

Deputy Foreign Minister Saeed Khatibzadeh Has Urged the United Nations to Use Its Full Capacity to Stop Israel's Genocide in Gaza and the Regime's Intensified Attacks in the Occupied West Bank

IRAN NEWS

Vice-President for Executive Affairs Mohammad-Jafar Ghaempanah Said That a First Round of Iran's Indirect Negotiations With the U.S. Was Conducted Well With "Dignity and Produce", and in Line With the Interests of the Iranian People

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Iran Discussing Venue for Upcoming Talks With the U.S.



TEHRAN - The Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesperson, Esmail Baghaei, has stated that discussions are currently underway regarding the venue for the next round of indirect negotiations between Iran and the United States. While Oman continues to serve as a key mediator, the possibility of another location is being considered.

Baghaei explained that the framework of the recent indirect talks between Tehran and Washington in Muscat was strictly focused on nuclear issues. He emphasized that the communication leading to these discussions included no topics beyond Iran's nuclear program.

"Our negotiations are based solely on nuclear issues and the lifting of sanctions. We will not engage in discussions with the American side on any other topic," Baghaei said. "This has been the foundation of our approach, and it continued in Muscat."

He reaffirmed that Iran's position is guided by official directives and the Foreign Ministry's commitment to discuss only nuclear-related matters with the United States.

Regarding future talks, Baghaei stated, "We are currently discussing whether the next round of talks will be held in Oman or elsewhere, but Oman will continue to play the role of mediator."

He added that wherever the talks are held, Oman will be responsible for coordinating logistics and facilitating the exchange of messages between the delegations. The indirect nature of the negotiations, with Omani mediation, will remain unchanged.

In response to rumors about possible direct talks with the U.S., Baghaei dismissed them as inaccurate. "The Foreign Ministry follows the country's strategic decision-making hierarchy. The mandate for the negotiating team is to engage in indirect talks only," he said.

Stroke Rates in Iran Surpass Global Average, Age of Onset Declining



TEHRAN - Stroke incidence in Iran appears to be higher than in many other countries, and concerning, the average age of stroke patients is dropping, according to Dr. Babak Zamani, President of the Iranian Stroke Association.

In an interview with ILNA, Dr. Zamani emphasized that while Iran's overall stroke rates may seem in line with global statistics, recent limited studies suggest a slightly higher-than-average prevalence and a noticeable decrease in the age of onset. However, he warned against drawing broad conclusions due to the lack of a comprehensive disease registry system in the country—something that is standard practice worldwide.

Dr. Zamani dismissed popular beliefs linking stroke directly to stress. "Contrary to common opinion, stress does not have a direct impact on the brain or cause strokes. What it does interfere with blood pressure regulation, which can be a contributing factor," he explained. He criticized media narratives that suggest stress is a primary cause of stroke, calling them "journalistic exaggerations."

One major issue, according to Dr. Zamani, is the public's lack of awareness about urgent treatment protocols. "If a patient receives treatment within the first hour—what we call the 'golden hour'—two out of every three patients can fully recover," he said. Treatments are most effective within the first three hours, and in some cases, up to six hours after the onset of symptoms.

Iran, U.S. Moved Closer to Establishing Basis of Negotiations

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says the first round of indirect negotiations between Iran and the United States in Oman brought the two sides closer to establishing "the basis of negotiations" for future discussions.

With Oman's mediation, Araqchi and Steve Witkoff, the U.S. President's Special Envoy for Middle East Affairs, led the first round of indirect talks in Muscat, Oman, on Saturday.

Speaking to IRIB after the talks concluded, Araqchi announced that the next round of discussions is expected to take place on April 19 at the same level. He said that while Oman will continue to act as mediator, the venue for the next session may change.

Araqchi added that the discussions aim to create a structured agenda for the negotiations based on a timeline.

"We agreed to hold a second round next Saturday, and in the next session, we will delve into the overall framework that a deal can take to see how far this process can advance," he said.

Araqchi stressed the importance of setting a basis for the talks, saying, "If we can finalize the basis in the next meeting...we can begin real discussions based on that basis."

He hailed the hard work of Omani Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi during about 2.5 hours of indirect talks between Tehran and Washington, shuttling between the two delegations to convey their messages.

The top Iranian diplomat described the first round of talks as "constructive" and said they were conducted in a "calm and very respectful atmosphere."

"No inappropriate language was used. Both sides demonstrated their determination to advance the talks until an agreement is reached that is desirable for both parties and is based



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on an equal footing," he added.

The foreign minister said neither Iran nor the U.S. wants to "negotiate for the sake of negotiating" and does not favor protracted "attributional talks."

Both Tehran and Washington voiced their keenness to achieve an agreement "at the shortest time," he said. "This, however, will not be easy and requires full determination of the two sides."

He noted that Tehran would precisely examine and consult on the issues discussed in Muscat at different levels.

The foreign minister said a short face-to-face meeting between the Iranian and American delegations after the talks was quite normal.

"When leaving, the two delegations encountered each other, and we talked for a few minutes. This is a completely accepted issue," he explained.

"We have always observed diplomatic courtesy when dealing with American diplomats, and this time, too, an initial greeting was exchanged, and then we left the place. It was nothing extraordinary," Araqchi said.

In a post on his X account, Araqchi reiterated that his talks with Witkoff were "constructive and promising" and conducted "in an atmosphere of mutual respect and 'kindly hosted and mediated' by his Omani counterpart.

"I elaborated Iran's viewpoints in a firm yet forward-looking manner," the foreign minister added.

He noted that Tehran and Washington decided to continue the process "in a matter of days."

Border Wall with Afghanistan Upgraded With Cutting-Edge Weaponry

TEHRAN - Commander of Iran's Army Ground Forces, Brigadier General Kioumars Heydari, announced that the eastern border wall with Afghanistan has been equipped with advanced weaponry and surveillance technologies, transforming it from a simple barrier into a high-tech defense structure.

