

CEO of the National Iranian Drilling Company, Regarding the \$800m Investment From the National Iranian Oil Company This Year to Purchase 15 Onshore Drilling Rigs, Said Between \$200m and \$300m of the Company's Domestic Foreign Currency Resources Will Be Allocated for Procuring Auxiliary Equipment

# IRAN NEWS

Hossein Afshin, Deputy President for Science and Technology, Says the Country Is Making Heavy Investments in Buying Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) as Part of Efforts to Expand the Country's Artificial Intelligence (AI) Infrastructure

## 2 DOMESTIC

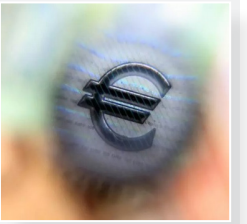


### Iran's Non-Oil Trade Reaches \$130b

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### France Pushes Retaliation Against U.S. Tech



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### Araghchi, Trump's Envoy Witkoff to Hold Indirect Talks in Oman on Saturday



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and the United States regional envoy Steve Witkoff are reportedly to hold "indirect talks" in the Omani capital Muscat on Saturday.

The Islamic Republic of Iran News Network carried the report on Tuesday, saying the two were to partake in the talks that are to be mediated by Omani Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi.

The report on the mediated talks comes amid Iran's repeated assertion that dialogue with the US would yield no positive outcome while Washington retains its "maximum-pressure" policy towards the Islamic Republic, and continues to act in bad faith concerning Tehran.

On Sunday, President Masoud Pezeshkian reiterated Iran's stance of roundly rejecting talks with the U.S. "at any cost."

Dialogue with the United States while Washington sustained its coercive attitude towards Iran would amount to submission rather than diplomacy, the president noted.

The chief executive also reiterated that the Islamic Republic would never compromise its national interests or principled positions, referring to the country's opposition to aggression of any type by any party.

Also on Sunday, Araghchi similarly stated unequivocally that direct talks with the United States were "meaningless" as long as Washington refused to abandon its hostile stance.

Iranian officials have, meanwhile, emphasized that the country had no illusions about the current US approach, and had so far seen no signs of genuine political will from the American side to correct its course.

They cite the US policy of ramping up its illegal and unilateral economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic after leaving the historic 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and others in 2018.

### Central Bank's Core Policy Now Focused on Exchange Rate Stability



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Governor of the Central Bank of Iran, Mohammadreza Farzin, announced that stabilizing the exchange rate is now the central strategy of the bank. He highlighted that one of the main causes of inflation in January and February of the previous year was the rising rates in the NIMA system (Iran's forex platform). In response, the current policy is to stabilize the exchange rate in the commercial foreign exchange market, allowing monetary plans to proceed as scheduled.

Farzin stated that the Central Bank's goal for this year is to maintain the exchange rate within a specific range, while also aiming to control inflation and money supply growth. The bank is also introducing a new targeted credit system called "Production Leap Account" to fund working capital needs in the real economy. Additionally, increasing the total capital of the banking system to 1,000 trillion tomans is among this year's major plans, alongside efforts to enhance international banking relations.

He further emphasized launching the digital rial as a key initiative for 2025, which aims to strengthen financial governance and better manage the national currency.

To tackle inflation, the Central Bank will continue to supply essential goods at a fixed exchange rate of 28,500 tomans, as done last year. He noted that the liquidity growth rate has been reduced to 25%, and the monetary base growth reached 22% in 2024—a positive indicator.

### Gov't Spokesperson Emphasizes Rational Diplomacy, Social Justice, and Economic Relief Measures



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In her first press conference of the new Iranian year, government spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani outlined the administration's key strategies across domestic and foreign policy, including ongoing economic support measures, a firm commitment to equitable governance, and a rational approach to international negotiations.

Speaking on Tuesday, Mohajerani began by expressing condolences over the recent mine accident in Damghan's Mihanaduyeh, assuring the public that President Masoud Pezeshkian has tasked the Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade with a thorough investigation into the tragedy.

Highlighting the government's decision to eliminate the requirement for upfront cash payments for its digital rationing system, she stated this move had significantly improved public satisfaction. The digital ration card system will remain valid until the end of June.

On the subject of international diplomacy, Mohajerani reaffirmed Iran's readiness to negotiate, provided it is conducted with mutual respect. She emphasized that the guiding principle behind any talks would be the preservation of national interests. While the details of upcoming negotiations remain unclear, indirect talks are expected to be pursued through Oman.

"We are committed to a wise and balanced negotiation process, one that values equality and prioritizes the well-being of the Iranian people," she noted.

Addressing controversy surrounding a recent personal trip by a government official, Mohajerani emphasized that all state employees, including ministers, are required to disclose travel plans and obtain prior approval for official trips. She reiterated that transparency, honesty, and justice are core principles of the Pezeshkian administration.

Touching on water management, Mohajerani confirmed the formation of a High Council for Water to address growing concerns over water shortages. The government plans to employ desalination technologies and unconventional water sources to reduce tensions, while encouraging cooperation among relevant agencies. "Patience and mutual respect are essential in preventing conflicts over national resources," she stressed.

Regarding the currency market, Mohajerani noted a stabilization in exchange rates during the recent Nowruz holidays, with the official rate hovering between 66,000 to 68,000 rials. She credited this to reduced market anxiety and affirmed that the government is taking steps to protect

low-income groups by raising the minimum wage by up to 45% and continuing to subsidize essential goods.

She said the digital ration card system had helped regulate prices for essential items like rice, and the government will continue supporting this initiative to curb inflation and improve living standards.

Responding to concerns about power outages and their impact on industry, Mohajerani detailed plans to boost electricity production through renewable energy sources. She mentioned that large factories are beginning to install rooftop solar panels to reduce reliance on the national grid, especially during peak consumption periods.

The government is actively working to expand energy infrastructure and remove investment barriers in the energy sector, aligning with this year's national slogan focused on production and investment.

When asked about the pending appointment of a new Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance, Mohajerani stated that the government is carefully evaluating all candidates and has not confirmed any names.

She outlined the administration's broader priorities for the year, including improving the business environment, attracting investment, developing sea-based economic infrastructure, and expanding the national rail network.

On foreign policy, she confirmed that indirect talks—reportedly in response to U.S. tariff actions—would continue through Oman, with a focus on safeguarding Iran's sovereign rights.

In response to a letter from over 800 civil society activists addressed to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Mohajerani hailed the move as a reflection of Iran's strong social capital. She reiterated the government's commitment to transparency, meritocracy, and combating corruption.

Concluding her remarks, Mohajerani acknowledged unresolved financial obligations left over from the previous administration, including debts to wheat farmers, retirees, and nurses. She emphasized that President Pezeshkian's government is forward-looking, committed to responsible leadership, and focused on rebuilding trust and delivering results.

