United States government has no authority, or business, dictating Iranian foreign policy. That era ended in 1979," the top Iranian diplomat said.

Araqchi further denounced the US government's support for Israeli terrorism and genocide in Gaza, spending tens of billions of dollars between October 2023 and September 2024.

"Biden was last year bamboozled into handing over unprecedented 23 billion dollars to a genocidal regime. More than 60,000 Palestinians killed and the world holds America fully accountable," Araqchi said.

He urged US statesmen and officials to halt their support for the Tel Aviv regime's vicious moves and acts of terror, and stop aggressive attacks on Yemen's infrastructure and civilian centers.

"End support for Israeli genocide and terrorism. Stop killing of Yemeni people," the Iranian foreign minister concluded.

US President Donald Trump, in a statement on Saturday, said the US holds Iran "fully accountable" for its support for Yemen's Anasurullah movement.

"Support for the Houthi terrorists must end IMMEDIATELY!" he said, adding that "America will hold you fully accountable, and we won't be nice about it!"

## IRGC Chief Warns of Devastating Response to Any Threat Turned Action

TEHRAN - Major General Hossein Salami, Commander-in-Chief of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), issued a stern warning on Sunday, stating that any threat against Iran that materializes into action will be met with a "devastating and resolute response." The remarks were delivered during a ceremony in Urmia, West Azerbaijan province, honoring the outgoing and incoming commanders of the Hamzeh Seyyed al-Shohada Base of the IRGC Ground Forces.

Speaking at the event, Salami paid tribute to martyr General Ahmad Kazemi, describing him as a steadfast figure who stood firm in battlefields with unshakable resolve and resisted enemies "like the towering mountains of this land." He emphasized Iran's unity, saying, "We are all parts of one body—Persian, Turk, Kurd, Baloch, Arab, Turkmen, Bakhtiari, Lor, or any other ethnicity. These are the beautiful colors of the white light that is our dear and proud Iran." Salami credited this unity, guided by the Supreme Leader, for overcoming severe military, political, economic, cultural, security, intelligence, and social crises.

Highlighting Iran's security achievements amidst regional instability, Salami said, "In today's turbulent world, surrounded by deep-rooted, vengeful enemies like the United States, the Zionist regime, and their international proxies, establishing security is a miracle." He praised the sacrifices of Iran's fighters, noting that no country faces threats as intense as Iran yet remains as secure. "You see chaos and insecurity in the region's countries. No nation has been targeted as much as Iran, yet none is as safe," he said, crediting the "steady steps and ready hands" of the nation's defenders.

Salami underscored Iran's transparency in its actions, stating, "Whenever Iran acts, it openly accepts responsibility. We are not a nation that operates in the shadows; we are a



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

credible, recognized system globally." Citing past operations like "True Promise," he affirmed Iran's policy of clarity: "If we strike or support anyone, we declare it outright. There's no reason to act and deny it, or accept blame for what we haven't done."

Addressing Iran's adversaries, Salami warned, "Every threat that becomes action will face a tough, decisive, and devastating reaction." He described Iran as a peace-loving nation that never initiates war but is fully prepared to deliver "decisive and conclusive" responses to any aggression. Reflecting on nearly 50 years of resistance against "global

evil coalitions," he hailed the Iranian people's resilience as a source of pride.

The IRGC commander criticized the United States, saying, "America still hasn't learned that war doesn't solve its problems." He pointed to the U.S.'s history of economic losses, political hatred, humiliating military defeats, and human casualties, arguing that its insistence on threats continues to fail. "They've grown accustomed to defeat yet repeat their mistakes," he said, calling the notion that Iran can be intimidated "an absolute error."

Salami also addressed U.S. claims linking Iran to Yemen's Ansarullah movement. Responding to recent American warnings, he clarified, "The Yemeni people are independent, with their own national policies. Ansarullah makes its own strategic and operational decisions. Iran has no role in shaping the policies or actions of any resistance group, including Yemen's Ansarullah. This is the truth."

The ceremony underscored Iran's military readiness and defiance in the face of external pressures. Salami concluded by reaffirming Iran's commitment to peace but warned that its enemies should not mistake this for weakness, as the nation stands prepared to counter any threat with overwhelming force.

# IRAN NEWS



## Iran Says Its Oil Exports Cannot Be Stopped

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Government spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani says Western sanctions cannot halt Iran's oil exports, as the country is determined to protect its share of the global energy market.

"The country's oil exports cannot be stopped. We will not compromise on Iran's share in the world oil market," Mohajerani wrote in a post from her verified X account.

She said several ministries are spearheading a campaign to counter the sanctions, with the Oil Ministry taking center stage. Mohajerani characterized new U.S. sanctions against Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad as evidence of Washington's anxiety about Iran's successful efforts to circumvent previous restrictions.

## 7% of Iran's GDP Spent Annually on Treating Traffic Accident Damages



TEHRAN - Iran's Minister of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education, Mohammadreza Zafarghandi, announced that approximately 7% of the country's gross national income is spent annually on medical costs and damages resulting from traffic accidents. This figure surpasses the entire budget allocated to the Ministry of Health in this sector.

