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# IRAN NEWS

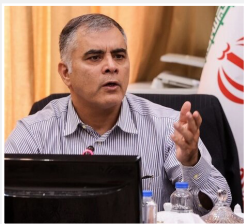
Iran Has Increased Its Minimum Wage by Nearly a Half Amid Efforts to Cushion the Impacts of Inflation on the Lives of Millions of Workers in the Country

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## Iran, Oman Discuss U.S. Criminal Overnight Airstrikes on Yemen



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The foreign ministers of Iran and Oman have discussed the latest developments in the region, particularly Washington's "criminal" aggression against Yemen in support of Israel.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi paid a short visit to Muscat on Sunday, leading a delegation and held talks with his Omani counterpart, Sayyid Badr Hamad Al Busaidi.

The visit comes a day after American and British warplanes launched large-scale airstrikes on several sites in Yemen's capital, Sana'a, as well as on areas in the northern province of Sa'ada, the central province of al-Bayda, and the southwestern province of Dhahar.

The Yemeni health ministry said at least 31 people were killed, and 101 others were injured in the strikes.

The large-scale aerial attacks, which began on Saturday and continued into the early hours of Sunday, came after the Yemeni Armed Forces threatened to resume their retaliatory operations against the Israeli-linked ships in the Red Sea over the Tel Aviv regime's blockade on Gaza.

Yemen's Supreme Political Council on Sunday condemned the deadly US aggression, pledging that the nation will punish the criminal regime in a "painful" manner.

The council said that targeting civilians proves the US's failure in confrontation, adding that the aggression will not deter Yemenis from supporting Gaza and will instead escalate tensions.

Araqchi and Al Busaidi also exchanged views about means of enhancing bilateral cooperation in various fields.

## Palermo and CFT Can Be Conditionally Accepted

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK



TEHRAN - Ayatollah Amoli Larjani, head of Iran's Expediency Discernment Council, clarified that the council is not debating the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) but is focused solely on reviewing the Palermo Convention and the Convention on Combating the Financing of Terrorism (CFT). Speaking to media representatives on Sunday night, he noted that parliament had approved both bills with reservations, suggesting Iran could conditionally accept them.

Larjani emphasized that the FATF itself is not under consideration at the council. "The FATF has called for the approval of Palermo and CFT, but what has been referred to us is strictly these two conventions, not the broader FATF framework," he explained. He added that parliament passed the bills, which were subsequently objected to by the Guardian Council, prompting their review by the Expediency Council.

Larjani highlighted the significance of the legal and military implications of CFT and Palermo, which have sparked debate. However, he pointed out that some council members are persuaded by parliament's conditional approval. "With these reservations, we can accept the bills on a conditional basis," he said. Addressing skepticism about whether international conventions can be accepted with caveats, he noted, "Fifty countries have done so, and we can too."

## Iran Vows Decisive Response to Any Aggression

TEHRAN - In a stern warning issued today, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Esmail Baghaei, declared that the country would respond decisively to any aggression threatening its territorial integrity or national security. The statement came during a weekly press briefing with journalists, where Baghaei addressed a range of pressing international and regional issues, including the recent U.S. military assault on Yemen and allegations of Iran's support for the Yemeni resistance.

Baghaei emphasized Iran's resolute stance: "We will respond with full determination to any violation of Iran's territorial integrity and national security—there is no doubt about that." He dismissed claims linking Iran to Yemen's actions, asserting that such accusations are attempts by adversaries to deflect from their own failures and suppress support for the Palestinian cause. "The resilient people of Yemen and their government make their own independent decisions, driven by their legitimate resistance in solidarity with Palestine," he added.

Baghaei sharply criticized the U.S. military operation in Yemen, labeling it "undoubtedly a crime" that warrants condemnation. He accused the United States of perpetuating a long-standing policy of misidentifying victims and aggressors, targeting those who support resistance movements instead of addressing the root causes of conflict. The attack, he noted, resulted in the deaths of numerous innocent Yemenis, further escalating regional tensions.

Calling for urgent action, Baghaei urged the international community and Islamic nations to intervene and halt the ongoing aggression against Yemen. He argued that the U.S. is effectively playing into Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's strategy, exacerbating the suffering in Gaza and beyond. "The solution is clear: the regime must be compelled to cease its crimes against Gaza," he stated.

The spokesperson highlighted recent diplomatic activities, including Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi's visit to Oman, a trilateral meeting in Beijing with Russia and China, and Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabadi's trip to Vienna to meet with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) officials. Additionally, former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi held discussions with ambassadors from three European countries. These engagements underscore Iran's active role in addressing rapid regional developments.

Regarding a reported letter from U.S. President Donald Trump to Iran amid new sanctions, Baghaei refrained from disclosing details, dismissing media speculation. "The content aligns with Trump's public statements. Our response will follow due consideration through appropriate channels," he said, clarifying that Araqchi's Oman visit was unrelated to the



letter but focused on Yemen-related discussions with Omani officials.

On Iran's ties with Türkiye, Baghaei affirmed that interactions continue as usual, with both nations committed to preserving and expanding relations. "Disputes exist, but we believe they should be managed through dialogue," he said, emphasizing the mutual desire to prevent misunderstandings from overshadowing their strong bilateral ties.

Addressing the pursuit of justice for Iranian chemical weapons victims from the Iran-Iraq War, Baghaei reiterated Iran's obligation to honor those who sacrificed their lives or suffered severe injuries. He accused certain countries, including Germany, of complicity in supplying Iraq with chemical weapons and called for a truth-seeking body to investigate German companies' involvement. "We raise this issue at every international forum, and while some convictions have been secured, the

effort must persist," he said.

Baghaei also touched on the cases of Iranian citizens in France, including the killing of two individuals and the detention of a woman activist supporting Palestine. "Our inquiries about the detained woman have yielded no clear answers; we only know she is in French custody," he said, adding that Iran has repeatedly sought clarification on the murders, to no avail.

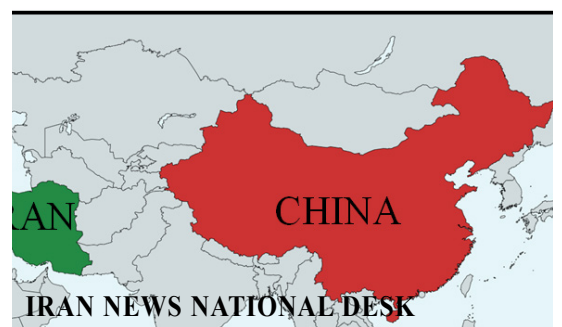
Commenting on potential negotiations with the U.S., Baghaei criticized Washington's contradictory approach: "While they talk of dialogue, they impose sanctions, targeting even our oil minister for simply doing his job. Diplomacy requires mutual respect and commitment—qualities the U.S. has consistently failed to demonstrate."