In a press conference held on Sunday, General Heydari emphasized that the wall is "not just a 4-meter-high structure," but a comprehensive security project armed with state-of-the-art military technologies. The project, he said, is designed to be completed within four years—one year has already passed, and the remaining work will be finalized over the next three.

Heydari detailed how the border defense system incorporates long-range precision weaponry, artificial intelligence, and networked combat systems. "All our weapons are now smart and precision-guided, with the ability to be networked and operate in sync," he said.

He emphasized that Iran's ground forces have transformed into a "mobile, agile, and offensive" force capable of rapid response, moving away from outdated and static military units. "Our current structure reflects a shift to an all-modern force prepared for today's challenges," he noted.

General Heydari explained that the Iranian Ground Forces now utilize domestically developed smart weapons, many of which are the product of collaboration between the military and the Ministry of Defense. "All of our smart, precision, and networked weapons are either designed by Iranian scientists or mass-produced with national resources," he stated.

He added that the forces are now equipped with weapons featuring four key capabilities: long-range strike, AI integration, network connectivity, and adaptability for modern warfare. The Army's growing drone capabilities were also highlighted. "Our UAVs are among our most effective assets. We have various long-range, precision-strike drones in operation, all



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produced domestically," Heydari said.

While asserting that Iran does not seek to invade or dominate other nations, Heydari warned that the military is fully prepared to respond decisively to any aggression. "We will target any hostile action with precision and intelligence," he warned, adding that the armed forces are strictly defensive but uncompromising in response to threats.

Heydari also highlighted the Ground Forces' non-combat contributions, including engineering and medical services. "Our engineering units are self-sufficient and deployed across the country. In times of disaster, they're the first responders," he said. The Army currently operates 28 specialized hospitals, with five new facilities either built or renovated in recent years.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the military mobilized 12,000 healthcare personnel and built eight hospitals to support the national effort.

General Heydari revealed plans for a large-scale military parade on April 18 across 24 provinces, where new achievements and innovations of the Army will be showcased to the public. He also hinted at the unveiling of advanced new weapons "suitable for future warfare," designed to increase national deterrence.

Heydari said the Ground Forces are now equipped with precision-guided missiles capable of long-range strikes, and anti-armor systems featuring "fire-and-forget" technology. "We have weapons that can confront enemy armored forces effectively using advanced tech," he added.

On international cooperation, Heydari stated that joint military exercises with neighboring countries are ongoing. In the past year, Iran has conducted drills with Azerbaijan and Oman, and more are planned for this year with other friendly nations.

Iran's helicopter fleet has also undergone upgrades, including the installation of night navigation systems and domestically produced long-range missiles. Significant investment is being made to double production of missiles and helicopter components in 2025.

Russian Entry into Chalous Denied as Rumor



TEHRAN - A senior analyst at the international energy data firm Kpler has stated that Iran may potentially hold up to 120 trillion cubic feet of natural gas in the Caspian Sea. However, he cautioned that development of such reserves would require extensive foreign technology and investment, which is unlikely due to ongoing U.S. sanctions and economic constraints.

Homayoun Falakshahi, energy analyst at Kpler, said that around 70-75% of Iran's gas production currently comes from the South Pars gas field, which has experienced production slowdowns in some phases. Any new discovery, such as the rumored Chalous field, must be large enough to justify high development costs and meet the growing domestic demand for gas.

Falakshahi emphasized that despite widespread speculation, no exploratory drilling has yet confirmed the existence of a gas field in the Chalous structure. Seismic studies have indicated a promising geological formation that could potentially contain up to 120 trillion cubic feet of gas—about a quarter the size of South Pars (Iranian section). However, he warned, "Until an exploratory well is drilled, there is no certainty."

He also noted that global success rates for exploratory drilling are typically around 30-35%, meaning the chance of an actual commercially viable discovery remains limited.

The suspected Chalous structure lies in a region of the Caspian Sea where water depths reach 1,000 meters, far deeper than Iran's previous offshore projects. The South Pars field, by contrast, is in waters only 60 meters deep. Given Iran's lack of experience in deepwater development and limited financial resources, Falakshahi said that foreign cooperation would likely be essential if a viable field is discovered.

Regarding recent claims that Iran, Russia, and China are jointly developing the Chalous field, Falakshahi dismissed them as baseless speculation. He stressed that, under current conditions, even Chinese firms are unlikely to engage in Iranian energy projects due to fears of secondary U.S. sanctions that could compromise their access to the global financial system.

Suicide Rate Among Women Higher Than Men in Iran



TEHRAN - The suicide rate among women in Iran remains higher than that of men, according to Seyed Mohammad Bathaei, Deputy Interior Minister and Head of the Social Affairs Organization. Speaking at a press conference ahead of the National Participation and Social Investment Event scheduled for April 21, Bathaei attributed the disparity to greater vulnerability among women compared to men.

"Although the gap is narrowing, women continue to be more affected in certain areas of social harm," Bathaei said. He emphasized that this trend is not unique to Iran and reflects a global pattern.

The upcoming event, inspired by this year's national slogan, aims to promote social investment and collaboration among civil society organizations (CSOs), NGOs, and charitable institutions. Bathaei announced that 600 participants from across the country are expected to attend, including the President.

"Our objective is to bring together social organizations to share ideas and experiences, and to define what social investment means in practice," he stated.

He expressed concern over the limited public involvement in the social sector. "While there are 11,000 registered NGOs in Iran—1,000 operating internationally and 10,000 at the local level—not all are active. Even if they were, this number is still too low for a country of our size."

Looking ahead to 2025, Bathaei revealed plans to unite knowledge-based centers to enhance innovation in the social domain. "Historically, public involvement has been directed toward infrastructure rather than social initiatives. We must change this and harness the creativity of our people in tackling social challenges."