Zafarghandi made these remarks during the inauguration ceremony of the 2025 Nowruz Plan. Highlighting the severity of the issue, he noted that over 20,000 people lost their lives in traffic accidents last year, while more than 3,000 individuals suffered spinal cord injuries. Additionally, over one million people affected by accidents sought treatment at medical centers during the same period.

The minister emphasized that a nation's worth and governance are measured by the value it places on human lives and the efforts it invests in preserving them. "This is a key indicator of development in today's world," he stated.

Zafarghandi further explained that the Ministry of Health is tasked with addressing all factors impacting public well-being, ranging from road accidents and injuries to air pollution, nutrition, and other social determinants of health. "Seventy-five percent of disease causes stem from these factors, which must be prioritized by the health system and all relevant institutions," he added.

Expressing gratitude to those involved in the Nowruz Plan, the minister underscored the importance of unity in action. "True unity is achieved through collective efforts for the nation and its people, not just in theory. Today, we have gathered for a common good—to save human lives," he said.

Referring to the launch of the first phase of the "No to Accidents!" campaign, which will run until April 4 with the aim of raising public awareness and issuing warnings, Zafarghandi expressed hope that collaboration among various institutions would reduce these losses. "Following our report to the government, we aim to implement the second and third phases of this campaign—medium-term over two years and long-term over three years—to bring this development indicator to an acceptable level, alleviating the suffering and bitterness of our people," he concluded.

# Iran's Producer Inflation in Month of Bahman Announced



TEHRAN - The Statistical Center of Iran has released the latest producer inflation figures for the month of Bahman (January 21 - February 19, 2025), reporting a monthly inflation rate of 8.4% and a point-to-point inflation rate of 46.5% compared to Bahman of the previous year.

According to a report from the Statistical Center of Iran, the producer price index (PPI) for the industrial sector reached 1,586.7 in Bahman 1403. This reflects an 8.4% increase from the previous month (monthly inflation), a 46.5% surge compared to the same month last year (point-to-point inflation), and a 26.6% rise over the 12 months ending in Bahman 1403 compared to the corresponding period of the prior year (annual inflation).

The monthly change in the industrial sector's producer price index for Bahman 1403 stood at 8.4%, marking a significant 3.1 percentage point increase from the 5.3% recorded in the previous month. This indicates that the average prices received by industrial producers for goods manufactured domestically rose by 8.4% in Bahman compared to Dey (the prior month).

Within this period, the highest monthly inflation rate was observed in the "coke and refined petroleum products" category, which surged by 21.7%. In contrast, the lowest increase was in the "motor vehicles, trailers, and semi-trailers" group, which saw a modest rise of 1%. These disparities highlight the uneven impact of inflationary pressures across different industrial subsectors.

The point-to-point inflation rate, comparing Bahman 1403 to Bahman 1402, reached 46.5%, a notable jump of 9.6 percentage points from the 36.9% recorded in the previous month's comparison. This means that the average

prices received by industrial producers for their domestically produced goods were 46.5% higher this Bahman than in the same month of the previous year.

The "chemicals and chemical products" group experienced the steepest point-to-point inflation at 64.9%, underscoring the intense cost pressures in this sector. Meanwhile, the "textile manufacturing" category recorded the lowest increase at 23.5%, indicating a relatively milder impact on this segment of the industry.

Over the 12 months ending in Bahman 1403, the industrial sector's producer price index rose by 26.6% compared to the same period in the prior year. This annual inflation rate reflects a 2.1 percentage point increase from the 24.5% reported for the 12 months ending in Dey 1403. In simpler terms, producers' average prices for goods manufactured domestically over this year-long period were 26.6% higher than in the previous 12-month cycle.

Among the industrial groups, "electrical equipment manufacturing" posted the highest annual inflation rate at 38.5%, signaling persistent cost challenges in this area. Conversely, the "paper and paper products manufacturing" category saw the lowest annual increase at 15.3%, suggesting greater stability in this segment.

The rising producer inflation rates—monthly, point-to-point, and annual—point to mounting cost pressures within Iran's industrial sector, likely driven by factors such as energy prices, supply chain disruptions, or currency fluctuations. These figures could signal broader economic challenges ahead, potentially affecting consumer prices and industrial output if the trend persists.

## Economic Resilience Against Sanctions Boosted by Road Development



TEHRAN - Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Farzaneh Sadegh, stated that enhancing the country's road infrastructure will strengthen its economic resilience against sanctions and external pressures. She emphasized Iran's strategic geopolitical position as a vital link between Asian, European, and Middle Eastern markets.

The minister made these remarks on Saturday during the inauguration of 61 kilometers of road and highway projects in West Azerbaijan Province. "Today, we opened a section of the route leading to the Razi border, which is significant due to its connection to active border terminals. Improved transportation routes to borders drive national progress," Sadegh said.

She underscored that developing highways and transportation corridors boosts economic prosperity and fortifies the country against sanctions.