Reacting to the U.S. expulsion of South Africa's ambassador—an anti-apartheid activist instrumental in legal action against Israel at The Hague—Baghaei decried it as evidence of suppressed free speech in America, particularly regarding Palestine. "This reflects a blatant disregard for fundamental human rights," he said.

On the trilateral Beijing meeting, Baghaei rejected Western threats to reinstate UN Security Council sanctions via the "snapback" mechanism, insisting Iran's nuclear program remains peaceful and compliant with safeguards. "There is no basis for such measures," he said, noting the Beijing talks reinforced Iran's commitment to diplomacy.

Concluding his remarks, Baghaei reaffirmed Iran's readiness to counter threats: "While we consult with allies, we will respond to any aggression or violation relying on our national capabilities." The briefing underscored Iran's firm stance amid escalating regional conflicts and its proactive diplomatic efforts to safeguard its interests.

## Majlis Research Center Unveils Diplomacy Blueprint to Deepen Ties with China



TEHRAN - Babak Negahdari, head of Iran's Parliamentary Research Center, revealed plans for a parliamentary diplomacy roadmap tailored for the 12th Iranian Parliament, spotlighting a strategic emphasis on strengthening ties with China. This initiative seeks to elevate parliamentary engagement between the Islamic Republic of Iran and China, paving the way for a robust partnership.

Negahdari held talks with China's Ambassador to Tehran, Zong Pei Wu, on March 16, to explore avenues for collaboration. Describing China as a vital strategic ally, Negahdari noted its status as Iran's leading trade partner, primary oil purchaser, and top investor. He emphasized that the 25-year strategic pact between Tehran and Beijing would reinforce this alliance, even amid what he called "unjust" U.S. sanctions.

Highlighting mutual goals, Negahdari pointed to both nations' roles in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, which aim to foster global multipolarity. He cited joint naval drills with China, Russia, and Iran as evidence of growing cooperation. Negahdari argued that U.S. sanctions target not only Iran but also China's Belt and Road Initiative, which relies on Iran as a critical, secure transit hub.

Discussions also covered potential collaboration in cutting-edge fields like technology, artificial intelligence, telecommunications, and defense. Negahdari stressed that joint monetary frameworks could diminish dependence on the U.S. dollar, laying the groundwork for a new global order in digital, cyber, and health sectors free from Western dominance. He shared a vision of an "innovative Iran" by 2045, fueled by technological advancements over the next 20 years.

Ambassador Zong Pei Wu reaffirmed China's rejection of U.S. sanctions and its dedication to the Belt and Road partnership with Iran. He urged Chinese firms to invest in Iranian ventures, underscoring a unified stance against U.S. hegemony and unilateral policies. The ambassador also highlighted opportunities in emerging tech and digital economies, stressing parliamentary diplomacy's role in driving progress.

## President Welcomes Peace Treaty Between Armenia, Azerbaijan



TEHRAN (PressTV) - President Masoud Pezeshkian has welcomed the long-awaited peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan, reiterating Iran's commitment to promoting regional peace and stability.

In a phone conversation with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan on Sunday, Pezeshkian congratulated the two neighboring countries and nations on the important event.

"Iran has always welcomed the establishment of peace, convergence and stability in the region, especially among the neighbors, while preserving the territorial integrity of countries," he said.

Armenia and Azerbaijan on Thursday agreed on the text of a peace agreement to end nearly four decades of conflict between the South Caucasus countries, with Yerevan agreeing to surrender its claim to Karabakh.

The long-disputed region of Karabakh was at the center of two costly wars between Armenia and Azerbaijan in 2020 and the 1990s.

The region has always been internationally recognized as part of Azerbaijan, whose troops retook it in a 24-hour offensive.

Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei on Friday hailed the announcement as "a necessary and important step" to achieve "lasting" peace in the South Caucasus region.

During the phone conversation, Pezeshkian pointed to good and progressing relations between Iran and Armenia and called on the two countries' high-ranking officials to expedite the implementation of bilateral agreements in various fields.

## Government Plans to Replace Fossil Fuels with Electricity

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian announced that the 14th administration is prioritizing the replacement of fossil fuels with electricity by expanding solar power plants, wherever economically feasible. The goal is to redirect oil and gas toward sectors with higher value-added potential. Speaking at a meeting with the Minister of Industry, Mines, and Trade and ministry officials, Pezeshkian emphasized the government's focus on developing renewable and clean energy infrastructure to address the country's energy imbalance.

The president congratulated attendees on the birth anniversary of Imam Hassan Mojtaba (AS), wished for the acceptance of their prayers, and expressed gratitude for the efforts of the ministry's staff. "Given Iran's abundant sunlight, our plan is to develop solar power plants to gradually replace fossil fuels with electricity, provided it is economically viable," he said. "We aim to use oil and gas in areas that generate greater value, and I urge you to provide expert opinions on this matter and the best ways to implement it."

Pezeshkian stressed that the program's success hinges on a thorough assessment of its economic, social, and environmental benefits. He noted that while gas is currently cost-effective for transportation, household, and industrial use due to its low price, this may not hold if gas were sold at global market rates. "All these factors must be carefully studied," he added.

Highlighting the finite nature of oil and gas reserves, the president contrasted them with solar energy, which he described as a perpetual resource. "Electricity is a clean energy source with lower transmission costs, higher efficiency, and safer distribution compared to oil and gas," he explained. He also underscored the need to evaluate whether burning gas for electricity or other products is more cost-effective.

Pezeshkian revealed his personal efforts to engage with investors and economic stakeholders to expedite projects. "Our reliance on oil and gas has made us vulnerable to



sanctions," he said. "I've met with numerous investors to prevent bureaucratic delays and ensure their initiatives—key to shifting our economic trajectory—reach fruition."

He called for removing obstacles and fostering regional economic cooperation to reduce dependence on fossil fuels and drive significant growth. Modernizing industries and transportation, including upgrading the rail network and replacing outdated heating systems with energy-efficient alternatives, were cited as critical steps to combat air pollution and improve sustainability.

The president urged officials to avoid delays in transformative projects and advocated for a comprehensive roadmap, developed with input from experts and stakeholders. "We have countless documents in this country that were not designed for implementation," he remarked. "Those who will execute these plans must help design them, as they best understand the challenges and opportunities."

Addressing the proposed revival of the Ministry of Commerce, Pezeshkian questioned whether structural changes alone could solve problems. "If we clearly define the ministry's responsibilities and grant the necessary authority, the existing framework could suffice," he argued.