### Iran Moves to Regulate Presence of Foreign Nationals through New National Migration Organization

TEHRAN - Iran is taking decisive steps to manage and regulate the presence of more than six million foreign nationals living within its borders, particularly Afghan migrants, through the establishment of a National Migration Organization. The initiative, announced by Nader Yar Ahmadi—advisor to the Interior Minister and head of the Bureau for Aliens and Foreign Immigrants Affairs (BAFIA)—marks a significant policy shift aimed at creating a more organized and lawful migration framework in the country.

In a statement made on Monday, Yar Ahmadi acknowledged the longstanding hospitality of the Iranian people, who have generously welcomed refugees fleeing war and humanitarian crises for decades. "Iranian society has historically gone above and beyond in its treatment of foreign nationals—even beyond what government systems can handle," he said. However, he also recognized that the lack of a clear migration policy has led to growing concerns among the public and government officials alike.

Yar Ahmadi stressed that the time has come to move from a reactive approach to a more systematic, informed method of managing migration. BAFIA has already begun differentiating between foreign nationals who enter Iran legally—such as students and workers—and undocumented migrants who arrive under duress, fleeing conflict or instability, particularly from neighboring Afghanistan.

Iran, as a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, holds a legal and moral obligation to provide humanitarian aid, even to undocumented arrivals. Yet the country now seeks to shift toward a model that balances compassion with regulation. The proposed strategy includes offering legal pathways to undocumented migrants who voluntarily present themselves to authorities, allowing them to regularize their status and integrate more fully into society.

While Afghan nationals make up the majority of the migrant population in Iran, the country is currently home to citizens from more than 100 countries, including professionals and laborers. According to Yar Ahmadi, of the estimated six million Afghans in Iran, about four million have some form of documentation, while two to two-and-a-half million remain undocumented.

To address the growing scale and complexity of migration, the Iranian government has drafted a bill to create the National Migration Organization. Though the bill is still awaiting final approval from parliament, its legal foundation is already established. The organization is envisioned as a centralized body responsible for coordinating migration policy, ensuring consistency among government departments, and aligning migration practices with both national interests and international commitments.

This centralized approach, Yar Ahmadi explained, will improve service delivery to migrants, reduce pressure on public infrastructure, and help maintain social cohesion.

Iran has conducted population censuses of foreign nationals since 2016. However, the lack of a comprehensive migration law has limited the effectiveness of these efforts. Current procedures are based on internal regulations rather than a clear legal code. A new legislative proposal is now under review to fill this gap and clarify the legal status of millions of foreign nationals living in



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

the country.

Census identification slips issued to migrants are not equivalent to residency or work permits. Instead, they are intended to help the government assess the population and determine appropriate next steps, whether that means issuing legal residency documents or preparing for repatriation—often dependent on agreements with the migrant's country of origin.

Yar Ahmadi pointed out that despite several rounds of dialogue, Afghan authorities are not yet fully prepared to receive returnees. Until viable return plans are in place, Iran will continue to support Afghan migrants, while encouraging regional cooperation and increased investment in vocational training centers that can help prepare Afghans for future reintegration.

In the meantime, documented individuals can apply for renewable one-year residency cards. For undocumented migrants, registration is a prerequisite for any legal process. Those choosing voluntary return are being issued temporary papers to help them acquire passports and re-enter legally, if desired.

In 2024 alone, over 1.26 million foreign nationals exited Iran, the majority of them—more than one million—through eastern border points with Afghanistan and Pakistan. These figures reflect ongoing repatriation efforts and the active role of Iranian law enforcement and border control authorities.

Yar Ahmadi outlined the division of responsibilities among state agencies: BAFIA handles planning and policy; the Interior Ministry manages camps and settlements; and the Police and Law Enforcement Forces (FARAJA) oversee enforcement and documentation.

He reiterated that possessing a valid passport will be the core requirement for legal residency going forward. From mid-2025, only passports and official residency cards will be accepted as valid identification. For investment-based residency, a minimum of \$100,000 plus additional funds per family member will be required.

Iran's commitment to providing basic services to migrants is evident in its education system, which currently serves over 610,000 Afghan students, including 310,000 girls. Other public sectors—such as healthcare, telecommunications, and employment—also remain accessible to foreign nationals.

Despite challenges with forged documents and fraudulent schemes, Yar Ahmadi assured the public that law enforcement is actively dismantling illegal networks. He urged migrants to avoid falling victim to online scams promising fake documentation for low prices.

In a forward-looking statement, Yar Ahmadi emphasized Iran's desire to involve migrants in shaping the very policies that affect them. Through academic forums and advisory councils, foreign nationals are being given a voice in policymaking processes. "Migrants should not just be subjects of regulations—they should be seen as partners," he said.

He concluded with optimism, expressing hope that the creation of the National Migration Organization will not only lead to better policy but also improve public perception and media narratives, fostering a more inclusive society built on mutual respect and shared responsibility.

### Iran Faces Aging Population Crisis Due to Declining Birth Rates



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran is heading toward a serious demographic challenge as declining birth rates threaten to rapidly age the population, according to the Minister of Health, Treatment, and Medical Education. In a statement marking World Health Day, Minister Mohammadreza Zafarhandi warned that without urgent action, the country could face far-reaching consequences across health, social, economic, and cultural sectors.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has designated this year's World Health Day theme as "Healthy Beginnings, Hopeful Futures," emphasizing the need for global efforts to prevent maternal and infant deaths. The Iranian health minister highlighted the special relevance of this theme to Iran, which is undergoing a critical demographic transition.

"If current fertility trends continue, Iran will soon be confronted with an aging population structure and the widespread challenges that come with it," Zafarhandi stated. He stressed that this looming demographic shift could evolve into a serious crisis, with impacts beyond health—touching every part of national life.

According to the Health Ministry's latest data, in 2023, Iran recorded 15.51 deaths per 1,000 live births among children under five, and 8.38 deaths per 1,000 live births among infants younger than 28 days. While infectious diseases were once the leading causes of child mortality, accidents—including road incidents and drownings—have become major threats to children aged 1 to 59 months. This shift, the minister noted, underscores the urgent need for enhanced public education on child safety and health.

The country's health system has implemented a range of programs aimed at monitoring and improving maternal and child health. These include child growth tracking, early detection of developmental disorders, promotion of healthy lifestyles, nutritional education for mothers and children, free treatment for children under seven in public hospitals, and interventions targeting issues like ADHD, learning disabilities, speech and hearing disorders, and autism.

### Red Cross Representative Highlights Iran's Strong Humanitarian Spirit



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Vincent Cassard, Head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegation in Iran, praised the Iranian people's deep commitment to humanitarian values, describing them as eager to support each other through acts of kindness and solidarity, especially during public health and aid initiatives.