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Oil Minister to Visit Iraq for Energy Cooperation Talks

TEHRAN (ILNA) - Iran's Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad announced that he will travel to Iraq in the coming days at the invitation of his Iraqi counterpart, highlighting the strong and growing cooperation between the two neighboring countries, particularly in the oil sector. Paknejad emphasized that Iran and Iraq have maintained positive relations and constructive engagement across various sectors, especially in the oil industry and the implementation of joint energy projects.

"Different areas of cooperation have previously been discussed and reviewed by both countries," Paknejad said, expressing hope that the upcoming visit will lead to the signing of new memoranda of understanding in the energy sector.

Reaffirming the close ties, he noted, "We enjoy very good relations and cooperation with Iraq in many fields, especially regarding oil and the execution of shared oil projects."

China Boosts Crude Oil Imports from Iran in March 2025



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TEHRAN - China significantly increased its crude oil imports from Iran in March 2025, according to traders and analysts, amid rising concerns over potential new U.S. sanctions against Tehran.

Data from the tanker-tracking firm Vortexa revealed that China's crude imports from Iran surpassed a historic threshold of 1.8 million barrels per day (bpd) in March. At the same time, storage levels at independent refineries in Shandong province saw a sharp rise.

Analytics company Kpler reported that China's Iranian crude imports climbed by 20% from February to reach 1.71 million bpd in March — the highest level in the past five months. In February, the figure stood at 1.43 million bpd.

Two oil traders monitoring the flow of Iranian shipments to China estimated March's imports at between 1.67 million and 1.8 million bpd.

Despite global pressure, China — which opposes unilateral sanctions — now accounts for approximately 90% of Iran's crude exports, analysts said.

According to Kpler's data, Iranian oil made up 16% of China's seaborne crude imports in March.

Emma Li, a senior analyst at Vortexa, and a refinery source based in China attributed the surge in Iranian purchases to growing fears of supply disruptions, prompting refiners and traders to stock up quickly.

Vortexa reported that Shandong's onshore crude storage increased by 22 million barrels in March compared to February, aligning with the spike in Iranian imports.

Li noted that this marked a monthly record in storage growth, particularly concentrated in port facilities across Shandong.

A trader working for an independent Chinese refinery suggested that the influx of Iranian crude last month was so substantial that some shipments were handed over by middlemen to storage tanks while awaiting buyers.

Looking ahead, Li expects China's imports from Iran to drop in April, citing stagnant demand. She predicts average annual imports to stabilize between 1.3 and 1.4 million bpd — consistent with last year's figures.

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Iran Launches Gas Pressure Boosting Project to Prevent Resource Migration to Qatar

TEHRAN - Iran has officially begun the implementation of a gas pressure-boosting project aimed at preventing the migration of natural gas from the South Pars gas field to Qatar. Experts say that with the resolution of international sanctions, Iran could become a major global gas producer and exporter.

Dr. Morteza Behroozifar, a faculty member at the Institute for International Energy Studies, told ILNA that Iran possesses substantial oil and gas reserves that could position the country as one of the leading producers and an influential exporter in the global energy market—without the need for imports.

Speaking about the importance of pressure-boosting operations and the lifting of sanctions in addressing Iran's gas imbalance, Behroozifar warned that without consistent investment in oil and gas reservoirs and implementation of enhanced recovery methods, production volumes would naturally decline year by year.

"South Pars has been producing for over two decades now. If investment does not continue, our production imbalance will worsen annually. While the pressure-boosting project can partially address this issue, it requires advanced equipment, machinery, and technical expertise," he explained.

Behroozifar emphasized that the pressure-boosting initiative could prevent gas from migrating toward Qatar, a country that shares the South Pars/North Dome field with Iran. He noted that the project is expected to increase Iran's daily gas output by 250 million cubic meters over five years.

"However, we must also recognize that Qatar is rapidly expanding its operations and significantly increasing its LNG production capacity. Their current extraction from South Pars stands at around 80 million tons and is

set to exceed 120 million tons. So assuming we can outpace Qatar just through pressure-boosting alone is overly optimistic," he added.

The energy expert stressed that lifting sanctions would allow Iran to re-engage foreign contractors and import essential technologies and equipment. Without this access, Iran's gas sector—and by extension, its entire economy—will continue to face increasing challenges.

"If negotiations succeed, we'll have access to international financing and supply chains. Iran's energy reserves are vast enough to not only meet domestic needs but also export substantial quantities," Behroozifar stated. "Even if we import, it would be for re-export purposes."

He further explained that resolving diplomatic tensions would allow Iran to simultaneously increase gas production and reduce domestic consumption through improved efficiency, ultimately leaving more gas available for export.

"Strategic action is needed. If we take the right steps, Iran could become a reliable gas exporter. But for now, we must prioritize ensuring our power plants and industries have enough fuel to get through the winter, given the current strain on both electricity and gas supplies throughout the year," he warned.

Behroozifar concluded that resolving international issues could significantly ease Iran's energy challenges within two years. "If we don't make meaningful investments in oil, gas, electricity, and the wider economy, GDP will continue to decline. Net investment in the country is currently negative—we're not only failing to grow, but we're losing what we have. That means our economic situation will worsen each year unless we act."

Foreign Relations Breakthrough Expected to Stabilize Markets in the Short Term



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TEHRAN - A member of the Iran Chamber of Commerce's board has stated that a breakthrough in foreign relations will lead to short-term market stability and pave the way for increased exports and capital return in the medium term.

Speaking to Iran Chamber Online, Keyvan Kashefi, a board member of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture, emphasized that the resumption of international negotiations comes at a time when Iran's economy is more affected than ever by political and global developments.

"Any easing of foreign relations can calm the markets in the short run and revitalize exports and attract capital in the medium term," Kashefi said.

