

Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi, Before Departure for Rome for Indirect Talks With the U.S. Officials, Said That He Would Soon Travel to the Chinese Capital, Beijing, for Talks With Chinese Officials

IRAN NEWS

Iranian Security Forces Killed a Senior Jaish al-Zolm Commander Involved in Last Year's Terrorist Attacks and Dismantled a Weapons Smuggling Network in Sistan and Baluchestan and Gilan Provinces

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Cyberattacks on Iran Have Increased Eightfold



TEHRAN - The Secretary of Iran's Supreme Council of Cyberspace, Mohammad Amin Aghamiri, revealed a sharp surge in cyberattacks targeting Iran, stating that the volume of attacks has increased by 7 to 8 times compared to previous years. This rise places Iran among the most frequently targeted countries in cyberspace.

In a statement reported by Tasnim News Agency, Aghamiri explained that this dramatic increase has occurred over the past three years, with exponential growth continuing into 2022 and 2023. Despite other global powers like the U.S. also experiencing vulnerabilities in operational and financial systems, the number of cyber threats against Iran remains exceptionally high.

To combat these threats, Aghamiri highlighted the government's efforts in updating and implementing strategic documents to regulate and secure the digital landscape. As of now, around 60% of the drafts for 39 national strategic documents—governing various aspects of cyberspace—have been submitted. Some ministries, including Economy, Foreign Affairs, and Justice, have completed their drafts, while others like Education and the Judiciary are yet to deliver.

The strategic documentation process began in 2021 following concerns about the fragmented regulatory framework, which often left stakeholders confused. A unified roadmap was needed to outline user rights, national policies, and the legal framework for digital activity.

Aghamiri emphasized that all stakeholders involved in executing these strategies are also part of their development process. Ministries and agencies are encouraged to use all available resources to ensure effective implementation. He added that if any agency fails to submit its assigned documents, responsibility could be transferred to another willing body.

U.S. Military Conducts 13 Airstrikes North of Yemen's Capital Overnight



SANAA (Dispatches) - Thirteen U.S. airstrikes targeted locations north of Yemen's capital Sana'a during the early hours of Saturday, local news agencies reported.

Saba news agency, citing local sources, reported that the U.S. airstrikes included seven raids on Saada and Al Jawf governorates north of Sana'a.

Four of the raids targeted Al Jawf's Bart Al-Anan and Khab Washa'af districts, and three struck Saada, the report added.

Additionally, six airstrikes were launched against Arhab district north of Sana'a, two of which hit the Al-Sama'a area.

On Friday, U.S. military raids on Yemen's Ras Isa oil port killed at least 80 civilians and wounded 150 others.

According to the Hodeidah Health Office, the attack on Ras Isa oil port has been one of the deadliest attacks on the Arab country by U.S. forces.

Since March 15, the U.S. has started a large-scale military operation against Yemen and in support of the Israeli regime.

The U.S. and UK forces have repeatedly targeted citizens and civilian infrastructure, including government buildings and hospitals, across Yemen to stop Yemeni armed forces solidarity operations in support of Palestinians facing Israeli genocide since October 2023.

President: "We Strive for Peace and Resolution of Conflicts"

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian stated on Friday that while the government is not solely dependent on dialogue and negotiations, it is actively working toward peace and the resolution of conflicts, both regionally and internationally. He made these remarks during the closing ceremony of the "National Summit of Medical University Presidents and Deans."

Referring to indirect talks between Iran and the United States, Pezeshkian emphasized, "The government has never tied its actions or efforts exclusively to negotiations. However, I firmly believe that if we can achieve peace and stability, we will gain significantly."

Highlighting the government's focus on strengthening the economy and resolving energy imbalances, the president said that attracting public cooperation and participation is essential. "If we can engage the people, every problem becomes solvable," he noted.

He stressed that overcoming challenges is possible through widespread public engagement and coordinated efforts, underscoring the government's active diplomatic approach to address regional and international issues.

Pezeshkian firmly stated that Iran is a long-time victim of terrorism. "History shows that over 25,000 to 26,000 of our citizens, intellectuals, and scientists have been assassinated on our streets," he said.

He blamed the Israeli regime for ongoing acts of terrorism worldwide, asserting, "The Zionist regime is openly carrying out acts of terror with both software and hardware tools, without fear or consequence. And yet, some countries continue to support this criminal regime while hypocritically speaking of human rights."

Calling such actions outright genocide, the president added, "It's unimaginable that a regime can commit assassinations at will while so-called human rights advocates not only remain silent but actually support them. Conversely, if something unintended happens in our country, the world unites to accuse Iran of human rights violations."