In an exclusive interview with IRNA, Cassard, a lawyer with two decades of experience at the ICRC, described Iran as a pivotal player in the Middle East. He emphasized the significance of Iran's humanitarian role in a region fraught with conflict, alongside the country's rich cultural heritage. "Iran is not only geopolitically important but also deeply rooted in ancient civilization and cultural diversity," he said.

Cassard commended the Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) for its remarkable dedication, particularly during emergencies like earthquakes. "Its volunteers are highly committed and selfless, and their work reflects the deep interest Iranians have in supporting one another," he added.

The ICRC has maintained a presence in Iran since the final years of the Iran-Iraq war, notably facilitating prisoner of war exchanges between the two nations. Cassard noted that efforts to identify the remains of those still missing from the war continue through bilateral technical meetings in both countries.

He also outlined the ICRC's broader mission in Iran: engaging with government authorities to promote humanitarian law and address violations that often accompany armed conflicts. He praised Iran's consistent support for international humanitarian law, particularly during the recent 75th anniversary of the Geneva Conventions, celebrated in Iran with participation from officials across government, the judiciary, and the armed forces.

# IRAN NEWS



## President Orders Immediate Investigation into Damghan Mine Tragedy

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Following a deadly incident at the Maimandouyeh coal mine in Damghan that claimed the lives of seven miners due to gas exposure and left others injured, President Masoud Pezeshkian has issued an urgent directive to the Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade.

Expressing deep sorrow and condolences to the victims' families, President Pezeshkian called on Minister Seyed Mohammad Atabak to dispatch expert teams to the site, investigate the causes of the tragedy, and take immediate measures to prevent similar accidents in the future.

## Tehran-Tokyo Trade Continues via Third Countries



TEHRAN - The President of the Iran-Japan Joint Chamber of Commerce has confirmed that Japan strictly adheres to the provisions of international sanctions, leading to minimal official trade figures between the two nations. A significant portion of Iran-Japan commerce is now conducted through intermediary countries.

In a statement to ILNA following the approval of a bill ratifying the agreement between the governments of Iran and Japan on mutual administrative assistance in customs matters, Hossein Selahvarzi emphasized the long-standing and respectful diplomatic ties between the two nations. "Diplomatic relations between Iran and Japan date back to 1929. Aside from a temporary interruption during World War II, bilateral relations have been friendly and based on mutual respect," he said.

Selahvarzi recalled the peak of economic relations in the 1950s when Japan was one of Iran's top crude oil customers. In exchange, Iran imported vehicles, electronic goods, and industrial equipment from Japan, with cultural relations also flourishing. He also noted the historic 2019 visit of the Japanese Prime Minister to Iran — the first since the Islamic Revolution.

He stated that Japan remains one of the few major economic powers that has never exploited Iran. The newly ratified customs cooperation agreement, he explained, is essentially an international treaty that provides a legal and operational framework for mutual support. "In normal, sanction-free conditions, such an agreement could have facilitated trade and eased customs procedures. However, even under current maximum-pressure sanctions from the U.S., the agreement can still help enhance bilateral relations," he added.

Selahvarzi also highlighted the broader benefits of the agreement, particularly in tackling transnational crimes like drug trafficking and customs violations. "Japan plays a key role in global politics and the economy, while Iran is a strategic transit point between Asia and Europe. This agreement could lead to improved cooperation and sends a message that Iran welcomes constructive international engagement and seeks to revive ties with longstanding partners like Japan," he noted.

## Iran Ranks Fourth in Global Livestock Production



TEHRAN - Iran has achieved the fourth-highest rank in global sheep and light livestock production, trailing only China, India, and Australia, according to Mansour Pourian, head of the National Livestock Supply Council. He noted that Iran currently maintains a population of around 50 million light livestock, though seasonal production can reach 65 to 67 million.

Despite its capacity, Iran's livestock industry has faced setbacks due to droughts, shrinking pastures, currency fluctuations, and inadequate policies. Pourian stated that with proper management and infrastructure, production could reach 80 million head, potentially boosting Iran to the second-largest producer globally.

While Iran holds a strong global position, Pourian warned that poor economic and trade policies have hindered further growth. Currently, the sector suffers from a negative trade balance, with imports continuing while exports remain banned. This imbalance has discouraged traditional investors, many of whom have since exited the market.

He emphasized the urgent need for trade reforms, pointing out that effective support for producers could revive the industry. "With positive trade policies and better export conditions, Iran could increase its sheep meat production and regain its global standing," he said.

Pourian also highlighted issues in the domestic market, where livestock prices are no longer driven solely by supply and demand but are instead influenced by broader economic factors. Although livestock supply is stable and meat availability meets national demand, high prices continue to burden consumers.

Iran's total capacity for light livestock is estimated at 100 million head. However, high production costs and lack of export-friendly policies have prevented full utilization of this potential. Meanwhile, countries like Sudan manage to export a million head annually despite lower production, a benchmark Iran has failed to reach due to export bans.

Historically, Iran was one of the top eight exporters of livestock during the 2010s, with over 1.2 million head of sheep and 70,000 head of cattle exported in peak years. Pourian believes the country could reclaim its status with investment and the lifting of trade restrictions.

## Iran's Non-Oil Trade Reaches \$130b



TEHRAN - Iran's non-oil foreign trade reached a total of \$130.2 billion during the Persian calendar year 1403 (March 2024–March 2025), marking a notable 11.39% increase compared to the previous year, according to preliminary data released by the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration (IRICA).

Faroud Asgari, Deputy Minister of Economy and Head of IRICA, provided a detailed breakdown of the country's trade performance, highlighting growth in both export and import activities despite ongoing economic challenges.

Iran's total non-oil trade for the year amounted to 191.2 million tons, reflecting a 7.63% increase in volume compared to the previous year. The export share stood at 151.9 million tons, while imports accounted for 39.2 million tons.

Exports rose by 15.62% in value to \$57.84 billion, while imports increased by 8.22%, reaching \$72.38 billion. In terms of volume, exports showed a 10% rise, whereas imports declined slightly by 1%.

Iran's petrochemical sector played a crucial role in boosting exports. Asgari reported that 61.6 million tons of petrochemical products, valued at \$24.91 billion, were exported last year. This represents a 27% increase in volume and a 28% rise in value from the previous year.

The top three exported commodities were: Natural gas – \$6.87 billion; Liquefied propane – \$3.64 billion; and liquefied butane – \$2.21 billion.

Iran's exports were mainly directed to seven countries, led by China with \$14.85 billion in purchases. The other key destinations included: Iraq – \$11.94 billion; United Arab Emirates (UAE) – \$7.20 billion; Turkey – \$6.89 billion; Pakistan – \$2.42 billion; Afghanistan – \$2.41 billion; and

India – \$1.90 billion

These nations accounted for the bulk of Iran's export revenues, driven largely by energy, petrochemical, and agricultural products.