He noted that sanctions imposed over the past two decades have not only persisted but become increasingly complex and institutionalized. "Sanctions are no longer just a simple barrier—they have developed into a structure that makes the Iranian economy both vulnerable and dependent on political and international variables," he explained.

According to Kashefi, the economy cannot be measured, predicted, or analyzed today without taking political factors into account. "Even the slightest positive or negative news regarding negotiations is immediately reflected in the markets."

On the potential impact of successful talks, Kashefi said that if current negotiations reach a favorable outcome, "we will see relative market stability in the short term." He acknowledged that there may initially be market shocks, but over time the environment will become more predictable, encouraging economic activity and creating the conditions for increased exports, investment attraction, and the return of blocked foreign currency reserves.

However, he cautioned that internal reforms must not be neglected even if the negotiations succeed. "Challenges like budget imbalances, an unfavorable business climate, oversized government, and high public expenditures are rooted in domestic structures and must be addressed independently of external factors."

Speaking to the Iranian Capital Market News Agency, Kashefi also noted that neighboring countries such as Iraq, Syria, and Gulf nations have welcomed the renewed diplomatic efforts. "Political stability contributes to regional peace and shared economic growth," he said.

Africa-Iran Summit 2025: Gateway to New Trade Opportunities



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TEHRAN - The upcoming Africa Economic Cooperation Summit and Iran Expo 2025, set for May, is poised to be a major turning point for Iran's foreign trade, according to the Deputy for International Business Development at Iran's Trade Promotion Organization.

During a televised roundtable on non-oil foreign trade, Amir Roshan Bakhsh Ghanbari highlighted the competitive edge of Iranian non-oil products in regional markets—especially amid rising foreign exchange rates that boost export benefits.

He acknowledged that international sanctions have limited trade routes and increased financial transaction costs, allowing rival exporters to gain ground. Still, he pointed to progress in trade talks, revealing that free trade agreements with Iraq and Venezuela are in the works, along with preferential deals with Oman and Uzbekistan.

Ghanbari also shared that a product basket is being finalized for Iraq to solidify a preferential trade agreement.

He called on the government to focus on legislation and facilitation of foreign trade, stressing the need for legal reforms to drive clearer results.

To support exporters, Iran is expanding trade centers and deploying more commercial attachés in top target markets. The organization is also compiling a list of export and import goods to better track trade flows.

In closing, Ghanbari emphasized that the Africa-Iran Summit 2025 will serve as a vital platform to kick off a new era of promising trade cooperation.

Over One Million Tourist Destinations Identified Across Iran

TEHRAN - Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts announced that more than one million tourist destinations have been identified across the country, attributing Iranians' enthusiasm for travel to the inherent appeal and diversity of Iran itself.

Speaking during a ceremony honoring those who served during the Nowruz holiday season, Minister Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri expressed gratitude to the 1.2 million individuals involved in the national Nowruz travel task force. He also thanked local officials including village heads, district governors, city governors, and provincial authorities from 28 organizations who dedicated their holiday time to public service.

"The government stands wholeheartedly in service of the people of Iran. Nothing matters more to us than ensuring their welfare and comfort," the minister said.

Salehi Amiri emphasized that while providing services is important, ensuring that citizens feel secure and supported is even more vital. "This year, we saw the least amount of coordination challenges between organizations in the past 20 years and recorded the highest levels of public satisfaction," he added.

According to the minister, over 36 million Iranians traveled during the Nowruz holidays, sending a strong message that "Iran and Iranians are always vibrant and dynamic."

Highlighting Iran's cultural and natural richness, Salehi Amiri stated, "The charm of Iran and the variety of its tourist destinations are major motivations for travel. Foreign tourists consistently return home speaking of Iran's beauty, rich civilization, and historical and natural treasures."

He noted that more than 23,000 heritage sites were available for



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travel across 1,000 Nowruz festivals, with access to tourism opportunities provided in 530 counties across the country.

The minister outlined some key travel hotspots, including: Over 3,000 historical sites in Khorasan Razavi province and the holy shrine of Imam Reza; The northern provinces of Mazandaran, Gilan, and Golestan, known for their forest and coastal tourism; Gilan, featuring over 300 types of local cuisine as a gastronomic tourism hub; Khuzestan, with cities like Abadan and Khorramshahr, important for war memorial tourism; Fars province, home to over 3,800 nationally and internationally registered sites,

including Shah Cheragh, Hafezieh, and Saadieh; Isfahan, regarded as a cradle of Iranian civilization, identity, and knowledge; Zanjan with Soltaniyeh Dome, Hamedan with its Ecbatana civilization, Sistan and Baluchestan with the Burnt City (Shahr-e Sukhteh), a symbol of ancient Iranian pride; Semnan, featuring Safavid and Qajar-era caravanserais and its unique deserts; Qom with the shrine of Hazrat Masoumeh; Alborz, dubbed "Little Iran" for its natural diversity; and Qazvin, the 50-year capital of the Safavid dynasty, including the Alamut Castle.

In a significant archaeological discovery, Salehi Amiri also revealed that a research team recently identified the mountain in Abadan believed to have supplied stones for the ancient cities of Susa and Persepolis, dating back over 2,500 years.

Concluding his remarks, the minister apologized for any shortcomings experienced during Nowruz travels but assured the public that "your children across the country gave it their all."

235m Tons of Goods Handled at Iranian Ports Last Year



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TEHRAN - Iranian ports handled a total of 234.8 million tons of cargo during the past Persian calendar year (1403), according to the acting head of the Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO), Saeed Rasouli.

Speaking on the performance of Iran's maritime infrastructure, Rasouli reported that 82.3 million tons of goods were unloaded across the country's state-owned and government-managed ports in 1403. Of this, 28.4 million tons were oil-related cargo, while 53.9 million tons were non-oil goods.