Highlighting West Azerbaijan's potential, with its six active border crossings, Sadegh announced plans to establish a joint special border zone with Turkey. "The region's geography and climate pose challenges for contractors and workers, doubling the difficulty of their tasks. We must acknowledge the tireless efforts of workers and contractors who braved freezing temperatures and snowfall to complete these projects," she added.

The minister described the project completions as a significant step toward achieving regional and national development goals. She noted that parts of this transit corridor were inaugurated last week in East Azerbaijan Province, while another segment leading to the Tamarchin border was also opened, reflecting the government's ongoing commitment to improving connectivity infrastructure.

Sadegh pointed out that West Azerbaijan's proximity to three countries and its six active borders position it as a potential hub for regional trade. "We are negotiating with Turkish counterparts to expand special border zones, facilitating smoother trade exchanges," she said.

The minister emphasized that road development directly impacts commerce and the lives of citizens in West Azerbaijan, particularly in Khoy. "Better roads increase the flow of goods and passengers," she explained, adding that enhancing the Razi border terminal's capacity would not only streamline exports and imports but also create numerous job opportunities for locals.

With the year-end and Nowruz holidays approaching, Sadegh urged the public to prioritize safety during travel to ensure memorable and secure trips. "The Ministry of Roads and Urban Development is focused on improving road safety by addressing accident-prone areas, enhancing roadside services, and strengthening the transportation fleet," she assured.

## Iranians Successfully Fix Iraq's U.S.-Made Al-Musayyib Plant



TEHRAN - Masoud Moradi, CEO of Iran's Power Plant Repairs Company, announced that the domestically specialized firm has produced 16,000 components locally, preventing the outflow of €50 million in foreign currency amid a challenging year for the sector.

Speaking at a press conference, Moradi described 2025 as a particularly difficult year for power plant maintenance. He outlined an extensive repair program covering 107,000 megawatts of power plants scheduled for the second half of the year. This includes periodic, mid-term, major, and semi-major repairs across thermal, hydroelectric, and nuclear facilities. "Of this, 18,000 megawatts fall under our company's responsibility," he noted, adding that the firm is managing 71 projects across 22 provinces. "Eighty percent of these projects are underway, with the remaining 20% set to be completed by the end of Ordibehesht [May 20, 2025]."

Addressing the challenge of sourcing parts under sanctions, Moradi emphasized self-reliance. "We've ensured that 80% of components are domestically produced. For the remaining 20%, it's not cost-effective to invest in local manufacturing," he said. "Importantly, no power plant unit has faced disruptions due to a lack of parts." He explained that some components are either repaired using imported spares or manufactured through reverse engineering.

Moradi highlighted the economic impact of localization efforts, stating, "In our parent company, 16,000 parts have been produced domestically, saving €50 million in foreign exchange." This achievement underscores Iran's growing independence in the power sector despite external pressures.

On international projects, Moradi revealed that while repair programs for Syrian power plants remain stalled due to unspecified issues, work in Iraq continues. Notably, Iranian engineers successfully repaired the rotor of Iraq's Al-Musayyib power plant—a task U.S. company GE refused to undertake. "This project has been completed with success in Iran and will soon be delivered to Iraq," he said, showcasing Iranian expertise on a global stage.

Closer to home, Moradi reported progress on the Lorestan hydroelectric plant, where a unit knocked offline by an incident has been repaired and will soon resume production. He also praised the efficiency of Iranian engineers, citing the Ramin Ahvaz power plant as an example. "Repairs that typically require 12 days of cooling time were completed in just 3 to 4 days to prevent power outages," he said.

# Alborz Province Unveils 100 Investment Opportunities to Chinese Firms

TEHRAN - The Deputy for International Affairs of the Karaj Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture, Seyed Reza Seyed Aghazadeh, announced the successful hosting of a webinar introducing over 100 investment opportunities in Alborz Province to Chinese investors. The event, attended by representatives from more than 40 Chinese companies, economic officials, and Iran's consulate in China, marks a significant step toward showcasing Alborz's potential and attracting foreign investment across diverse economic sectors.

Seyed Aghazadeh detailed that the webinar, organized by the Karaj Chamber, included participation from provincial economic managers and investment authorities from the Alborz Governor's Office. Coordinated with Iran's Consulate General in Guangzhou, the event drew a robust turnout from Chinese firms. "This initiative underscores our commitment to promoting Alborz as a hub for investment," he said, noting that over 100 projects spanning infrastructure, industry, technology, agriculture, and tourism were presented. A key highlight was an English-language film showcasing Alborz's economic strengths, offering Chinese investors a comprehensive view of the region's potential.

The deputy emphasized the critical role of foreign investment in driving economic growth, advancing technology, boosting employment, and strengthening national production. "In an era where many countries approach economic cooperation with Iran cautiously due to external pressures, the enthusiastic participation of Chinese investors signals their keen interest in our opportunities," he remarked. The webinar provided a platform for direct engagement, enabling investors to explore actionable prospects in real time.

Seyed Aghazadeh highlighted the interconnectedness of trade and investment, stating, "Many successful investments in Iran have stemmed from prior commercial ties. Companies familiar

with our market often expand into investment and business development after assessing the opportunities." He added that alongside promoting investment, the Karaj Chamber is focused on deepening Alborz's trade relations with other nations, laying the groundwork for broader economic partnerships.