On the import side, raw gold led the list of top imported goods, with a value of \$8.05 billion. Other major imports included: Animal feed corn – \$2.98 billion; Smartphones – \$2.40 billion; Soybean meal – \$1.95 billion; Soybeans – \$1.32 billion; Heavy-duty vehicles (tractors and trucks) – \$1.27 billion; Rice – \$1.27 billion; and car parts for assembly – \$1.05 billion.

These goods reflect both the country's industrial needs and consumer market demands.

Iran's key import partners in 1403 were: United Arab Emirates (UAE) – \$21.98 billion; China – \$19.33 billion; Turkey – \$12.47 billion; Germany – \$2.43 billion; India – \$1.75 billion; Hong Kong – \$1.39 billion; and Russia – \$1.35 billion.

The data underscores the continued reliance on regional and global trade partners, with China and the UAE maintaining their positions as Iran's top economic allies.

Despite sanctions and economic constraints, Iran's non-oil trade in 1403 showed solid growth in both value and volume. The positive trade balance in some sectors, especially petrochemicals and energy derivatives, demonstrates the country's efforts to diversify its exports and reduce dependence on crude oil sales.

Officials remain hopeful that with ongoing trade diplomacy and regional economic partnerships, Iran will continue to build on this momentum in the year ahead.

## 36m Iranians Traveled During Nowruz Holidays, Over 60m Overnight Stays Recorded

TEHRAN - In a press conference held by Iran's National Travel Services Coordination Headquarters, officials revealed that a staggering 36 million Iranians embarked on trips during the Nowruz (Persian New Year) holidays this year, resulting in over 60 million overnight stays nationwide.

According to Mostafa Fatemi, Director-General of Domestic Tourism and Secretary of the Travel Services Headquarters, Mazandaran Province topped the list of domestic travel destinations with nearly 4.94 million visitors. Gilan followed with 3.92 million, and Razavi Khorasan with 3.25 million. Other high-traffic destinations included Tehran (3.12 million), Isfahan (2.97 million), Fars (2.63 million), Khuzestan (2.36 million), Hormozgan (2.25 million), Bushehr (1.83 million), and Qom (1.69 million).

Anooshirvan Mohseni Bandpey, Deputy Minister of Tourism and Head of the Central Travel Services Coordination Headquarters, emphasized that thorough planning and inter-agency cooperation were pivotal in managing the increased travel volume. With over 1.2 million trained personnel engaged in various travel-related services, the initiative saw 350,000 traffic police working around the clock to ensure road safety and smooth traffic flow.

Bandpey praised the collective efforts of ministries including Health, Education, ICT, and Interior, as well as emergency and traffic control agencies, stating that their collaboration resulted in a noticeable improvement in the quality of services compared to previous years.

Thanks to proactive safety campaigns and timely public warnings, fatalities from carbon monoxide poisoning and drownings significantly declined. Over 1,000 roadside rest stops were set up to help prevent driver fatigue and offer travel information. Additionally, real-time updates from mobile phone data provided valuable insights into population movement, helping authorities manage crowd control and accommodation demand.

Several lesser-known provinces experienced a spike in tourist visits. Ilam saw a 27% increase in visitor numbers, followed by Lorestan (15%), Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari (7.8%), Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad (6.1%), and both North Khorasan and Kurdistan (2.3%). Even Alborz, typically a transit province, recorded a 15% increase in tourism compared to last year.

Fatemi highlighted the increased use of digital tools, including the "MosferYar" platform, which tracked accommodation statistics for



hotels, eco-lodges, and authorized private lodging. Non-traditional stays, such as school dormitories, mosques, and emergency shelters, were also included in semi-official accommodation data. The Ministry of ICT contributed mobile traffic data to help authorities analyze travel trends.

Fuel consumption, mobile cloud activity, and waste generation were also monitored as indicators of population movement. A key finding was that people staying in a city between 10 p.m. and 4 a.m. were considered overnight guests in the official statistics.

Travel trends revealed a 10% drop in travel between March 19 and March 21 (the start of Nowruz) but a 26% surge on April 1 (12th of Farvardin), the final day of the holiday. This shift helped distribute tourism more evenly and reduce pressure on emergency accommodations.

Mashhad emerged as the most visited city, followed by Shiraz, Tehran, Bandar Abbas, Qom, Karaj, Rasht, Ahvaz, and Khorramabad. Coastal cities like Qeshm, Kish, and Bandar Ganaveh also drew large numbers, as did traditional tourist favorites like Isfahan, Yazd, Tabriz, Hamedan, and Ramsar.

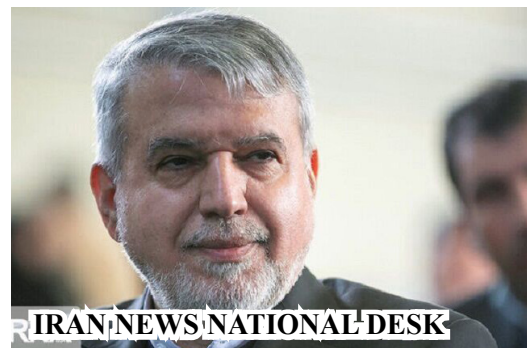
Official overnight stays during Nowruz totaled around 10 million, with Razavi Khorasan leading at 2.79 million. Mazandaran recorded 1.76 million, Gilan 932,000, Fars 610,000, and Isfahan 370,000. Other notable provinces included Yazd, Khuzestan, Kerman, and Ardabil. Education-sector lodging alone accounted for 3.5 million guests, with the highest numbers in Fars, Razavi Khorasan, Bushehr, and Isfahan.

In addition, approximately 359,000 people stayed at religious shrines and facilities overseen by the Endowments Organization, especially in provinces such as South Khorasan, Kermanshah, and Ilam.

Officials emphasized that travel services should not be viewed as seasonal or temporary operations. "Scientific and expert-level evaluations are necessary to institutionalize safe, well-managed travel throughout the year," said Bandpey. Plans are underway to maintain the Travel Services Headquarters as a permanent body—much like the ongoing "No to Accidents" campaign, which operates during peak travel periods.

He also announced the formation of a new independent Environmental Committee within the Headquarters to improve oversight and address sustainability issues during high-traffic travel periods.

## Minister of Cultural Heritage Travels to UAE for Strategic Talks on Tourism and Culture



TEHRAN - Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, has traveled to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) at the official invitation of the Chairman of the UAE Tourism Council and Zurab Pololikashvili, Secretary-General of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

Salehi Amiri was welcomed upon arrival in Abu Dhabi by the Iranian Ambassador to the UAE. The trip aligns with Iran's broader diplomatic agenda aimed at strengthening regional ties and advancing civilizational diplomacy.