In terms of exports and shipments, 152.5 million tons of goods were loaded at the ports, including 74.7 million tons of oil products and 77.9 million tons of non-oil items.

The combined total of unloading and loading operations for oil cargo reached 103 million tons, while non-oil cargo accounted for nearly 131.8 million tons, bringing the overall figure to 234.8 million tons for the year.

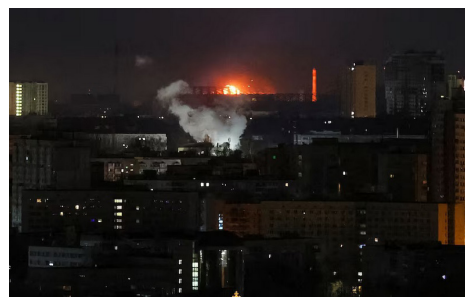
Highlighting the container operations, Rasouli stated that 3.08 million TEUs (Twenty-foot Equivalent Units) were handled in 1403, representing a 13% increase compared to 2.73 million TEUs recorded in the previous year (1402).

This growth reflects continued efforts to enhance Iran's maritime trade capacity and logistics efficiency.

Russia Launches Scores of Drones on Ukraine

KYIV (Dispatches) - Russia launched a barrage of drones in an overnight attack on Ukraine, injuring four people and damaging residential and commercial buildings in Kyiv and other parts of the country, Ukrainian officials said on Saturday. Ukraine's air defenses shot down 56 of 88 Russian drones, its air force said. It added that 24 drones were "lost" as the military used electronic warfare to redirect them.

Kyiv mayor Vitali Klitchko said that three people were injured in the capital as a result of the drone attacks. Drone debris also destroyed a private house and damaged several commercial buildings, causing large fires in different parts of Kyiv, city officials said.



Serbian President Holds Nationalist Rally to Counter Student Demos



BELGRADE (Dispatches) - Serbia's President Aleksandar Vucic declared the launch of a new political movement on Saturday as he rallied nationalist supporters in Belgrade to push back against months of protests against him.

Serbia has been gripped by a wave of protests since November, when 16 people died in the collapse of the newly renovated rail station in the city of Novi Sad -- a tragedy widely blamed on corruption and poor oversight.

Hundreds of thousands have marched for months against corruption and mismanagement, culminating in the biggest protests in decades last month.

Vucic claims the student-led protests are threatening the Balkan nation's peace and stability, accusing the protesters of being paid by "foreign intelligence agencies".

Addressing the crowd late on Saturday evening, Vucic dismissed the protest movement as "an attack from overseas, because certain foreign powers cannot bear to see a free, independent and sovereign Serbia".

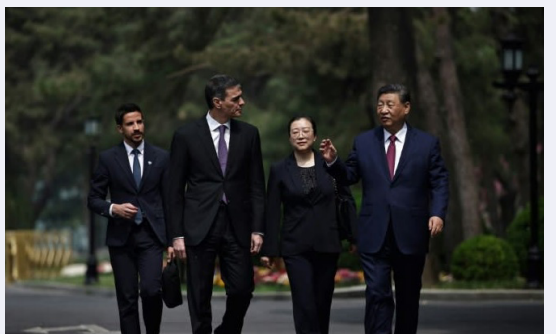
He announced the creation of his new political movement "to bring new energy" to the country.

"Each worker, each farmer is welcome; each person who earns an honest living, and fights for his children and his country, is welcome," he told the crowd.

At least 55,000 people attended the rally, the Public Assembly Archive -- a group that monitors crowd sizes -- said on X.

The figure was much lower than the group's estimate of between 275,000 and 325,000 people who took to the streets of Belgrade on March 15, in a student-led protest which was the biggest ever recorded in Serbia.

China, EU Urged to Jointly Resist Unilateral Bullying



BEIJING (Dispatches) - Chinese President Xi Jinping urged the European Union to join hands with Beijing in resisting "unilateral bullying", in reference to swingeing tariffs imposed by US President Donald Trump.

As he met Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, state news agency Xinhua said Xi had stressed the need for cooperation between the bloc and China in weathering Beijing's mounting trade war with Washington.

"China and Europe should fulfil their international responsibilities... and jointly resist unilateral bullying practices," Xi said.

This, he stressed, would not only "safeguard their own legitimate rights and interests, but also... safeguard international fairness and justice."

Sanchez, in turn, told a press conference following his meeting with Xi that tensions over trade should not impede cooperation between the European Union and China.

Spain buys about 45 billion euros (\$49.1 billion) of goods every year from China, its fourth-largest trading partner, but sells around 7.4 billion euros' worth.

World Expo Opens in Japan in Rocky Times



TOKYO (Dispatches) - World Expo opened on Sunday with 160 countries and regions showcasing their technology, culture and food, with host Japan hoping to provide the world with some much-needed hope.

Highlights at the show in Osaka until mid-October include a Mars meteorite, a beating artificial heart grown from stem cells and Hello Kitty figures in algae form.

Surrounding most of the pavilions -- a chance for architects' fancies to run wild -- is the world's largest wooden structure, the "Grand Ring".

Its creator Sou Fujimoto told AFP that Expo is a "really beautiful, precious opportunity where so many different cultures... and countries come together in one place to create diversity and unity".

But with conflicts raging and US President Donald Trump's tariffs causing economic turmoil, that may be optimistic. "Not for sale" states a yellow and blue sign over Ukraine's booth -- echoing defiant comments from leader Volodymyr Zelensky about the war with Russia, which is absent at Expo 2025.

Yahel Vilan, head of Israel's equally compact pavilion -- there is also a Palestinian one -- featuring a stone from Jerusalem's Western Wall, told AFP that "we came with a message of peace".

The US building has the theme "America the Beautiful", but with no mention of Trump's trade policies. Instead it focuses on the country's landscapes, AI tech and space, including a simulated rocket launch where dry-ice blasters appear to ignite above visitors' heads.