Stressing the importance of economic diplomacy, Seyed Aghazadeh revealed plans to replicate such webinars with other countries. "We aim to position Alborz as an attractive investment destination regionally and globally.

Beyond China, we're planning similar events with Asian and European nations to further pave the way for foreign capital," he said. These efforts, he noted, not only attract investors but also elevate Alborz and Iran's profile as an industrial and economic powerhouse, enhancing the province's international brand.

Despite the progress, Seyed Aghazadeh pointed to a challenge: many private-sector investment proposals lack proper frameworks. "There's a pressing need to educate economic stakeholders about foreign investment—its benefits, and how to pitch projects effectively to global investors," he explained. Leveraging the Karaj Chamber's extensive experience in this arena, he expressed readiness to foster a culture of investment readiness. "We're prepared to offer training and consultation programs for private-sector players in Alborz, incorporating discussions and knowledge-sharing. Plans for such initiatives are already in motion for 1404 [2025-2026]."

Seyed Aghazadeh expressed optimism about the webinar's economic impact. "Events like these don't just draw foreign funds—they spotlight Alborz's capabilities and build its reputation worldwide," he said. With over 40 Chinese firms engaging directly with Alborz's offerings, the event sets a promising precedent for future collaborations, potentially unlocking new avenues for growth in one of Iran's key provinces.

## Iran's Steel Production Falls 6.7% Amid Energy Imbalances



TEHRAN - The Iran Steel Producers Association has released data on the country's steel production for the first 11 months of the Iranian year 1403 (March 21, 2024 - February 19, 2025), reporting a 6.7% decline attributed to ongoing imbalances in the industry.

Farzaneh Piri, the association highlighted that the intensified drop in steel production stems from energy shortages, particularly restrictions on electricity and gas supplies. The rate of decline has worsened over the year, rising from 4.8% in the first nine months to 5.5% in ten months, and now reaching 6.7% over 11 months.

Energy limitations have slashed Iran's intermediate steel production by approximately 2 million tons, valued at around \$1 billion. Of this reduction, 75% pertains to steel billet output, reflecting the disproportionate impact of power and gas constraints on small and medium-sized private sector units.

Severe gas shortages have also hampered the output of newly operational sponge iron capacities, further contributing to the decline. While iron ore concentrate production has seen an uptick, pellet production has recorded a decrease.

Following steel billets, rebar has experienced the second-highest rate of production decline in the steel supply chain, largely due to a sharp domestic market recession and reduced exports.

## Improving Pope Reduces Use of Ventilation for Oxygen

VATICAN CITY (Dispatches) - Pope Francis is improving slowly as he battles double pneumonia in hospital and is reducing the use of mechanical ventilation at night to help with breathing, the Vatican said on Saturday.

"The clinical conditions of the Holy Father have remained stable, confirming the progress seen in the last week," said the latest update on the 88-year-old pontiff, who was admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital on February 14.

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Francis, who is prone to lung infections, has not been seen in public since entering hospital, the longest such absence of his papacy which this week reached its 12th anniversary.

He will again miss weekly prayers with pilgrims this Sunday, for the fifth week in a row.



## Tens of Thousands of Anti-Gov't Protesters Converge in Belgrade



BELGRADE (Dispatches) - As a sea of people flooded the streets of downtown Belgrade, the rally was likely set to be the single largest protest since the anti-graft movement first coalesced.

The movement formed after 15 people were killed when a railway station roof collapsed in the city of Novi Sad in November.

The railway station disaster ignited long-simmering bitterness over alleged corruption and lax oversight in construction projects.

But with supporters of President Aleksandar Vucic's embattled government also mobilising in the capital as well, there was growing concern about the risk of clashes.

In statements issued on social media, students urged those attending the rally to act "in a calm and responsible manner".

"The purpose of this movement is not an incursion into institutions, nor to attack those who do not think as we do," read one statement.

"This movement must not be misused."

The rally was due to officially start at 4:00pm (1500 GMT) and run to 9:00 pm, but thousands had already amassed hours in advance.

The European Union and the United Nations on Friday appealed to the government ahead of the demonstration to respect the right to demonstrate.

For weeks, the student-led protesters have criss-crossed the country, holding rallies in Serbia's major cities.

They have also taken their anti-corruption crusade to the rural villages and towns that have long been the backbone of support for Vucic's government.

## Romanians Rally to Show Support for Europe Amid Election Tensions



BUCHAREST (Dispatches) - Thousands of Romanians took to the streets of Bucharest to show their support for the European Union, amid political disputes over a presidential election rerun scheduled for May.

Romania is due to repeat its two-round presidential election on May 4 and 18 after the Constitutional Court voided the initial ballot in December following accusations of Russian meddling in favour of Calin Georgescu, who had been leading in the polls.

The cancellation of the ballot has placed the EU and NATO state at the centre of a dispute between Europe and U.S. President Donald Trump's administration over free speech and suppressing political opponents.