He also highlighted the potential of certain industrial units to become regional or global hubs with proper support, urging ministries to delegate authority to provincial officials. Additionally, Pezeshkian praised the recent free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union as a valuable opportunity for enhancing trade and industrial collaboration.

Pezeshkian concluded by emphasizing the need for efficiency, productivity, and a serious commitment to environmental and economic progress, positioning Iran for a sustainable energy future.

# IRAN NEWS



## Iran Exports \$17m Worth of Tea, With Russia, India as Top Destinations

TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Tea Organization, Habib Jahansaz, announced that Iran exported 13,000 tons of tea valued at \$17 million over the past 11 months. Speaking on Sunday, he identified Russia and India as the primary and secondary markets for Iranian tea, respectively.

According to a report by the Ministry of Agriculture, Jahansaz highlighted Iranian tea as a successful model for non-oil exports. "In the first 11 months of this year, we exported 13,000 tons of tea worth \$17 million," he said, emphasizing its growing presence in international markets.

He continued, "Russia is the top destination for Iranian tea, followed by India." Jahansaz attributed the global appeal of Iranian tea to its unique quality, noting that it is produced without agricultural pesticides, giving it a competitive edge worldwide.

## Kuwait-Iran Road Trade Nears Launch, Bilateral Trade Up 30%



TEHRAN - Trade between Iran and Kuwait is poised for a significant boost as efforts to establish a road trade route via Iraq gain momentum, potentially unlocking a \$1 billion trade potential.

Mohammad Khaki, a board member of the Iran-Kuwait Joint Chamber of Commerce, told ILNA that bilateral trade reached \$300 million in 2024, a \$100 million increase from the previous year—marking a 30% rise—and emphasized that a land route could propel exchanges even further.

Khaki revealed ongoing negotiations, including a recent meeting with Iran's ambassador to Kuwait earlier this month, to finalize the road link. "Iran supports this initiative, and Iraq has no objections, with transit agreements already in place," he said. "If Kuwait agrees, road trade can commence, significantly boosting trade volumes." Currently, all Iran-Kuwait trade relies on maritime routes, but a land corridor would unlock untapped export potential, reduce costs, and enhance Iran's competitiveness against regional rivals like Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Kuwait's market.

While Kuwait has not explicitly stated its reservations, Khaki speculated that the lack of border control equipment, such as X-ray scanners, might be a hurdle. "Sea routes allow easier cargo checks, but land borders require stricter security measures," he noted. Should the route materialize, Iranian goods would travel from the Shalamchah border crossing through Iraq to Kuwait.

Construction materials dominate Iran's exports to Kuwait, driving the \$300 million trade figure for 2024, which primarily reflects Iran's exports. However, Khaki highlighted that the real value might be higher, as some Iranian goods reach Kuwait via the UAE and are not captured in official Iran-Kuwait trade statistics. "The \$300 million is based on customs declarations, but the actual trade could exceed this," he explained. With a land route, he believes the \$1 billion potential is within reach.

Iran and Kuwait, Persian Gulf neighbors, have historically maintained modest trade ties, constrained by logistics and regional dynamics.

Iran's push for a road link reflects its broader strategy to deepen economic relations with Persian Gulf states amid sanctions and diversify export routes beyond sea dependency. Iraq's role as a transit hub is pivotal, leveraging its geographic position and improving ties with both nations. For Kuwait, a small but wealthy market, Iranian goods offer cost-competitive alternatives to imports from larger neighbors. If successful, this corridor could reshape trade patterns in the region, boosting Iran's economic resilience and Kuwait's access to diverse supplies.

## Diesel Production Surges by 10m Liters



TEHRAN - The CEO of the National Iranian Oil Products Distribution Company (NIOPDC), Mohammad Sadeq Azimifar, announced a significant milestone in Iran's energy sector, revealing that diesel production has increased by 10 million liters per day. This boost, achieved within the first six months of the 14th government, equates to the output of a 300,000-barrel-per-day refinery. Azimifar also outlined ambitious plans to reach a target of 130 million liters of diesel production under the Seventh Development Plan.

Azimifar detailed the strides made in fuel production. "In the past six months, gasoline production rose from an average of 97 million liters to 105 million liters per day," he said. "In the diesel sector, we achieved a major leap, increasing production from 110 million liters to 120 million liters daily."

Azimifar attributed the 10-million-liter increase in diesel output primarily to an uptick in refinery feedstock, which grew from 2.3 million barrels per day to 2.45 million barrels per day. Additionally, the activation of a hydrocracker unit has bolstered refinery diesel yields. "Within six months, we've added the equivalent of a 300,000-barrel-per-day refinery to our diesel production capacity," he emphasized.

Looking ahead, Azimifar expressed optimism about hitting the Seventh Development Plan's goal of 130 million liters of diesel per day. "Next year, with the commissioning of the Adish refinery, we expect to add another 5 million liters daily," he said. "Within two years, the Mehr refinery will help us fully realize the plan's diesel production targets."

On the quality front, Azimifar highlighted efforts to elevate diesel standards. "By early next year, we'll operationalize the GHT (quality enhancement) unit at the Shiraz refinery, converting all its diesel output to Euro 5 standards," he noted. He also pointed to recent progress at the Abadan refinery, where a hydrocracker unit brought online in the past three months has added 4 million liters of Euro 5 diesel to national production. Further quality upgrades at Abadan are in the pipeline, with plans to fast-track a diesel enhancement unit.

Azimifar, who also serves as Deputy Oil Minister for Refining and Distribution, underscored a historic achievement in supporting Iran's power sector. "This year, we've set a record in supplying fuel to power plants," he said. As of March 16, 2025, a total of 21.5 billion liters of liquid fuel—predominantly diesel—has been delivered to power plants. This marks a 41% increase over last year's figures, a level unprecedented in the NIOPDC's history.

## Iran Aims to Collect 16bcm of Flare Gas by End of Seventh Development Plan



TEHRAN - Oil Minister, Mohsen Paknejad, has described the burning of flare gas as a waste of the country's natural resources, emphasizing that efforts are underway to address this issue through short- and long-term projects.

According to Paknejad, approximately 4 billion cubic meters of associated gas are currently being collected annually, with a target set under the Seventh Development Plan to increase this figure to 16 billion cubic meters per year.

Speaking to ISNA, Paknejad highlighted the significance of flare gas collection, a topic currently under review by the parliament's Article 90 Commission due to its relevance to gas imbalances. "The burning of flare gas, particularly in upstream oil operations, represents a significant loss of natural resources," he stated. "To tackle this, we've outlined projects and initiatives, and we're making steady progress."