The nearby Chinese pavilion, evoking a calligraphy scroll, focuses on green technology and lunar samples brought by the Chang'e-5 and Chang'e-6 probes.

After enjoying the view and sea breeze atop the Grand Ring's "skywalk", hungry visitors can stop by the world's longest sushi conveyor belt or meet many-eyed Expo 2025 mascot Myaku-Myaku.

Among the more bizarre displays are 32 sculptures of Hello Kitty dressed as different types of algae -- to symbolise the plant's many uses -- and a "human washing machine" that shows imagery based on the bather's heart rate.

Elsewhere are demonstrations of drone-like flying vehicles, and the tiny artificial heart made from induced pluripotent stem cells (iPS) shown in public for the first time.

"It has an actual pulse," Byron Russel of Pasona Group, which runs the exhibit, told AFP.

Themes of sustainability run through the Expo, including at the bauble-like Swiss pavilion, which aims to have the smallest ecological footprint.

But Expos have been criticised for their temporary nature, and after October Osaka's man-made island will be cleared to make way for a casino resort.

According to Japanese media, only 12.5 percent of the Grand Ring will be reused.

Expo is also known as a World's Fair, and the phenomenon, which brought the Eiffel Tower to Paris, began with London's 1851 Crystal Palace exhibition and is held every five years.

The 2020 edition in Dubai was postponed by the Covid-19 pandemic, so Osaka Expo organisers say it will "restore much-needed connections" and "provide the opportunity to create a better tomorrow".

Osaka last hosted the Expo in 1970 when Japan was booming and its technology the envy of the world. It attracted 64 million people, a record until Shanghai in 2010.

But 55 years on Japan is less of a trendsetter and opinion polls show low levels of enthusiasm among the public for the Expo, particularly after it went 27 percent over budget.

So far 8.7 million advance tickets have been shifted, below the pre-sales target of 14 million.

Japan is also experiencing a record tourism boom, meaning accommodation in Osaka -- near hotspot Kyoto -- is often fully booked with prices sky-high.

Local resident Hirofumi Hayashi, 65, told AFP he hoped to visit the Expo "if my schedule allows".

"To be honest, I don't think it's worth spending so much money on. There are many other things that deserve to be prioritised," he told AFP.

Hamas Releases Video of Israeli-American Soldier Held Hostage in Gaza

GAZA CITY (Dispatches) - Hamas's armed wing released a video on Saturday showing an Israeli-American hostage alive, in which he criticizes the Israeli government for failing to secure his release.

Israeli campaign group the Hostages and Missing Families Forum identified him as Edan Alexander, a soldier in an elite infantry unit on the Gaza border when he was abducted by Palestinian militants during their October 7, 2023 attack on Israel.

AFP was unable to determine when the video was filmed.

Hamas's armed wing, the Ezzedine al-Qassam Brigades, published the more than three-minute clip showing the hostage seated in a small, enclosed space.

In the video, he says he wants to return home to celebrate the holidays.

Israel is currently marking Passover, the holiday that commemorates the biblical liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt.

Alexander, who turned 21 in captivity, was born in Tel Aviv and grew up in the US state of New Jersey, returning to Israel after high school to join the army.

"As we begin the holiday evening in the USA, our family in Israel is preparing to sit around the Seder table," Alexander's family said in a statement released by the forum.

"Our Edan, a lone soldier who immigrated to Israel and enlisted in the Golani Brigade to defend the country and its citizens, is still being held



captivity by Hamas.

"When you sit down to mark Passover, remember that this is not a holiday of freedom as long as Edan and the other hostages are not home," the family added.

The family did not give a green light for the media to broadcast the footage.

Meanwhile Israel announced on Saturday that its military had completed the takeover of a new corridor in southern Gaza, advancing its efforts to

seize large parts of the war-battered Palestinian territory.

On the same day, Hamas's armed wing released a video showing a hostage alive in Gaza, whom Israeli media widely identified as Israeli-American Edan Alexander.

The Israeli military issued a fresh evacuation order for residents of Khan Younis and nearby areas, ahead of a planned strike after projectiles were fired from there earlier in the day.

"IDF (Israeli) troops are operating with significant force in the area, and will strike with intensity on any location from which rockets are launched," the military's Arabic-language spokesman Avichay Adraee said on X. "For your safety, move immediately westward to recognised shelters in Al-Mawasi" area, he added.

Since a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas collapsed in mid-March, Israel's renewed offensive in Gaza has displaced hundreds of thousands of

people while the military has seized large areas of the war-battered territory. Top Israeli officials, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have repeatedly said that the ongoing assault aims to pressure Hamas into freeing the remaining hostages held in Gaza.

Hamas on Saturday said that the offensive not only "kills defenceless civilians but also makes the fate of the occupation's prisoners (hostages) uncertain".

Trump Spares Smartphones, Computers, Other Electronics From China Tariffs

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - S. President Donald Trump's administration granted exclusions from steep reciprocal tariffs to smartphones, computers and some other electronics imported largely from China, providing a big break to tech firms like Apple that rely on imported products.

In a notice to shippers, the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency published a list of tariff codes excluded from the import taxes, with retroactive effect from 12:01 a.m. EDT (0401 GMT) on April 5.

It featured 20 product categories, including the broad 8471 code for all computers, laptops, disc drives and automatic data processing. It also included semiconductor devices, equipment, memory chips and flat panel displays.

The notice gave no explanation for the move, but the late-night exclusion provides welcome relief to major technology firms such as Apple, Dell Technologies and many other importers.

Trump's action also excludes the specified electronics from his 10% "baseline" tariffs on goods from most countries other than China, easing import costs for semiconductors from Taiwan and Apple iPhones produced in India.