Georgescu, who along with Moscow denied Russian meddling, has been barred from taking part in the rerun.

On Saturday, pro-European Romanians formed a sea of blue EU and tricolour Romanian flags, some shouting anti-Russian slogans and carrying banners saying "Unity and respect - Europe gives us rights", or "Free your mind - No to Russian wisdom".

"Romania has to remain in Europe, not go towards Russia", said a 54-year-old nurse Laura Dumitrache.

# U.S. Launches First Yemen Strikes Under Trump

SANAA (Dispatches) - The first U.S. strikes against Yemen's Huthis since President Donald Trump took office in January killed at least 21 people, the rebels said today, as Washington warned Iran to stop backing the group.

The Huthis, who have attacked Israel and Red Sea shipping throughout the Gaza war, said children were among those killed by the intense barrage of strikes.

An AFP photographer in the rebel-held capital Sanaa heard three explosions and saw plumes of smoke rising from a residential district, and strikes were also reported in Yemen's northern Saada region, a Huthi stronghold.

"Nine civilians were killed and nine others were injured, most of them seriously," the Huthis' health and environment ministry said in a statement on their Saba news agency, reporting the strikes on Sanaa.

A strike in the Saada region killed at least 10 people and wounded others, according to the Huthi Ansarollah website, condemning what it called "US-British aggression" and Washington's "criminal brutality".

A separate strike on a house in Saada's Alshaaf district killed two people, Ansarollah said.

The U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which posted images of fighters taking off from an aircraft carrier and a bomb demolishing a building compound, said "precision strikes" were launched to "defend American interests, deter enemies, and restore freedom of navigation".

There was no immediate comment from British authorities.

Trump, in a post on social media, vowed to "use overwhelming lethal force until we have achieved our objective", citing the Huthis' threats against Red Sea shipping.

The Huthis vowed that the strikes "will not pass without response".

"Our Yemeni armed forces are fully prepared to confront escalation with escalation," the rebels' political bureau said in a statement on the rebel Al-Masirah TV station.

Trump also warned Iran that it must "immediately" cut support to the Huthis.

The rebels, who have controlled much of Yemen for more than a decade, are part of the "axis of resistance" of pro-Iran groups staunchly opposed to Israel and the United States.



They have launched scores of drone and missile attacks at ships passing Yemen in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden during the Gaza war, claiming solidarity with the Palestinians.

The campaign crippled the vital route, which normally carries about 12 percent of world shipping traffic, forcing many companies into a costly detour around southern Africa.

The Palestinian group Hamas, grateful for the Huthi support, hit out Saturday at the US strikes, branding them "a stark violation of international law and an assault on the country's sovereignty and stability".

After halting their attacks when Gaza's ceasefire took effect in January, the Huthis announced on Tuesday that they would resume them until Israel lifts its blockade of aid to the shattered Palestinian territory.

Trump's statement did not reference the dispute over Israel, but focused on previous Huthi attacks on merchant shipping.

"To all Huthi terrorists, YOUR TIME IS UP, AND YOUR ATTACKS MUST STOP, STARTING TODAY. IF THEY DON'T, HELL WILL RAIN DOWN UPON YOU LIKE NOTHING YOU HAVE EVER SEEN BEFORE!" he said.

"Do NOT threaten the American People, their President... or Worldwide shipping lanes. If you do, BEWARE, because America will hold you fully accountable and, we won't be nice about it!"

Earlier this month, the United States reclassified the Huthi movement as a "foreign terrorist organisation", banning any US interaction with it.

"Continued Huthi attacks on US military and commercial shipping vessels in the Red Sea will not be tolerated," US Secretary of State Marco Rubio told his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov, according to the State Department.

Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said the Huthis had "attacked US warships 174 times and commercial vessels 145 times since 2023".

# Hamas Accuses Israel of Violating Gaza Truce

GAZA (Dispatches) - Hamas has accused Israel of a 'blatant violation' of a fragile Gaza ceasefire in the Palestinian territory after around nine people were killed, including journalists, in Israeli strikes on Saturday, according to Gaza's civil defense agency.

Gaza's civil defense agency said nine people including journalists were killed in Israeli strikes on Saturday, attacks which could further endanger the fragile truce in the Palestinian territory.

Following the reported strikes, the deadliest since the ceasefire took hold on January 19, Hamas accused Israel of a "blatant violation" of the truce which largely halted more than 15 months of fighting.

The first phase of the truce ended on March 1 without agreement on the next steps, but both Israel and Hamas have refrained from returning to all-out war.

A senior Hamas official said on Tuesday fresh talks had begun in Doha, with Israel also sending negotiators.

On Saturday, Gaza civil defense spokesman Mahmoud Bassal told AFP that "nine martyrs have been transferred (to hospital), including several journalists and a number of workers from the Al-Khair Charitable Organisation".

He said the killings were "as a result of the occupation (Israel) targeting a vehicle with a drone in the town of Beit Lahia, coinciding with artillery shelling on the same area".

The health ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said "nine martyrs and several injured, including critical cases" were taken to the Indonesian Hospital in northern Gaza.