The visit is centered around Minister Salehi Amiri's participation in the 2025 Annual Investment Meeting (AIM), held at the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre (ADNEC). The high-profile event brings together global leaders in economics, technology, and governance to explore strategic investment opportunities and international collaboration.

Organized in coordination with the UNWTO, the conference seeks to align sustainable tourism policies and uncover emerging investment prospects. It serves as a platform for high-ranking officials, tourism professionals, and international organizations to chart a path toward balanced and forward-looking tourism development at both national and regional levels.

During his visit, Minister Salehi Amiri is scheduled to meet with Iranian investors and tourism professionals based in the UAE, as well as hold bilateral talks with ministers and officials attending the summit.

His presence at this prestigious event highlights Iran's cultural and tourism potential, offering a strategic opportunity to showcase the country's investment infrastructure to a global audience. The engagement supports transnational dialogue and reflects a forward-thinking approach to international cooperation in culture and tourism.

## Iran Unveils \$135b Investment Opportunities in Oil and Gas Sector



TEHRAN - The National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) is set to introduce more than 200 investment opportunities worth a total of \$135 billion in the country's oil and gas upstream sector, according to Amir Moqiseh, Deputy for Investment and Business Development at NIOC.

Moqiseh announced that a major event titled "Transformation in Investment and Development in Iran's Oil and Gas Upstream Sector" will be held this spring, showcasing a wide range of projects and investment opportunities under the NIOC's umbrella.

"One of the primary goals of this national event is to introduce the Oil Industry Guarantee Fund as a major initiative for financing oil projects," Moqiseh said. "Agreements will be signed with the presence of banking institutions, which are expected to play a crucial role in channeling investments into the oil industry."

He highlighted the strategic importance of the event, noting that top government officials, senior executives from the Presidential Office and various ministries, as well as private sector stakeholders and potential investors in upstream oil and gas, will attend. Moqiseh extended an open invitation for interested parties to register and take advantage of this unique opportunity.

According to him, the investment capacity of the presented projects exceeds \$135 billion. This includes around 100 upstream oilfield and gas field development projects and an additional 100 investment opportunities across the oil industry value chain, all managed and led by the National Iranian Oil Company.

Moqiseh further revealed that the event will see participation from key figures such as the head of the Planning and Budget Organization, the Central Bank governor, economic ministers, CEOs of major banks, representatives of capital markets, and chambers of commerce.

"We hope this major gathering will be well received and will mark a significant step toward development and investment in Iran's oil sector," he said.

As reported by SHANA, the event will focus on presenting investment and financing opportunities in several areas: oil and gas field development, gas flaring reduction, fast-track processing units, gas compression stations, water treatment projects, construction of pipelines and crude oil storage facilities, smart pigging projects, power generation and transmission, optimization plans, and new economic incentives for investment in NIOC projects. The event will also explore the structure of Iran's IPC (Iran Petroleum Contract) model and public-private partnership frameworks.

## Kanlaon Volcano Erupts in Philippines

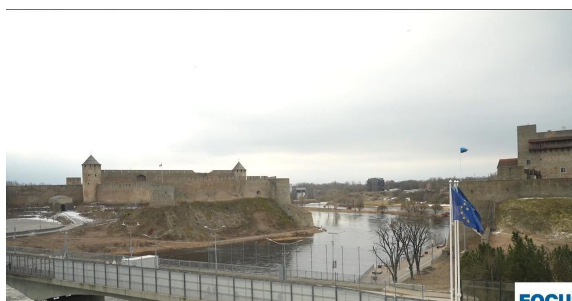
MANILA (Dispatches) - A volcano in the central Philippines erupted early Tuesday morning, sending a plume of ash 4,000 metres (2.5 miles) into the sky and prompting calls for local school cancellations.

Kanlaon Volcano, one of 24 active volcanoes in the Southeast Asian nation, erupted in December, prompting the evacuation of surrounding villages.

The area around the volcano on the island of Negros was still under evacuation orders when Tuesday's eruption occurred. "An explosive eruption is currently occurring at the summit vent of Kanlaon Volcano that began at 5:51 am today," the Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology said in a statement.



## Zelensky Says Ukrainian Troops Operating in Russia's Belgorod Region



FOCUS

KYIV (Dispatches) - President Volodymyr Zelensky said for the first time Monday that Ukrainian forces were operating in Russia's Belgorod region, where Moscow reported attacks in March.

Belgorod is regularly the target of Ukrainian air attacks and is close to Russia's Kursk region, where Ukrainian forces have been desperately hanging on to territory since launching a surprise incursion last year.

Zelensky said in his daily address that the country's commander in chief General Oleksandr Syrsky had reported on "our presence in Kursk region and our presence in Belgorod region".

"We continue to conduct active operations in the border areas on the enemy's territory, and this is absolutely right - the war must return to where it came from," Zelensky added.

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It is the first time in the more than three years since Russia's invasion that Zelensky has explicitly mentioned a Ukrainian presence in Belgorod, a region on the border with Ukraine with a population of about 1.5 million people.

The Russian military acknowledged facing Ukrainian land attacks in the region in March, at a time when Ukrainian forces were under pressure in Kursk.

According to the DeepState military blog, which is considered close to Ukraine's army, Ukrainian troops have occupied a 13 square kilometre (five square mile) area in the Russian region, near the border village of Demidovka.

Zelensky and other Ukrainian officials have said the incursion into Kursk and other Russian territory is to divert Russian forces attacking the Ukrainian regions of Sumy and Kharkiv.

## France Pushes Retaliation Against U.S. Tech



PARIS (Dispatches) - The EU's trade commissioner, Maros Sefcovic, said the 27-country bloc was weighing its response to a "paradigm shift of the global trading system" as Trump's sweeping tariffs sent world markets crashing.

Heading into their first talks since Trump ordered 20 percent tariffs on the bloc's imports, EU trade ministers all agreed: Brussels must negotiate with Washington to avoid a damaging trade war.

But the bloc has already vowed strong countermeasures should negotiations with Trump's team fall short - and ministers hoped on Monday to narrow their differences over what that response could entail.

France came out swinging before the talks in Luxembourg, urging the EU not to rule out an "extremely aggressive" trade response to Trump.

EU chief Ursula von der Leyen signalled last week that Brussels had different options to respond to the United States, noting the bloc "holds a lot of cards".

Backed by Germany and Austria, Paris has been pushing for the EU to consider targeting US services, including digital - drawing fire from Ireland which relies heavily on US investment, particularly in the pharmaceutical and tech sectors.

Targeting services "would be an extraordinary escalation at a time when we must be working for de-escalation", Irish Trade Minister Simon Harris told reporters.