The minister noted recent achievements, including the collection of an additional 40 million cubic feet of gas per day from the Rag Sefid oil field over the past month and a half, with totals reaching 80 million cubic feet per day. "By the end of April, we aim to hit 120 million cubic feet per day," he added, expressing optimism that the process would continue until flare gas wastage is eliminated.

Addressing the broader issue of gas imbalances, Paknejad explained that warmer weather typically reduces domestic, commercial, and small-scale industrial gas consumption. "This reduction eases previous restrictions on gas supply to industries and power plants, allowing us to better meet their needs," he said. He outlined a dual approach to resolving gas imbalances, including short-term measures for immediate relief and long-term strategies focused on optimizing consumption and demand management. "The Seventh Development

Plan provides a strong framework to address these challenges within a set timeline," he added.

Paknejad stressed the importance of focusing on consumption management rather than solely boosting production. "If we shift our attention away from consumption and only increase production, the gap won't close, and imbalances will persist," he warned. While non-price-based solutions remain a priority for the ministry, pricing strategies are also under consideration, though no specific proposals are currently on the table.

Regarding parliamentary support, the minister praised the Article 90 Commission and other specialized committees for their effective oversight and assistance. "Whenever the ministry faces execution challenges, parliament—especially the Article 90 Commission—has been a refuge," he said. "Their supervisory role and constructive collaboration have been instrumental in overcoming obstacles."

Commenting on external pressures, Paknejad dismissed claims by former U.S. President Donald Trump regarding halting Iran's gas exports to Iraq. "The U.S. policy of maximum pressure has failed," he asserted. "These are futile dreams that will not come to fruition."

On the timeline for flare gas collection, the minister revealed that the ministry has set mid-2026 as the target for addressing major flare gas sources. "Some flare gases lack the quantity or commercial value to justify collection," he explained.

The initiative reflects Iran's broader commitment to reducing resource waste and optimizing its energy sector under the Seventh Development Plan.

End of Report

## Iran to Expand Shipping Lines to West and Southwest Africa

TEHRAN - Iran is set to bolster its maritime trade links with West and Southwest Africa, following a decision by the Africa Committee chaired by the First Vice President, according to Mohammadreza Safari, Acting Director General for Africa at Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO). This move aims to enhance Iran's economic footprint on the continent, building on existing shipping routes and trade relationships.

Safari noted that Iran currently operates shipping lines connecting to East and North Africa, with Iranian vessels regularly traveling to ports in Tanzania, Kenya, and Libya. "These ships depart monthly or bimonthly, depending on cargo availability and logistical arrangements," he said. However, the new initiative focuses on establishing direct maritime connections to West and Southwest Africa, a decision formalized during an Africa Committee meeting. Part of this plan includes modernizing Iran's shipping fleet to support expanded operations.

Safari outlined Iran's strategic approach to African trade, categorizing countries into three priority tiers. Nations hosting Iranian embassies, trade centers, or commercial attachés—such as Kenya, South Africa, Algeria, and Nigeria—are at the forefront of this trade push. "These countries are our top priorities for deepening commercial ties," he emphasized.

Trade between Iran and Africa largely operates on a barter system, though Safari clarified that this extends beyond simple goods exchange. "It involves complex currency and banking mechanisms," he said, reflecting the challenges of navigating international financial systems under sanctions. Iran primarily imports minerals, agricultural products, and precious stones like diamonds and gold from Africa, while exporting petrochemicals, machinery, and equipment. However, Safari noted a shift in African preferences: "They're more interested in joint production investments for machinery than direct imports." Currently, bitumen and urea top Iran's export list to the continent.

Looking ahead, Safari announced plans for a significant petrochemical export drive at the 2025 Iran-Africa Summit. Additionally, Iran is pursuing an ambitious extraterritorial farming

program in Africa to secure agricultural inputs amid domestic currency constraints. "Africa could become a key supplier for Iran's needs," he explained. "Iranian private companies could cultivate crops there, with the produce imported back home." This initiative requires coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture to issue import permits and set quotas. Safari added that traders engaging in such barter-based farming in 2026 would receive special incentives, pending an operational framework agreement with the ministry.

On the mining front, Safari addressed Iran's extraterritorial mining ambitions in Africa, identifying a key challenge: "Iran prefers buying minerals over investing in African mines." Overcoming currency export hurdles could position Africa as a priority for mining investments, he suggested, noting that Iran has already identified target minerals and mines. "There's also potential to transfer Iranian technology and machinery to support these efforts," he added.

Iran's push into Africa aligns with its broader strategy to diversify trade partners and reduce reliance on oil exports amid Western sanctions. The Africa Committee, under the Vice President's leadership, reflects a high-level commitment to this goal. Historically, Iran's trade with Africa has been modest, but recent years have seen renewed focus, particularly in East Africa. Expanding to West and Southwest Africa—regions rich in resources like oil, gas, and minerals—could open new markets for Iranian goods and secure vital imports.

The extraterritorial farming and mining initiatives underscore Iran's innovative approaches to circumvent financial restrictions. By leveraging barter systems and overseas production, Tehran aims to stabilize its economy while fostering sustainable partnerships. The modernization of its shipping fleet, meanwhile, signals a long-term investment in logistics to support these ambitions.

As Iran prepares for the 2025 summit, its evolving trade strategy could reshape its economic ties with Africa, offering mutual benefits in a shifting global landscape.

## 381 Inactive Mining Units Reactivated, 925 Idle Industrial Units Return to Production



TEHRAN - In a detailed report presented to the President during a meeting of the Council of Deputies, Iran's Minister of Industry, Mines, and Trade, Seyyed Mohammad Atabak, outlined significant progress in revitalizing the country's industrial and mining sectors. The reactivation of dormant mining units, the revival of idle industries, investments based on value-added principles, and improvements in trade indices were among the key highlights of the report.

According to ILNA, citing the government's information portal, Atabak emphasized structural reforms within the ministry aimed at enhancing efficiency and eliminating redundancies. He noted that managerial shifts in recent years had rendered parts of the ministry inefficient, but under the 14th administration, the ministry's framework was realigned with strategic goals to streamline operations.

A major focus of the reforms included the revival of the Steel Committee and enhanced oversight of mining activities. "In the steel sector, we are working to balance the supply chain in line with production capacity," Atabak said. He also highlighted the establishment of a Copper Committee to optimize the copper production chain, from concentrate to cathode.

To accelerate the reactivation of idle mining units, the minister announced that some powers of the Supreme Mining Council have been delegated to provincial councils. "This will significantly speed up efforts to reduce the number of inactive mining units," he added, forecasting promising developments in the copper and gold sectors for the coming year. "Next year, we expect good news regarding copper and gold as we complete the value chain."