In a statement, the Israeli military said it hit "two terrorists... operating a drone that posed a threat to IDF troops in the area of Beit Lahia".

"Later, a number of additional terrorists collected the drone operating equipment and entered a vehicle. The IDF struck the terrorists," it added.



Israel has carried out near-daily air strikes in Gaza since early March, often targeting what the military said were militants planting explosive devices.

"The occupation has committed a horrific massacre in the northern Gaza Strip by targeting a group of journalists and humanitarian workers, in a blatant violation of the ceasefire agreement," Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem said in a statement.

A separate Hamas statement said the attack was "a dangerous escalation", adding that it "reaffirms (Israel's) intent to backtrack on the ceasefire

agreement and intentionally obstruct any opportunity to complete the agreement and carry out the prisoner swap".

During the truce's initial six-week phase, militants released 33 hostages, including eight who were deceased, in exchange for about 1,800 Palestinian detainees held in Israeli prisons.

Hamas said Saturday that "the ball is in Israel's court" after offering to release an Israeli-US hostage and return the bodies of four others as part of the truce talks.

Gaza's civil defence agency said that among the nine killed were at least three photo journalists, one a drone photography specialist, and a driver.

It said two of the photographers worked for the Oman-based Ayn television channel.

Two members of the Al-Khair charitable organization were killed, including a spokesperson, the civil defense agency said.

"This heinous crime comes in the context of the systematic targeting of Palestinian journalists, who pay with their lives to convey the truth and expose the crimes of the occupation to the world," a Palestinian Journalists Syndicate statement said.

"The continuation of these brutal attacks against journalists constitutes a war crime and a blatant violation of international laws, especially the Geneva Convention, which guarantees the protection of journalists during conflicts."

The director of Hamas-affiliated media in Gaza, Ismail Thawabteh, told AFP that local photo journalists were killed while "using a drone to capture images of a Ramadan dining table in Beit Lahia".

He said they were "directly targeted by the occupation in two air strikes, despite their work being clear".

The Committee to Protect Journalists said in February that a total of 85 journalists had died in the Israeli-Hamas war, "all at the hands of the Israeli military", adding that 82 of them were Palestinians.

# Military Chiefs to Plan for Operational Phase of Ukraine Peace Deal

LONDON (Dispatches) - UK premier Keir Starmer said Russian President Vladimir Putin would eventually have to "come to the table", speaking after a virtual summit to drum up support for Ukraine.

The British leader told some 26 fellow leaders in a group call he hosted that they should focus on how to strengthen Ukraine, protect any ceasefire and keep up the pressure on Moscow.

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky had, he said, "shown once again, and beyond any doubt, that Ukraine is the party of peace" by accepting a 30-day unconditional ceasefire.

"But Putin is trying to delay -- saying there must be a painstaking study before a ceasefire can take place," he added.

And he insisted: "Sooner or later, Putin will have to come to the table."

Military chiefs will meet again on Thursday in the UK as the coalition moves into the operational phase, he added.

"The group that met this morning is a bigger group than we had two weeks ago, there is a stronger collective resolve and new commitments were put on the table this morning," he said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky warned that Russia wanted to achieve a "stronger position" militarily ahead of any ceasefire, more than three years since it invaded his country.

"They want to improve their situation on the battlefield," Zelensky told journalists in Kyiv.



The ceasefire proposal by Trump's team comes as Russia has momentum in many areas of the front in Ukraine.

The Russian leader did not commit to an immediate ceasefire proposed by the US, instead setting conditions.

But Zelensky insisted that Putin was "lying about how a ceasefire is supposedly too complicated".

French President Emmanuel Macron on Saturday called for joint US and European pressure on Russia to accept the proposed ceasefire.

EU chief European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said in a message on X that Russia had to show "it is willing to support a ceasefire leading to a just and lasting peace".

US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Friday he was "cautiously optimistic" about reaching a truce, but a lot more work needed to be done.

Overnight fighting continued, with Russia saying it had taken two more villages in its Kursk border region where it has launched an offensive to wrest back seized territory.

Moscow has pushed this week to retake a large part of the land that Ukraine originally captured in western Kursk.

Russia's defence ministry said troops had taken control of the villages of Zaoleshenka and Rubanshchina -- north and west of the town of Sudzha, the main town that Moscow reclaimed this week.

## Draper Upsets Alcaraz to Meet Rune in the Indian Wells Final



INDIAN WELLS (Dispatches) - Briton Jack Draper upset the overwhelming favourite Carlos Alcaraz 6-1 0-6 6-4 to reach the Indian Wells final, denying the Spaniard in his bid for a rare "three-peat" in the California desert.

Draper beat the world number three at Queen's Club last year and had the winning formula again this time around, as the lefty relied on his lethal forehand to reach his first Masters 1000-level final, where he will face Denmark's Holger Rune.

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"It was a strange match. You know, honestly Carlos came out, he was a bit flat, I sensed that," Draper said in televised remarks.

"Against top players in the world, they can change their momentum very quickly so I just got lost out there for 25 minutes and then in the third, I came out, I was really proud of my competitiveness, my attitude and somehow managed to get over the line there in the end."