Asked on Saturday about his reasoning for the exemptions and plans for semiconductors, Trump told reporters on Air Force One: "I'll give you that answer



on Monday. We'll be very specific on Monday ... we're taking in a lot of money, as a country, we're taking in a lot of money."

Wedbush Securities analyst Dan Ives called the announcement "the most bullish news we could have heard this weekend."

"There is still clear uncertainty and volatility ahead with these China negotiations.... Big Tech firms like Apple, Nvidia, Microsoft and the broader tech industry can breathe a huge sigh of relief this weekend into Monday," Ives said in an industry note.

Many tech company CEOs have embraced Trump as he begins his second term, attending his January 20 inauguration in Washington and celebrating with him afterward. Apple CEO Tim Cook hosted a pre-inaugural ball and has visited Trump at his home in Florida.

For the Chinese imports, the exclusion only applies to Trump's reciprocal tariffs, which climbed to 125% this week, according to a White House official. Trump's prior 20% duties on all Chinese imports that he said were related to the U.S. fentanyl crisis remain in place.

But the official said Trump would launch a new national security trade investigation into semiconductors soon that could lead to other new tariffs.

Alcaraz Ousts Davidovich Fokina to Set Up Final With Musetti



MONTE CARLO (Dispatches) - Carlos Alcaraz stormed into his first Masters final in 13 months when he beat Alejandro Davidovich Fokina 7-6(2) 6-4 in Monte Carlo, but not before his Spanish compatriot saved five match points in a gruelling encounter. Alcaraz will play Lorenzo Musetti in Sunday's final after the Italian fought back from a set down to beat Alex de Minaur 1-6 6-4 7-6(4). Second seed Alcaraz found it difficult to break Davidovich Fokina, succeeding only three times in 19 attempts, and he also wasted three set points in an opening set that lasted over an hour. Davidovich Fokina was imperious in his defensive game but Alcaraz lifted his service in the second set, in which he did not face a single break point. "It's been a long time," Alcaraz said after reaching his first Masters final since he won at Indian Wells last year. "I just had to be patient and believe that this moment was going to come again. Sometimes the people are not patient, they want me to make the final in every tournament." The 21-year-old sealed the win with a sizzling forehand winner down the line to move into his first final in Monte Carlo. The two shared a warm embrace at the net and a laugh before Alcaraz praised his compatriot. "I think I played really good tennis from the beginning until the last point," Alcaraz added. "I tried to take the chances he gave me in the match. He saved a lot of break points and match points, but I'm really happy... The most important thing is that I'm feeling great physically." Musetti, who had beaten three-times champion Stefanos Tsitsipas in the previous round, reached his first Masters 1000 final after battling De Minaur for 2-1/2 hours. "I always struggle to start and find a rhythm but today Alex was playing really solid and the conditions were hard," Musetti said.

"It was slow today with the rain and was not easy to break through the Alex wall. I started to be more patient and that was the key." Alcaraz holds a 3-1 record over Musetti, but the Italian beat him the last time they met in a claycourt final in 2022 in Hamburg. Meanwhile Japan's number one Moyuka Uchijima beat Anca Todoni to dash Romania's hopes of reaching the Billie Jean King Cup Finals after Ena Shibahara had got Japan off to a flying start in their Group A qualifying clash. Shibahara beat Miriam Bulgaru 7-5 6-2 and Uchijima overcame Todoni 3-6 7-6(3) 6-2 in two and a half hours in Tokyo to set up a winner-takes-all showdown with Canada. Todoni earned the first break to move ahead 4-2 in the opening set and maintained her advantage to close it out. The Romanian also led for much of the second set before Uchijima saved two match points and broke back to force a tiebreak. Uchijima dominated that and broke Todoni twice in the third set to seal victory. "I don't know how I won the match. I am just happy that I was able to pull it off. Of course, the fans helped me a lot," Uchijima said. Shibahara had put Japan ahead to the delight of a vocal home crowd, pouncing at 6-5 to claim the first set and breaking Bulgaru twice in the second. "I was nervous in the beginning. I think overall I played well," Shibahara said. "It (the crowd) helps me so much, I love it when they're loud. I really kept pressing and being aggressive." Spain downed Czech Republic in Group B to qualify for the Finals, as Cristina Bucsa beat Marie Bouzkova 7-5 6-1 and Jessica Bouzas Maneiro defeated Linda Noskva 6-4 6-2 to take a decisive 2-0 lead in the tie in Ostrava.

De Bruyne Leads City Comeback against Palace as Arsenal Stumble

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Kevin De Bruyne inspired a Manchester City fightback from two goals down to beat Crystal Palace 5-2, while Arsenal's 1-1 draw with Brentford edged Liverpool closer to the Premier League title. In De Bruyne's first appearance at the Etihad Stadium since announcing his decade in Manchester will finish at the end of the season, the Belgian rolled back the years to save City's blushes. Palace found themselves 2-0 up after 20 minutes as Eberechi Eze slotted home Ismaila Sarr's pass before Chris Richards took advantage of poor City defending to head in from a corner. Eze had a third goal narrowly ruled out for offside before De Bruyne stirred the City fightback. The 33-year-old fired in a free-kick off the post before heading down for Omar Marmoush to level just three minutes later. City were rampant after the break as De Bruyne teed up Mateo Kovacic on 47 minutes to complete the comeback. Goalkeeper Ederson provided his fourth Premier League assist of the season for James McAtee to make it 4-2 before Nico O'Reilly's sweet strike rounded off the scoring. "The performance of Kevin—as he has done for many, many years in many, many games—he played fantastic," said City boss Pep