Atabak also revealed that 925 industrial units have been brought back into production, with ongoing efforts to support more dormant facilities. A roadmap and industrial strategy, developed in collaboration with the private sector and the ministry's planning and smart technology division, were cited as positive steps forward. However, he acknowledged challenges in securing funding, despite presidential support, which has slowed industrial development.

Despite energy imbalances in gas and electricity, Atabak stressed that industrial growth has continued uninterrupted, thanks to the strategic roadmap. He also highlighted the delivery of 10,000 vehicles for veterans after a one-and-a-half-year delay as a key achievement of the 14th administration.

Additional initiatives include the formation of a development bloc in general industries and the promotion of renewable energy power plants by the Industrial Development and Renovation Organization (IDRO). Large industries, alongside industrial zones, are set to contribute electricity to the grid through these plants.

## Railway Chief Emphasizes Boosting Transit Cargo Transport



TEHRAN - Jabbarali Zakeri, CEO of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways, underscored the importance of expanding rail transport for transit cargo across the country's railway network during a visit to the Aprin dry port rail hub. The inspection, conducted alongside a high-level delegation from the UAE's customs and ports authority, highlighted Iran's push to strengthen its position as a regional logistics hub.

Zakeri showcased the Aprin logistics center's potential as a key rail intersection connecting the east-west and north-south corridors, dubbing it a "crossroads" for Iran and the region. Discussions with the Emirati delegation focused on enhancing cooperation, with both sides agreeing to explore further collaboration. Welcoming the UAE officials, Zakeri affirmed Iran's readiness to deepen ties within the framework of national regulations, urging greater utilization of Iran's rail corridor capacities for mutual benefit.

Sultan Ahmed bin Sulayem, head of Dubai's Ports Customs Authority, praised Iran's rail transport capabilities, noting that the visit aimed to assess Aprin's logistical potential firsthand and explore increased investment opportunities. Citing the \$1 trillion trade potential of CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries, he highlighted Iran's strategic advantage: "Given these nations' lack of sea access, Iran's rail network is ideal for transporting goods like cotton and grains."

## Congo to Join Peace Talks With Rwanda-Backed Rebels

LUANDA (Dispatches) - Democratic Republic of Congo will send a delegation to Angola on Tuesday for talks aiming to resolve a spiralling conflict against Rwandan-backed rebels in the east, the presidency said on Sunday. Angola said last week that direct peace talks between Congo and M23 rebels would begin in the Angolan capital Luanda on March 18.

President Felix Tshisekedi, who has long ruled out dialogue with M23, had been considering changing his position after a string of defeats as regional support for Congo has waned.

"At this stage, we can't say who will make up the delegation," presidency spokesperson Tina Salama said.



## Russia Demands Ironclad Guarantees in Peace Treaty With Ukraine



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia will seek "ironclad" guarantees in any peace deal on Ukraine that NATO nations will exclude Kyiv from membership and that Ukraine will remain neutral, a Russian deputy foreign minister said in remarks published on Monday.

U.S. President Donald Trump is trying to win President Vladimir Putin's support for a 30-day ceasefire proposal that Ukraine accepted last week and which Putin says needs to meet crucial conditions to be acceptable.

Trump is expected to speak with his Putin this week on ways to end the three-year war in Ukraine, U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff told CNN on Sunday after returning from what he described as a "positive" meeting with Putin in Moscow.

In a broad-ranging interview with the Russian media outlet Izvestia that made no reference to the ceasefire proposal, Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said that any long-lasting peace treaty on Ukraine must meet Moscow's demands.

"We will demand that ironclad security guarantees become part of this agreement," Izvestia cited Grushko as saying.

"Part of these guarantees should be the neutral status of Ukraine, the refusal of NATO countries to accept it into the alliance."

Moscow is categorically against the deployment of NATO observers to Ukraine, Grushko also reiterated the Kremlin's position.

Britain and France both have said that they were willing to send a peacekeeping force to monitor any ceasefire in Ukraine. Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said his country was also open to requests.

"It does not matter under what label NATO contingents were to be deployed on Ukrainian territory: be it the European Union, NATO, or in a national capacity," Grushko said.

## Fire at Packed North Macedonia Nightclub Kills 59



KOCANI (Dispatches) - Fire ripped through a packed and unlicensed nightclub early on Sunday in the North Macedonian town of Kocani, killing 59 people and injuring more than 150, officials said, after sparks ignited the roof as a live band performed.

Hundreds of people scrambled for the small venue's only exit as the fire spread across the ceiling, leaving many trapped in the country's deadliest incident in years.

One video from the event, verified by Reuters, showed the moment the fire began: as the band played on stage, two flares spat white sparks into the air, setting a patch of ceiling alight. Seconds later, the panic began.

"Fire broke out, everyone started screaming and shouting: 'Get out, get out,'" Marija Taseva, 22, told Reuters.

As she tried to escape, Taseva fell to the ground and people trod on her, injuring her face. In the rush, she lost contact with her sister, who did not make it out.

"My sister died," Taseva said, breaking into tears.

Authorities arrested about 20 people in connection with the fire, including government officials and the manager of the "Pulse" nightclub, which did not have a valid licence, Interior Minister Pance Toskovski told a press conference.

# U.S. Vows to Keep Hitting Houthis Until Shipping Attacks Stop

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The United States will keep attacking Yemen's Houthis until they end attacks on shipping, the U.S. defense secretary said on Sunday, as the Iran-aligned group signaled it could escalate in response to deadly U.S. strikes the day before.

The airstrikes, which the Houthi-run health ministry said killed at least 53 people, are the biggest U.S. military operation in the Middle East since President Donald Trump took office in January. One U.S. official told Reuters the campaign might continue for weeks.

Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi said on Sunday that his militants would target U.S. ships in the Red Sea as long as the U.S. continues its attacks on Yemen. "If they continue their aggression, we will continue the escalation," he said in a televised speech.

The Houthi movement's political bureau described the attacks as a "war crime," while Moscow urged Washington to cease the strikes.

The Houthis' military spokesman said without evidence in a televised statement early Monday that the group had launched a second attack against the U.S. aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman in the Red Sea.

U.S. warplanes shot down 11 Houthi drones on Sunday, none of which came close to the Truman, a U.S. official told Reuters. U.S. forces also tracked a missile that splashed down off the coast of Yemen and was not deemed a threat, the official said.

U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth told Fox News' "Sunday Morning Futures": "The minute the Houthis say we'll stop shooting at your ships, we'll stop shooting at your drones. This campaign will end, but until then it will be unrelenting."

"This is about stopping the shooting at assets ... in that critical waterway, to reopen freedom of navigation, which is a core national interest of the United States, and Iran has been enabling the Houthis for far too long," he said. "They better back off."