Alcaraz had not dropped a set en route to the semi-final but gifted Draper a break with a double fault in the second game as he struggled to find his rhythm. The 13th seed converted on another break with a fine forehand winner in the sixth.

But the momentum flipped entirely in the second set, where Draper put up 15 unforced errors compared to just two in the first, as Alcaraz hit his stride and neutralised the only break point he faced in the first game.

"It kind of happened to me (in the second set) what happened to him in the first set. I got tired, I got low energy," said Draper.

Alcaraz closed out the set with a superb backhand winner and looked as though he would roll through the third with the crowd on his side.

But Draper, who retired due to injury in their last meeting at the Australian Open this year, was ready to

go the distance this time around and made a perfect shot down the line past Alcaraz to convert on break point in the third game.

Draper sent an un-returnable backhand shot into the corner to go up another break in the seventh and was glad for the insurance as Alcaraz broke back in the next game.

The Briton closed it out with un-returnable serve, ending Alcaraz's 16-match win streak at Indian Wells, and whacked a ball deep into the stands in celebration.

With the win, Draper will move into the top 10 for the first time in his career and would be ranked as high as seventh if he can take the title.

He will face an in-form Rune, who beat the Russian Daniil Medvedev 7-5 6-4 after losing his last seven semi-final matches.

Rune, the number 12 seed, lost to Medvedev in the quarter-finals a year ago and the two were evenly matched in a gruelling opening set in which they traded early breaks and Rune battled through a marathon six-deuce eighth game to hold his serve.

Medvedev helped him to a break point with a fluffed shot at the net in the 11th game and the 21-year-old Dane carried the momentum into the second set, breaking the former U.S. Open champion to love in the third game.

Down 0-30 in the final game, Rune clawed his way back and forced a fatigued Medvedev into an error at the end of a 37-shot rally on the penultimate point before clinching victory with a powerful forehand winner.

"He's a very difficult player to play. He makes you play uncomfortable shots," said Rune.

"I tried to play as good as possible, making it difficult for him, trying to, you know, play different kind of shots to mix up the rhythm in the game."

## Man City's Champions League Hopes Take a Hit With Brighton Draw

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Manchester City failed to ease fears of missing out on next season's Champions League after twice blowing the lead to draw 2-2 against Brighton, while third-placed Nottingham Forest thrashed Ipswich 4-2.

Erling Haaland and Omar Marmoush put City in front, but high-flying Brighton extended their unbeaten run to seven games thanks to Pervis Estupinan's free-kick and an Abdulkodir Khusanov own goal.

City boss Pep Guardiola said on Friday that just qualifying for the Champions League would be a "big success" after a difficult season for a side used to lifting the league title.

The English champions' early exit from Europe's top competition to Real Madrid had at least ensured a full week's preparation for Guardiola's men to bounce back from last weekend's dismal 1-0 defeat at Forest.

Marmoush was restored to the starting line-up and proved to be City's brightest spark going forward.

The Egyptian won the penalty from which Haaland opened the scoring with his 29th goal of the season.

City's lead lasted only 10 minutes as Estupinan curled a free-kick in off the post past the leaden-footed Stefan Ortega in the City goal.

Marmoush blasted City back in front from long range before half-time.

Brighton, though, took just three minutes into the second half to



level again when Jack Hinshelwood's shot was turned into his own net by Khusanov.

Nico Gonzalez hit the post as City pushed in vain for a winner.

A top-five Premier League finish will almost certainly secure a Champions League place this season thanks to English clubs' strong performances in European competition.

A point leaves City still in fifth, just one point ahead of Brighton in seventh.

"I'm always confident, in that I am a master. I do have moments when I can doubt but I find the right way, the positiveness in everything," said Guardiola.

"I know it will be difficult for many reasons but we have nine

games, nine finals."

Forest's charge towards Europe's top club competition for the first time since 1980 continued with a dominant display at Portman Road.

The visitors struck three times in six first-half minutes to close to within one point of second-placed Arsenal and move six clear of City.

Nikola Milenkovic controlled a loose ball inside the area and blasted in on off the underside of the bar to open the floodgates.

Anthony Elanga then drilled in his first goal since Boxing Day at the end of a blistering Forest counter-attack.

Two minutes later Elanga took advantage of dreadful Ipswich defending to sprint clear and slot in his second of the afternoon.

"There is a good spell in the first half that really changed the game for six minutes," said Forest boss Nuno Espirito Santo, who is not getting carried away dreaming of Champions League football.

"We have to focus on ourselves. Work as much as we can because there is a lot of football to be played yet."

Jens Cajuste and George Hirst scored late consolation goals for Kieran McKenna's men either side of Jota Silva's fourth for Forest.

Ipswich's uphill task to beat the drop suffered another blow as Wolves pulled nine points clear of the bottom three with a 2-1 victory at Southampton thanks to a double from Jorgen Strand Larsen.

## Record-Breaking France Clinch Six Nations Title With Scotland Win



PARIS (Dispatches) - France claimed their seventh Six Nations trophy in a record-strewn 35-16 victory over Scotland, shaking off their beautiful runners-up tag on a crisp evening at the Stade de France.