Guardiola. "He helped us to break this momentum that was not good." Victory lifts Guardiola's men back into the top four, with the top five in the Premier League this season qualifying for the Champions League thanks to the strong performance of English sides in European competition. Arsenal paid the price for having one eye on their Champions League quarter-final against Real Madrid as a 12th league draw of the season left them still 10 points adrift of Liverpool. Mikel Arteta left Bukayo Saka, Martin Odegaard and Mikel Merino on the bench with the Gunners holding a 3-0 first leg lead

over the European champions ahead of the return in Madrid on Wednesday. It appeared the Spaniard would get away with that risk as Saka and Odegaard were introduced seconds after Declan Rice teed up Thomas Partey to open the scoring on the break from a Brentford corner. But the Bees hit back with a well-worked set-piece of their own when Nathan Collins headed Michael Kayode's cross down and Yoane Wissa flicked in his 16th goal of the season. "We play every three days and are used to it, so there is not an excuse of energy," said Arteta. "We had full control of the game and conceded a very poor goal. It was not good enough." Liverpool could now seal a record-equalling 20th English top-flight title as early as next weekend should they win their next two matches and Arsenal lose at Ipswich. Nottingham Forest's challenge for a Champions League place stumbled after a 1-0 defeat by Everton. Forest remain in third but have lost their last two games to allow the chasing pack back onto their tails. A forgetful game at the City Ground appeared to be meandering towards a stalemate until Abdoulaye Doucoure struck in the 94th minute to secure Everton's first win in seven games.

McIlroy Eyes Masters Win and Slam

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Augusta (United States) (AFP) - Rory McIlroy is on the verge of winning the Masters and completing golf's career Grand Slam and he's ready to face the pressure and painful memories head-on at Augusta National. The 35-year-old from Northern Ireland fired his second consecutive six-under par 66 to seize a two-stroke lead over reigning US Open champion Bryson DeChambeau entering Sunday's final round. World number two McIlroy, a four-time major winner, has not captured a major title since 2014 but has a golden chance to end the drought and claim the green jacket that has long eluded him. He would also join Jack Nicklaus, Tiger Woods, Gary Player, Gene Sarazen and Ben Hogan as the only players to win the Slam -- winning each major at least once. "I think I still have to remind myself that there's a long way to go," he said. "I, just as much as anyone else, know what can happen on the final day here.



"I've got a lot of experience. I came in here talking about being the most complete version of myself as a golfer. "I just have to keep reminding myself of that and remind myself that no matter what situation or scenario I find myself in tomorrow, I'll be able to handle it." Excitement for McIlroy was reflected in roars from the spectators at his amazing shotmaking, the 54-foot eagle chip-in at the par-five second, three birdies in the first five holes and "the shot of the day," his 205-yard approach to six feet at the par-five 15th to set up another eagle. "It's a pleasure to play in front of them and to have that atmosphere and that support," McIlroy said. "Tomorrow in that final group it's going to be a little rowdy and a little loud. "I'm just going to have to settle in, really try to keep myself in my own little bubble and keep my head down and approach tomorrow with the same attitude I've tried to approach the last three days with."

McLaren's Piastri Claims Bahrain Pole



SAKHIR (Dispatches) - McLaren's Oscar Piastri claimed pole position for the Bahrain Grand Prix as his teammate Lando Norris and Red Bull's Max Verstappen had a trying evening under floodlights at the desert circuit. Series leader Norris could only make it onto the third row with Verstappen facing an even tougher time from the fourth row. George Russell had originally qualified in second, but he and Kimi Antonelli in the other Mercedes received one-place grid penalties. The late kick in the teeth came after the stewards sanctioned them for entering the pitlane before the second qualifying session resumed after a red flag. As a result Ferrari's Charles Leclerc moves up onto the front row, with Antonelli, who qualified fourth, dropping down to the third. Ferrari introduced upgrades this weekend and they appeared to have had the desired effect with Leclerc enjoying a positive evening. Alpine are the only team to remain pointless but that could soon change with Pierre Gasly posting the fifth quickest qualifying time but then moved up to the second row on Antonelli's demotion. Norris leads Verstappen by just one point going into Sunday's nocturnal showdown in the Gulf kingdom. But the omens look good for Piastri with pole-sitters accounting for four of the last five winners in Sakhir. The Australian has been in dominant form so far this weekend, bossing practice. "I felt confident out there all weekend. FP3 we had good pace, and Qualifying - the others caught up a little closer than I wanted, but I delivered the laps when it mattered so very, very happy. "I have to get to Turn 1 in first so let's see what happens but I've felt comfortable all weekend. I can't thank the team enough for the car they have given me."

Doncic Scores 39, Lakers Clinch 3 Seed



LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Luka Doncic recorded 39 points, eight rebounds and seven assists, and the Los Angeles Lakers clinched the Western Conference's No. 3 seed with a solid 140-109 victory over the visiting Houston Rockets. LeBron James had 14 points and eight assists in 22 minutes before sitting out the final 19:27 with an apparent injury. James, who has been bothered by a left groin injury, grimaced just before being pulled in the third quarter and had his left leg/hip area taped but the team didn't immediately announce an ailment. Austin Reaves contributed 23 points, seven rebounds and six assists, and Dorian Finney-Smith added 18 points on six 3-pointers off the bench for the Lakers (50-31). Finney-Smith matched his season best for treys, previously achieved against Houston on March 31. Rui Hachimura scored 16 points for Los Angeles, which shot 60.9 percent from the field and made 19 of 37 3-point attempts. Cam Whitmore established career highs of 34 points and seven 3-pointers for the Rockets (52-29), who held out several players for the second straight game. Reed Sheppard scored 14 points, Nate Williams added 12 and Aaron Holiday tallied 11. Houston previously clinched the No. 2 seed and on Friday held out Dillon Brooks (rest), Tari Easton (left leg), Alperen Sengun (personal reasons), Jabari Smith Jr. (left groin), Amen Thompson (rest) and Fred VanVleet (right ankle). Jalen Green scored seven points in nearly 15 first-half minutes before watching the second half in street clothes. Green is bidding to play in all 82 regular-season games for the second straight campaign.