But if Trump took the bloc's surplus in goods with the United States - meaning it exports more than it imports - as his reasoning for hurting the EU, officials have indicated Brussels could target the US services surplus in response.

The 27-country bloc had a goods trade surplus of 157 billion euros (\$171 billion) with the United States in 2023.

But in services, where American firms are dominant, the EU had a trade deficit of 109 billion euros with the United States.

France and Germany have specifically raised the possibility of deploying a new tool called the anti-coercion instrument (ACI), a trade weapon that has never been used and has been dubbed a "bazooka".

First adopted in 2023, it gives the EU greater powers to respond to trade coercion, with options available including

restricting US companies from public tenders, limiting trade on services as well as intellectual property rights protection.

"We must not exclude any option on goods, on services... and open the European toolbox, which is very comprehensive and can also be extremely aggressive," French Trade Minister Laurent Saint-Martin said, explicitly referencing the ACI tool.

German Economy Minister Robert Habeck likewise said Europe must be prepared to use it.

Harris made it clear Ireland was opposed. "It is in many ways the nuclear option if you start talking about the use of the anti-coercion instruments and the likes."

"What's important here is that Europe reacts in a calm and measured way," Harris said, a position backed by Italy and Spain, which made no reference to hitting services.

Spanish Trade Minister Carlos Cuerdo said the EU should "convey a message that we do not want to escalate any conflict", while Italy's Antonio Tajani said Europe had to "avoid uncontrolled reactions that would cause damage" to both sides.

In calibrating its response, a European diplomat said the EU was watching to see how the United States responds to Beijing's retaliatory higher duties that kick in later this week.

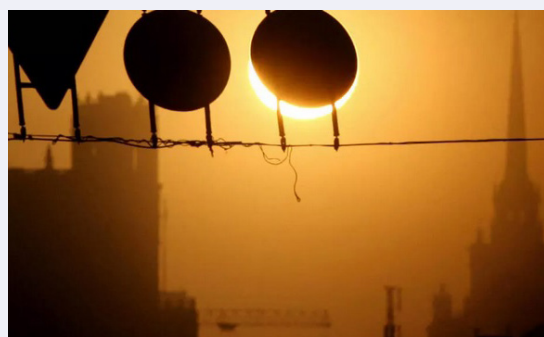
"Our first strategy is that China will impose tariffs on the United States, so we will probably wait and see what the United States will do, what this will cause," the diplomat said.

The ministers will also discuss EU-China trade relations, which will require careful handling as Brussels fears US tariffs will cause Chinese goods to flood into the bloc, but also wants to avoid further tensions with Beijing.

Trump's universal tariffs came weeks after he slapped higher levies on steel and aluminium import as well as cars and auto parts that have hit the EU hard.

The commission, which leads on trade policy, has prepared a list of US goods to target in response to the metals tariffs, which it will present to EU states later on Monday with a vote expected on Wednesday.

## Global Temperatures Hit Historic Highs for March



PARIS (Dispatches) - Global temperatures hovered at historic highs in March, Europe's climate monitor said on Tuesday, prolonging an extraordinary heat streak that has tested scientific expectations.

In Europe, it was the hottest March ever recorded by a significant margin, said the Copernicus Climate Change Service, driving rainfall extremes across a continent warming faster than any other.

The world meanwhile saw the second-hottest March in the Copernicus dataset, sustaining a near-unbroken spell of record or near-record-breaking temperatures that has persisted since July 2023.

Since then, virtually every month has been at least 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) hotter than it was before the industrial revolution when humanity began burning massive amounts of coal, oil and gas.

March was 1.6C (2.9F) above pre-industrial times, prolonging an anomaly so extreme that scientists are still trying to fully explain it.

"That we're still at 1.6C above preindustrial is indeed remarkable," said Friederike Otto of the Grantham Institute for Climate Change and the Environment at Imperial College London.

## Israeli Strikes Hit Media Tent, Area Near Charity Kitchen in Gaza

GAZA (Dispatches) - An Israeli strike on Monday hit next to a charity kitchen where Palestinians crowded to receive cooked meals as food supplies dwindle under Israel's month-long blockade of the Gaza Strip, one of a string of attacks in the territory that killed more than 30 people, mostly women and children, hospital officials said.

Another strike hit a media tent outside a hospital, killing two people, including a local reporter, and wounding six other journalists, medics said. The Israeli military said the strike targeted a man whom it identified as a Hamas militant posing as a journalist.

Video footage showed people carrying the body of a little girl, her face covered with blood, from the blast that witnesses said hit a tent next to the charity kitchen outside the southern city of Khan Younis. Six other people were killed, including two women, and at least 10 people were wounded, hospital officials said.

The strike hit around noon as the kitchen was distributing meals to displaced people living in tent camps. Samah Abu Jamie said her nephew was among those killed and her young daughter was wounded as they waited with their pots to collect meals for their families.

"They were going to get food. I told her, 'Daughter, don't go,'" she said. "These were children, and they had nothing with them but a pot. Is a pot a weapon?"

There was no immediate comment from the Israeli military on the strike. Charity kitchens have been drawing bigger crowds of Palestinians because other sources of food are running out. More than a month ago,



Israeli cut off all food, fuel, medicine and other supplies for Gaza's population of more than 2 million people, forcing aid groups to ration their stocks.

The World Food Program has warned that its supplies to keep kitchens going could be depleted by next week. It had to stop distributing boxes of food staples directly to families last week, spokesperson Abeer Etefa said Monday. The bakeries it ran have also shut down for lack of flour, ending a main source of bread for hundreds of thousands of people.

Since it ended its ceasefire with Hamas last month, Israel has carried out bombardments across Gaza, killing hundreds of people, and ground forces have carved out new military zones. Israel says it is pressuring Hamas to free its remaining hostages, disarm and leave the territory. Under the

ceasefire deal, it had agreed to negotiate for the hostages' release.

The heads of six U.N. agencies operating in Gaza said in a joint statement Monday that the blockade has left Gaza's population "trapped, bombed and starved again". They said Israeli claims that enough supplies entered during the ceasefire "are far from the reality on the ground, and commodities are running extremely low".

"We are witnessing acts of war in Gaza that show an utter disregard for human life," they said. "Protect civilians. Facilitate aid. Release hostages. Renew a ceasefire."

The strike outside Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis about 2am set the media tent ablaze, killing Yousef al-Faqawi, a reporter for the Palestine Today news website, and another man, according to hospital officials.

The military said the strike targeted Hassan Eslaiha, claiming he was a Hamas militant who took part in the Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel that ignited the war. Eslaiha was among six journalists who were wounded in the strike, according to the hospital.

Eslaiha had occasionally contributed images to The Associated Press and other international media outlets as a freelance journalist, including on Oct. 7. The AP has not worked with him for over a year.