Les Bleus matched England's number of titles since Italy joined the championship in 2000 and did so in style, scoring 30 tries in a pulsating campaign to make sure they would not end up runners-up for the fifth time in six years.

Their only defeat came against England at Twickenham but Fabien Galthie's side put that 26-25 loss behind them by humiliating Italy before crushing Ireland despite losing their talismanic captain Antoine Dupont through injury.

The hosts turned on the gas after the interval on Saturday, and prevailed through tries by Yoram Moefana (2), Louis Bielle-Biarrey and Thomas Ramos, who kicked the other points to become France's all-time record points scorer.

Scotland competed and scored a try through Darcy Graham with Finn Russell kicking their other points.

France, who gave Galthie his second title after the 2022 Six Nations since he took charge in 2020, finished on 21 points with England second in the standings.

Les Bleus lost in the 2023 World Cup quarter-finals against South Africa 29-28 on home soil, were relieved after two years without a title despite playing some of their best rugby for years.

"It's a relief to win after two years seeing the others lift trophies," said Ramos. "There was a lot of stress at the beginning of the game. The half-time break did us good."

Galthie said France were not expecting such a challenge from Scotland.

"It was a very difficult game, it's not a scenario we had anticipated. But the team reacted well and we won scoring four tries again," he said.

Scotland coach Gregor Townsend believes his team has a better future after this year's campaign.

"We created things and the effort was there until the 80th minute," he said.

"There's a lot to be proud of and lot to build on, our best moments came in defeats, against England and France."

It was party time at the Stade de France but Les Bleus only really got into their groove after the break, relying again on forward power to finish off a combative but limited Scotland team.

Dupont, who ruptured his ACL against Ireland, stayed with the squad and the mercurial scrumhalf received the loudest cheers as he watched from the stands.

France started well.

Gael Fickou tore through the middle and set up fellow centre Moefana for a try between the posts while Scotland were down to 14 after Jamie Ritchie was shown a yellow card.

France, however, suffered a blow when Peato Mauvaka was sin-binned for head-butting Ben White and the hooker looked relieved when he heard the sanction was not upgraded to a red card.

## India Batsman Kohli Not Ready to Retire



BENGALURU (Dispatches) - Indian batsman Virat Kohli said he may not have another tour of Australia left in him after his team's humbling 3-1 test series defeat Down Under but the 36-year-old has ruled out retiring anytime soon as he still enjoys playing the game too much.

Kohli arrested a long run of poor form with an unbeaten ton in the series opening test in Perth in November, but frequently chased balls moving away from his stumps and managed a total of 190 runs at an average of 23.75.

Speaking at the RCB Innovation Lab Indian Sports Summit on Saturday, Kohli said the slump was reminiscent of his dismal run in England in 2014 where he made 134 runs.

"If you ask me the intensity of how disappointed I've been, the recent Australia tour would be the one that's most fresh. So it might feel the most intense," Kohli said.

"For a long time, the tour of England in 2014 bothered me the most. But I can't look at it that way. I might not have an Australia tour again in four years. I don't know. You have to make peace with whatever's happened in your life."

Kohli quit Twenty20 internationals after India's World Cup win last year but continues to play in the Indian Premier League for Royal Challengers Bengaluru.

He remains a key member of India's test team, and played a big role in their 50-overs Champions Trophy triumph last week.

## Poole's Last-Second Trey Helps Wizards Upset Nuggets

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Jordan Poole swished a 35-foot, 3-pointer with 1.8 seconds left to give the visiting Washington Wizards a stunning 126-123 victory over the Denver Nuggets.

Poole had time to move closer but stopped well behind the 3-point line and hoisted the successful shot that gave the Eastern Conference-worst Wizards (15-51) a two-game season sweep of the Nuggets.

Alex Sarr scored a career-high 34 points for Washington, which is 6-4 over its last 10 games.

Poole and Kyshawn George scored 19 points apiece and Justin Champagnie had 16 points and 13 rebounds for the Wizards.

It was a wild ending as George drilled a wide-open 3-pointer to give Washington a 123-121 lead with 10 seconds remaining. Denver's Jamal Murray hit a tying 15-footer with 5.7 seconds left before the final sequence.

Nikola Jokic had 40 points, 13 rebounds and nine assists for Denver (43-25). Jokic scored a career-high 56 points on Dec. 7 in



the first meeting with Washington.

Murray added 24 points, seven assists and four steals and Russell Westbrook had 22 points and 11 assists for the Nuggets.

Sarr hit a tying 3-pointer with 2:13 remaining and added two free throws 22 seconds later to give Washington a 118-116 lead.

Porter knocked down a corner trey to give Denver a one-point edge with 1:31 to play.

Poole hit a 12-footer to give Washington a 120-119 lead with 44.4 seconds to play.

Westbrook scored on an inbounds play to put Denver back ahead by one with 30.1 seconds left.

The Nuggets shot 50.5 percent from the field, including 12 of 34 from 3-point range.