The Houthis, who have taken control of most of Yemen over the past decade, said last week they would resume attacks on Israeli ships passing through the Red Sea if Israel did not lift a block on aid entering Gaza.

They had launched scores of attacks on shipping after Israel's war with Hamas began in late 2023, saying they were



acting in solidarity with Gaza's Palestinians.

Trump also told Iran, the Houthis' main backer, to stop supporting the group immediately. He said if Iran threatened the United States, "America will hold you fully accountable and, we won't be nice about it!"

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Sunday called for "utmost restraint and a cessation of all military activities" in Yemen and warned new escalation could "fuel cycles of retaliation that may further destabilize Yemen and the region, and pose grave risks to the already dire humanitarian situation in the country," his spokesperson said in a statement.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio told CBS News' "Face the Nation" program: "There's no way the ... Houthis would have the ability to do this kind of thing unless they had support from Iran. And so this was a message to Iran: don't keep supporting them, because then you will also be responsible for what they are doing in attacking Navy ships and attacking global shipping."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov called Rubio to urge an "immediate cessation of the use of force and the importance for all sides to engage in political dialogue," Moscow said.

Five children and two women were among the 53 people killed in the U.S. strikes, said Anees Alsbahi, spokesperson for the Houthi-run health ministry. Another 98 people were

injured, the ministry said.

The Pentagon did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the claims of civilian casualties. Reuters could not independently verify the claims.

Residents in Sanaa said the strikes hit a neighborhood known to host several members of the Houthi leadership. "The explosions were violent and shook the neighborhood like an earthquake. They terrified our women and children," said one of the residents, who gave his name as Abdullah Yahia.

In Sanaa, a crane and bulldozer were used to remove debris at one site and people used their bare hands to pick through the rubble. At a hospital, medics treated the injured, including children, and the bodies of several casualties were placed in a yard, wrapped in plastic sheets, Reuters footage showed.

# Thousands Rally for Brazil's Ex-President Bolsonaro

BRASILIA (Dispatches) - Former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, facing accusations of supporting an attempted coup, declared his re-election ban a "denial of democracy" to supporters in Rio de Janeiro. Bolsonaro addressed thousands on Copacabana beach, underscoring tensions as he confronts charges of attempting to overthrow successor Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

Brazil's former president Jair Bolsonaro, who is accused of backing an attempted coup, told supporters in Rio de Janeiro on Sunday that a ban on him seeking re-election next year amounted to a "denial of democracy."

Thousands of supporters of the far-right firebrand lined Rio's famous Copacabana beach to show support for Brazil's 2019-2022 leader, who stands accused of attempting to overthrow his left-wing successor Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva.

The 69-year-old has been attempting to position himself as a leading contender in elections next year, despite being barred from holding elected office until 2030.

"I want to tell all those who don't like me in Brasilia (Brazil's capital): elections without Bolsonaro are a denial of democracy in Brazil," he said.

Bolsonaro hopes to emulate US President Donald Trump by making a stunning political comeback despite facing multiple legal charges.

"They are trying to throw him in prison, in a cowardly fashion, so he can't be elected, but they won't succeed," Patricia Santos, a 41-year-old attending the rally, told AFP.

Jose de Souza Vitorino, 64, a former military officer like Bolsonaro, said he came to the rally because he wanted "to leave a better Brazil for my children."



Bolsonaro had called for a "million" supporters to gather on Sunday, but researchers at the University of Sao Paulo put the crowd size at 18,000 people, based on computer analysis of aerial images.

The protest was officially called to demand amnesty for hundreds convicted over the January 8, 2023 riots in Brasilia, when Bolsonaro backers stormed the presidential palace, Congress and Supreme Court.

The rioters demanded that the military oust Lula, who had defeated Bolsonaro, his archrival, in October 2022 elections and had been sworn in just a week earlier.

The rampage evoked the January 2021 storming of the Capitol building in Washington by Trump supporters, most of whom the US president has

since pardoned.

Bolsonaro was in the United States during the Brasilia riots but prosecutors believe they were part of a coup plot approved by the former army captain.

On March 25, Brazil's Supreme Court will consider whether there is sufficient evidence to try him.

If convicted, he risks a prison term of more than 40 years. Like Trump, Bolsonaro claims to be the victim of politically motivated judicial hounding. Both men also survived attempts on their life on the campaign trail.

On the Copacabana stage, a poster showed the now iconic image of a defiant Trump with his fist raised after a bullet pierced his ear during a rally last year in Philadelphia.

Dubbed the "Trump of the Tropics," Bolsonaro claims to be the victim of political persecution aimed at excluding him from seeking a second term.

He has been declared ineligible to hold public office until 2030 for having made unsubstantiated claims of fraud in Brazil's electronic voting system, but he hopes to have the ban overturned by Congress.

Independent political analyst Andre Rosa told AFP the real purpose of Sunday's rally was to allow Bolsonaro to "send a message to his competitors on the right... and reaffirm his intention to be a candidate in 2026."

"For now, I am a candidate," Bolsonaro told journalists in Brasilia this week.

There are concerns in Lula's camp, meantime, including worry over the 79-year-old president's health and the persistent inflation that has dragged down his popularity.

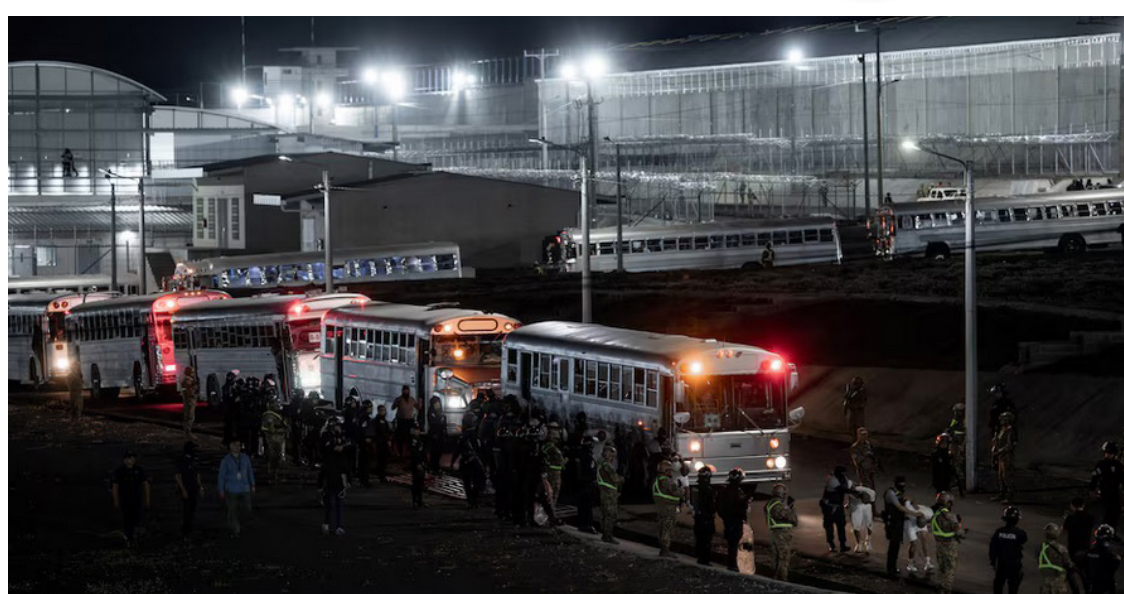
# U.S. Deports Hundreds of Venezuelan Immigrants Despite Court Order