A strike that hit a street in Gaza City killed an emergency room doctor, the Gaza Health Ministry said. Israel's campaign has killed more than 1,000 health workers and at least 173 journalists, according to the U.N. and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

## China Vows to Fight to the End in Trade War With the U.S.

BEIJING (Dispatches) - China vowed to "fight to the end" against fresh tariffs of 50 percent threatened by U.S. President Donald Trump, further aggravating a trade war that has already wiped trillions off global markets.

Trump upended the world economy last week with sweeping tariffs that have raised the spectre of an international recession, but has ruled out any pause in his aggressive trade policy despite a dramatic market sell-off.

Beijing—Washington's major economic rival—responded by announcing its own 34 percent duties on U.S. goods to come into effect on Thursday, in a showdown between the world's two biggest economies.

The swift retaliation from China earned a new warning from Trump that he would impose additional levies if Beijing refused to stop pushing back against his barrage of tariffs—driving the overall levies on Chinese goods to 104 percent.

"I have great respect for China but they cannot do this," Trump said in the White House. "We are going to have one shot at this... I'll tell you what, it is an honor to do it."

China swiftly hit back, blasting what it called "blackmailing" by the U.S. and saying it would "never accept" such action.

"If the U.S. insists on going its own way, China will fight it to the end," a spokesperson for Beijing's commerce ministry said on Tuesday, adding that Trump's threat "once again exposes the U.S.'s blackmailing nature".



"If the U.S. escalates its tariff measures, China will resolutely take countermeasures to safeguard its own rights and interests," the ministry said.

The ministry reiterated that it sought "dialogue" with the United States, and that there were "no winners in a trade war".

Trump's tariffs have already had a dramatic impact on markets in the last days, with Hong Kong's Hang Seng collapsing by 13.2 percent on Monday—its worst day since the Asian financial crisis—before paring back some of those losses in opening trade on Tuesday.

Wall Street stocks finished lower following a volatile session, with both the Dow and S&P 500 ending down.

Trillions of dollars have been wiped off combined stock market valuations in recent sessions.

Trump doubled down again on Monday, saying he was "not looking" at any pause in tariff implementation.

He also scrapped any meetings with China over tariffs, but said the United States was ready for talks with any country willing to negotiate.

After equities took a huge hammering in Shanghai on Monday, China's central bank issued a statement before trading resumed Tuesday to underline it was standing behind a sovereign fund as it buys up exchange traded funds to stabilise the market.

## Heat's 4th-Quarter Run Sends 76ers to 12th Straight Loss



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Kel'e Ware's 19 points and career-high 17 rebounds helped lead a makeshift Miami Heat lineup to a 117-105 home win over the slumping Philadelphia 76ers, who lost their 12th straight game.

Miami (36-43) rebounded from a two-game skid and won without Bam Adebayo, who was scratched from the lineup due to back spasms. The Heat moved within a half-game of the ninth-place Chicago Bulls in the Eastern Conference play-in race.

Adebayo's absence provided Ware the opportunity to start at center, and he delivered his highest-scoring performance since March 15. Ware's personal-best work on the glass also gave him his second double-double in the last three games.

Ware was one of four Heat starters to score in double-figures, including Tyler Herro with 20 points. Herro returned from a thigh contusion and shot 2-of-4 from 3-point range en route to his team high in scoring, but also committed seven turnovers.

One of Herro's turnovers came amid an 11-0 Philadelphia run midway through the third period. After trailing by as many as 14 in the second quarter, the Sixers (23-56) took the lead on that run, which included a pair of 3-pointers from Quentin Grimes and another triple from Lonnie Walker IV.

Walker and Grimes each scored 29 points to lead all scorers, marking a season high for Walker. Adem Bona added 16 points and 11 rebounds for the Sixers.

After Philadelphia battled back to pull ahead in the third quarter, Miami rallied in the fourth. Jaime Jaquez Jr.'s 3-pointer began a 19-5 Miami run that turned a one-point deficit into a 13-point lead. The spurt proved pivotal as the Heat led the rest of the way.

Duncan Robinson, who led Miami with 21 points, fueled the Heat reserves in outscoring Philadelphia's 46-17. Davion Mitchell scored 12 points and doled out nine assists and Kyle Anderson had eight points, eight rebounds and six assists.

Pelle Larsson scored 12 for the Miami starters, with Alec Burks adding 11.

Meanwhile Zach LaVine scored a season-high 43 points, DeMar DeRozan added 37 points and the visiting Sacramento Kings beat the Detroit Pistons 127-117 for their third straight win.

Domantas Sabonis recorded a triple-double with 19 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists for Sacramento (39-40), which erased an 18-point first-half deficit. Off the bench, Jonas Valanciunas added 10 points and 12 rebounds.

LaVine, who was 8-of-11 shooting from 3-point range, made six 3-pointers and scored 30 points in the second half for the Kings, who led 119-112 on Trey Lyles' layup with 3:32 left in regulation.

Detroit pulled within 122-114 with 2:05 left before LaVine scored the next five points to seal the Kings' victory. LaVine's eight 3-pointers matched a season high.

Cade Cunningham led Detroit (43-36) with 35 points on 13-of-21 shooting from the field. Tim Hardaway Jr. scored 19 points, Ausar Thompson added 15 and Malik Beasley had 14 off the bench.

With their fourth loss in five games, the Pistons are 1 1/2 games behind the fifth-place Milwaukee Bucks in the Eastern Conference.

Sacramento, which shot 51.6 percent from the field and 40.7 percent (11 of 27) from 3-point range, moved a game ahead of the Dallas Mavericks for the No. 9 spot in the Western Conference.

The Kings led 38-37 at the end of the first quarter behind DeRozan and LaVine, who scored a combined 21 points for the period.

Sacramento guard Malik Monk exited late in the opening quarter with left calf soreness and did not return.

Detroit began the second quarter on a 19-4 run and led 56-42 with 7:25 left in the second quarter. DeRozan had 22 points in the first half to lead Sacramento, which trailed 72-62 at intermission. Hardaway led the Pistons with 14 points at the break.

## Djokovic Motivated Again After Miami Run But Keeping Expectations Low



LONDON (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic said reaching his first final of the 2025 season at the Miami Open helped him find the motivation to continue his quest for more titles as the 37-year-old looks to win his 100th ATP trophy during the clay season.

The 24-times Grand Slam champion has not won a title on the men's tour since his ATP Finals triumph during an extraordinary 2023 although he bagged the Olympic gold medal during the Paris Games at Roland Garros last year.

Djokovic's bid to join Jimmy Connors (109) and Roger Federer (103) as the only three men in the professional era to claim 100 or more ATP trophies ended in a defeat by Jakub Mensik last week but the Serb said he was spurred on by his level in Miami.

"There's no doubt it has become more difficult throughout my career but the performances in Miami, when I'm playing that way, it gives me more inspiration to keep going," Djokovic told reporters in Monte Carlo.

"It just feels great on the court when you're striking the ball well and winning matches. Obviously when you start losing early you have more questions and inner voices, which are bringing doubts about whether you should keep going."

"I'm glad in Miami I found that joy on the court and performance levels, so let's see if I can carry that into clay. It's a different surface and I've not had much time to get used to this tournament so my expectations aren't that high."

Djokovic will be without his coach Andy Murray at the ongoing Monte Carlo Masters, with the Scot expected to return in Madrid later this month.

"It was never part of the agreement to work with Andy this week," said Djokovic.

"I was thinking about who I wanted, anyone apart from my fitness coach and physio, and my brother Marko was able to join me, so that helps me on a different level emotionally."

Third-seed Djokovic could meet Stan Wawrinka in his opening match in Monaco.

## Newcastle Step Up Champions League Chase as Dismal Leicester Slump Again

LEICESTER (Dispatches) - Newcastle coasted to a 3-0 win over sorry Leicester to step up their Champions League charge and condemn the Foxes to an eighth straight Premier League defeat without scoring.

Eddie Howe's men, still on a high after winning the League Cup last month, are up to fifth in the table, level on points with fourth-placed Chelsea but with a game in hand.

Fifth place will almost certainly be enough to secure a place in the Champions League next season after strong performances by English clubs in continental competition.

But relegation for Ruud van Nistelrooy's hapless team is all but certain after a solitary season in the Premier League.

The visitors were 2-0 up in the 11th minute after two goals from Jacob Murphy, the second a tap-in from close range after an audacious effort from Fabian Schar hit the crossbar, and Harvey Barnes added a third before half-time.

Leicester last scored a league goal in front of their own fans against Brighton on December 8 and they are the first side in football league history to lose eight home league games in a row without scoring a goal.

Newcastle boss Howe said his "biggest challenge" had been maintaining focus after the club ended their 56-year trophy drought in the League Cup final against Liverpool last month.

"I can't compliment them enough," he told the BBC.

"They are a very down to earth, humble group who want to do well and represent the club in the right way. They have shown that in the



last few weeks."

Howe said the race for the Champions League was "going to hot up".

"The next week for us is a big week. We have three really tough games (against Manchester United, Crystal Palace and Aston Villa) and that will go a long way in seeing where we are at the end of the season."

Newcastle were ahead in the just second minute after Tino Livramento squared for Murphy to tap home after an attack down the left.

Minutes later time stood still as Schar, spotting goalkeeper Mads Hermansen off his line, nearly scored from his own half.

His effort cannoned off the crossbar but landed at the feet of Murphy, who was the only player to react.

The game was effectively over in the 34th minute when former Leicester player Barnes finished from close range after Hermansen saved from Joelinton, declining to celebrate.

Leicester were better in the second half but lacked bite. The home fans had little to celebrate but cheered the entrance of 15-year-old Jeremy Monga late in the game as he became the second-youngest Premier League player.

Howe has the chance to add gloss to a historic season by qualifying for the Champions League.

Newcastle have leapfrogged Manchester City but it is a tight battle for the top five—only six points separate third-placed Nottingham Forest from Aston Villa in seventh spot.

Van Nistelrooy arrived at the King Power Stadium in November after a spell as interim manager at Manchester United but results have nosedived after an encouraging start.

The Dutchman said his side were desperately short of confidence. "In the second half you can see when there is no pressure anymore it frees people up," he told Sky Sports.

"Then you see some reasonable football. When the pressure is on it becomes very difficult. With an early couple of goals it collapses."

## Brooksby Claims Maiden Title in Houston

HOUSTON (Dispatches) - Jenson Brooksby captured his maiden ATP title at the U.S. Men's Clay Court Championship with a stunning win over 2023 champion Frances Tiafoe to cap off a superb tournament which he began as a wild card in the qualifying rounds.

Victory was all the more sweet for the 24-year-old American who had lost a big chunk of his career due to a ban for missing drug tests and two wrist surgeries in 2023.

"It was the world," Brooksby said after his 6-4 6-2 win over second seed Tiafoe.

"It was one of my biggest goals ever since I have been a professional tennis player. It means a lot to have my first one. It's probably the best week of my life."

Having come into the tournament at number 507 following the major disruption of his career, Brooksby also became the third-lowest-ranked champion in the tour's history since 1990.

He was hit with an 18-month ban in October 2023 for three "whereabouts failures" in a 12-month span but had the



suspension reduced to 13 months on appeal at the Court of Arbitration for Sport after disputing the second missed test.

Hampered by injuries during and after the ban, he finally made his return to tennis at the Australian Open earlier this year and lost to compatriot Taylor Fritz in the first round.

Brooksby persevered and saved multiple matchpoints in three of his matches to prevail in Houston.

"I've had a lot of different life adversity, whether it's on the court or off the court," Brooksby said.

"So I think it makes these situations ... like, I still get nervous about them and somewhat tense for sure, but it gives you a different perspective once you've had to face other difficult things in life."

"I'm just someone who hates to lose and loves to win in general - obviously tennis being most important, but even in other games, and that's just how I'm wired as a person."

## Alcaraz Says Pressure to Catch Top-Ranked Sinner "Killed" Him



MADRID (Dispatches) - World number three Carlos Alcaraz said the pressure to reclaim the top ranking during the absence of the banned Jannik Sinner had "killed" him and that he would approach the clay season without any expectations.

The top-ranked Sinner is serving a three-month doping ban that ends on May 4 and Alcaraz was seen as one of the contenders to replace the Italian in the rankings in the build-up to the French Open next month but he has not made the most of his opportunities.

"A lot of people are asking me, or are telling me, that I have the chance to become number one if Jannik isn't playing," Alcaraz, 21, said in Monte Carlo, where he begins preparations for his Roland Garros title defence.

"So probably that pressure has killed me in some way."

The Spaniard won his first title of the season in Rotterdam two months ago, before losing in the quarter-finals of Doha, the semi-finals of Indian Wells and the opening round of Miami last week to sit more than 3,500 points behind Sinner.

Alexander Zverev is almost 1,000 points above Alcaraz in the standings in second place.

Alcaraz told reporters on Monday that he will not focus on the top ranking heading into Monte Carlo, where he will take on Italian wild card Fabio Fognini or Francisco Cerundolo first.

"I'm just thinking that I'm not able to become number one in the clay season, even if Jannik is not playing, I don't have the chance to do it," Alcaraz said.

"I think I'm too far from Jannik. So I'm just here and I realise that I don't have to think about it and just go there and play. That's my mindset right now."