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The Trump administration has transferred hundreds of immigrants to El Salvador even as a federal judge issued an order temporarily barring the deportations under an 18th century wartime declaration targeting Venezuelan gang members, officials said Sunday. Flights were in the air at the time of the ruling.

US District Judge James E. Boasberg issued an order Saturday blocking the deportations but lawyers told him there were already two planes with immigrants in the air — one headed for El Salvador, the other for Honduras. Boasberg verbally ordered the planes be turned around, but they apparently were not and he did not include the directive in his written order.

"Oopsie... Too late," Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele, a Trump ally who agreed to house about 300 immigrants for a year at a cost of \$6 million in his country's prisons, wrote on the social media site X above an article about Boasberg's ruling. That post was recirculated by White House communications director Steven Cheung.

Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who negotiated an earlier deal with Bukele to house immigrants, posted on the site: "We sent over 250 alien enemy members of Tren de Aragua which El Salvador has agreed to hold in their very good jails at a fair price that will also save our taxpayer dollars."



Steve Vladeck, a professor at the Georgetown University Law Center, said that Boasberg's verbal directive to turn around the planes was not technically part of his final order but that the Trump administration clearly violated the "spirit" of it.

"This just incentivises future courts to be hyper specific in their orders and not give the government any wiggle room," Vladeck said.

The Department of Justice in court papers filed Sunday said some immigrants were already out of the country by the time the hold was issued Sunday night. The department added that it has appealed the order and would use other laws for deportations in coming days if the appeal is not successful.

The immigrants were deported after Trump's declaration of the Alien Enemies Act of 1798, which has been used only three times in US history.

The law, invoked during the War of 1812 and World Wars I and II, requires a president to declare the United States is at war, giving him extraordinary powers to detain or remove foreigners who otherwise would have protections under immigration or criminal laws. It was last used to justify the detention of Japanese-American civilians during World War II.

## Norris Wins Chaotic Australian GP, Edges Verstappen



MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Lando Norris kept his cool in a rain-hit and incident-packed season-opening Australian Grand Prix Sunday to edge world champion Max Verstappen with Lewis Hamilton 10th on his Ferrari debut.

The pole-sitting Briton took the chequered flag by less than a second from the Dutchman, with Mercedes' George Russell third after a chaotic race in Melbourne that saw three drivers crash before the end of the first lap.

With the safety car repeatedly forced into action after a slew of accidents on the wet Albert Park circuit, Norris held on to clock a fifth grand prix win and second in a row after topping the podium at the final race of 2024 in Abu Dhabi.

RB rookie Isack Hadjar, Alpine's Jack Doohan and Williams' Carlos Sainz—last year's winner—all failed to finish the first lap on a track made treacherous by earlier torrential rain.

Norris came into the season as favourite for the 2025 drivers' title and cemented his status as the man to beat.

"It was amazing, a top race, especially with Max behind me. I was pushing, especially the last two laps—it was a little bit stressful, not going to lie," said Norris.

"Tricky conditions, but there are the ones that are enjoyable and we ended up on top so I'm happy."

Verstappen, who is aiming to become only the second driver to win five straight world titles after Michael Schumacher, was in the hunt early but an uncharacteristic error on lap 18 dented his chances until another safety car put him back in the frame.

"It was a difficult race, but at the end it was fun," said the Dutch star.

"It was pushing, fighting for the win but I'm just happy to bring it home, score good points and this is a good start for us."

In the unpredictable conditions, with rain on-and-off, Williams' Alex Albon was an encouraging fourth

ahead of Mercedes' Kimi Antonelli on his debut.

Aston Martin's Lance Stroll was sixth ahead of Nico Hulkenberg in a Sauber.

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc came eighth, with Norris' teammate Oscar Piastri and Hamilton rounding out the top 10.

Russell was content with third, given the circumstances.

"It was a great race to come home in P3. And well done to Lando, a race like that when you are leading is probably your worst nightmare," he said.

"I was quite enjoying it to be honest, hoping the two guys ahead made a mistake and I could slip through."

While torrential rain eased for the main event, the tricky conditions were rammed home when Hadjar skidded and hit the wall on the formation lap and was out before the race even started.

The start was aborted and when the green lights finally came on, Norris, on intermediate tyres, made a clean jump and kept his position at the first corner.

Verstappen also had a flying start and passed Piastri to go second while Leclerc moved up two places to fifth.

But the race was interrupted minutes later when Doohan ploughed into the wall, then the experienced Sainz did the same on his Williams debut.

They restarted after a safety car with Norris holding his spot ahead of Verstappen and with Piastri they began pulling clear of fourth-placed Russell.

With the track drying, the gap to Russell was eight seconds by lap 13.

But with his tyres starting to wear, Verstappen brushed the gravel on lap 18 and Piastri flashed past back into second.

## Newcastle End 56-Year Wait for Silverware by Winning League Cup



LONDON (Dispatches) - Eddie Howe hailed Newcastle's "incredible" League Cup final victory against Liverpool as proof his side are ready for a period of sustained success after finally ending their 56-year trophy drought.

Newcastle produced a superb display to beat Premier League leaders Liverpool 2-1 at Wembley on Sunday, securing the Magpies' first major prize since the 1969 Inter-Cities Fairs Cup.

After celebrating with 32,000 jubilant Newcastle fans packed into one half of Wembley, Howe and his players kept the party going in the dressing room.

The euphoric celebrations included dousing Howe with champagne and beer as the magnitude of delivering Newcastle's first significant domestic prize since the 1955 FA Cup started to sink in.

For a composed, erudite figure like Howe to arrive at his post-match press conference still soaked and reeking of alcohol underlined just how much Newcastle were letting themselves go after one of the greatest days in the history of a proud but so often underachieving club.

"If you can smell a strange smell that's me. I was drenched in alcohol by Joelinton and some of the others!" Howe said.

"There has to be a celebration. I will certainly be encouraging it. That's not usual for me."

"I urge everyone to enjoy it. We've had some people who have worked for this club for a long time and it's great to see them so happy."

"That is what is all about, you have so many difficult days in football and this club has had its share."

Aside from a brief period when Kevin Keegan's self-styled "entertainers" challenged for the title in the 1990s, Newcastle have suffered decades of self-inflicted wounds that rendered them a laughing stock.

All that changed in 2021 when a Saudi-backed consortium completed a takeover from unpopular owner Mike Ashley and quickly hired Howe as their manager.

Thanks to Howe's leadership and the Saudi financial backing, Newcastle have been transformed from relegation candidates to silverware winners.

Amanda Staveley, who was the face of the ownership consortium until leaving last year, had boldly claimed Newcastle would one day win the Premier League.

While that target remains unfulfilled, Staveley's belief that trophies would soon arrive has come to fruition, with Newcastle chairman Yasir Al-Rumayyan, governor of the Saudi Public Investment Fund, at Wembley to witness the triumph.

Now Howe, whose deft touch has been so influential in Newcastle's renaissance, wants his team to use the victory as a springboard for more success.

Howe became visibly emotional as he contemplated Newcastle's road to redemption and his own path to the greatest moment of his career.

## Draper, Andreeva Win at Indian Wells Titles

INDIAN WELLS (Dispatches) - Britain's Jack Draper thrashed Denmark's Holger Rune 6-2 6-2 to collect the biggest title of his career at Indian Wells on Sunday with a place in the top 10 assured for the first time.

The 23-year-old Draper has suffered a lingering hip issue this year but looked fine as he zipped around the court with ease on Sunday, firing 21 winners to cap a superb week in the California desert.

Playing in his fourth Masters 1000 final, Rune had the benefit of experience but could never find his rhythm as he made seven winners against 18 unforced errors.

"I lost first round here last year so I didn't get to experience the tournament too much," Draper said. "I would say this is one of my favourite tournaments now."

Playing in his first 1000-level final, Draper bludgeoned his opponent with seven aces in the first set, having hit a forehand winner to break in the first game and outfoxed Rune at the net in the third to go up another break.

The Dane's frustrations boiled over early in the second set, where he shouted at his team before dropping serve in the first game. He handed Draper another break in the penultimate game with a backhand shot that he sent wide.

Draper fired a booming forehand shot on match point and smiled towards the stands before kneeling on court with his fists thrust into the air in celebration, clinching it in just one hour and nine minutes.

"Before the match, you know, you're thinking of all kinds of



scenarios in your head, a lot of doubts," he said.

"And just what makes it even better is that, you know, just getting through those doubts and being able to play the final the way I did." Rune made no excuses for his performance, telling the crowd: "It never feels nice not to be able to step over the line, but that's life sometimes."

Draper did not have an easy path to the final, having to beat 2022

winner Taylor Fritz in the last 16, and had to contain his nerves after beating back-to-back defending champion Carlos Alcaraz in the semi-finals on Saturday night.

Earlier Russian teenager Mirra Andreeva fought back to overcome world number one Aryna Sabalenka 2-6 6-4 6-3 in the Indian Wells final, winning a second WTA 1000-level event in a row to keep her charmed year on track.

The 17-year-old Andreeva, the youngest women's champion at the tournament since Serena Williams in 1999, found her form midway through the match and crumpled to the ground in celebration after closing it out with a forehand winner.

Top seed Sabalenka pulled herself out of a slump to bring some of her best tennis to the California desert this year and got off to a hot start on Sunday but her form unravelled as the match wore on and she was left to rue missed opportunities.

"I would like to thank myself for fighting until the end and for always believing in me and for never quitting," Andreeva said at the trophy ceremony.

"I was running like a rabbit today because Aryna, she's been sending bullets and it was really hard to just keep up."

Andreeva had lost to Sabalenka twice this year and it looked as though the pattern would continue as the top-seeded Belarusian mixed some nifty drop shots with her usual forehand power to save four break points in the third game.

## Gilgeous-Alexander, Thunder Cruise Past Bucks

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Shai Gilgeous-Alexander recorded 31 points and eight assists to help the Oklahoma City Thunder post a 121-105 victory over the host Milwaukee Bucks.

Isaiah Hartenstein scored a career-high 24 points on 11-of-15 shooting and collected 12 rebounds as the Thunder (56-12) won their third straight game and 10th of their past 11. Oklahoma City set a franchise record for most road wins (27) in a season.

Isaiah Joe made five 3-pointers and scored 19 points off the bench for Oklahoma City. Chet Holmgren added 16 points and eight rebounds and Alex Caruso had 10 points for the Thunder, who led by as many as 25.

Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo had 21 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists for his seventh



triple-double of the season and 52nd of his career.

Damian Lillard scored 19 points, Gary Trent Jr. added 12, Kevin Porter Jr. had 11 and Kyle Kuzma tallied 10 for the Bucks (38-29), who lost for the fourth time in the past six games.

Jalen Williams and Luguentz Dort both sat out with hip injuries for Oklahoma City.

The Thunder shot 51.7 percent from the field and made 10 of 29 from 3-point range. Gilgeous-Alexander was just 11 of 27 from the field.

Oklahoma City held a 50-34 rebounding advantage.

Milwaukee knocked down 39.8 percent of its attempts, including 13 of 34 from behind the arc.

Gilgeous-Alexander scored 14 first-half points as the Thunder led 53-41 at the break. Lillard had 13 points in the half for Milwaukee.

## Arsenal Edge Chelsea 1-0 as Merino Strikes



LONDON (Dispatches) - Chelsea's challenge for a place in next season's Champions League faltered in a toothless 1-0 defeat at Arsenal as Manchester United continued their upward trend with a 3-0 win at Leicester.

Mikel Merino scored the only goal of a disappointing contest at the Emirates as Arsenal pulled clear in second place and to within 12 points of runaway leaders Liverpool.

Chelsea badly missed the presence of the absent Cole Palmer due to injury as they meekly surrendered to a damaging defeat for their hopes of a top-four finish.

The Blues remain in fourth for now but have five sides from fifth-placed Manchester City to Aston Villa in ninth within four points of Enzo Maresca's men.

Both managers are hoping to be stronger after the upcoming international break.

Bukayo Saka is nearing a return for Arsenal, while Maresca is confident of having Palmer, Nico Jackson and Noni Madueke back when they are next in action at home to Tottenham on April 3.

"We did enough to deserve to win the game," said Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta. "Now we have the international break so let's take a chance to breathe and bring some players back hopefully."

Arsenal have struggled badly for goals since the loss of Kai Havertz to a season-ending injury forced midfielder Merino into a makeshift centre-forward role.