Pezeshkian acknowledged the presence of internal challenges but insisted that the



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government is committed to overcoming them. He pointed to the health summit itself as an example of unified efforts to improve the nation's well-being.

"Islamic countries must demonstrate strength," he added. "If they had shown resolve, such audacious and criminal actions wouldn't be so rampant. What's happening is too grave to be ignored by any conscientious person."

The president went on to say that ensuring public health involves more than medicine and treatment. "Social factors, economic hardship, and mental well-being all play a role in health. We are responsible for all elements that impact the people's lives," he said.

He called on officials to fully commit to resolving people's problems, stating that the opportunity to serve should be seen as an

honor.

"All our disputes stem from ego," Pezeshkian asserted. "We must put aside personal pride and unite to bring comfort and prosperity to the nation. Together, we can accomplish great things."

He added that the government must also address the population's mental, physical, and economic struggles and urged officials not to confine themselves to their offices.

Reiterating the need for public involvement, the president said, "We must not rely on anyone else. If we depend on foreign help, we will fall behind. We have no expectations from others."

He stressed that economic difficulties can only be solved through active public participation. He proposed forming local support networks involving NGOs, charitable organizations, the Welfare Organization, and the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee, coordinated under provincial authorities to ensure no citizen is left without support.

In conclusion, Pezeshkian declared, "If we have a clear goal, nothing can stop us. Passion for that goal makes hardship bearable. We must do everything in our power to protect both the people's health and the country's honor."

Agreement Within Reach If U.S. Makes No Unreasonable, Unrealistic Demands

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says an agreement with the United States is possible as long as Washington does not put forward "unrealistic" demands.

Araghchi made the remark in a joint press conference with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, in Moscow on Friday afternoon, a day ahead of a second round of indirect talks between Tehran and Washington, which is scheduled to be held in the Italian capital, Rome.

"We will only negotiate over the nuclear issue and other topics will not be included in these negotiations," he said.

"I believe there is a possibility of reaching an agreement if they [Americans] demonstrate seriousness of intent and make no unrealistic and unreasonable demands," he added.

The top Iranian diplomat cited Washington's threats and its so-called maximum pressure policy as Iran's reasons for holding indirect talks with the US.

He, however, emphasized, "The path of diplomacy is open. Indirect talks are not complicated and can lead to an agreement."

He said Tehran spotted a certain level of the United States' seriousness during the first round of talks in the Omani capital Muscat on April 12.

The Iranian foreign minister cast serious doubt over US intentions following Washington's contradictory positions.

"We have serious doubts about the intentions and motivations of the American side but we will participate in tomorrow's negotiations with full seriousness and determination," he pointed out.

He once again voiced Tehran's full readiness to find a peaceful solution to its peaceful nuclear program.

Speaking to reporters in Moscow earlier on Friday, Araqchi said Tehran will assess and decide on the path ahead of negotiations based on the approach of the United States in the second stage of indirect talks in Rome.



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Araqchi and Steve Witkoff, the U.S. president's special envoy for Middle East affairs, led the first round of indirect talks in Muscat. Both sides described the talks as positive and constructive.

Elsewhere in the presser, Araqchi said during his Thursday meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, he handed over a message from Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei to him, which included various bilateral and regional issues.

The top Iranian diplomat noted that he held "useful" talks with the Russian president, which demonstrate that Tehran and Moscow are advancing relations.

He said Putin was officially invited to travel to Tehran and expressed hope that the visit would take place this year.

He noted that Iran and Russia have drawn up plans to promote economic cooperation regardless of sanctions imposed on both countries.

"Of course, this does not mean that the two countries recognize the legitimacy of the sanctions, but they have designed their economic cooperation in such a way that even in the presence of sanctions, they can achieve desirable results," Araqchi explained.

The Russian foreign minister said his country is ready to play any role in the negotiations between Iran and the US on a potential nuclear deal.

"We are ready to help, mediate and play any role that, from Iran's point of view, will be useful and that will be acceptable to the United States," Lavrov added.

"We proceed from the fact that the only option for an agreement, as the [Iranian] Minister just said, is an agreement exclusively on nuclear issues," he said, stressing that it is "a fundamental point."

The Russian foreign minister also noted that Putin was "very pleased" with Thursday's meeting with Araqchi.

"Yesterday's meeting emphasized the unprecedented dynamics of our political dialogue," Lavrov said.

Being on FATF Blacklist, Not Exiting It, Causes Information Leaks



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TEHRAN - The Secretary of Iran's High Council for the Prevention and Combating of Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing responded to critics who fear the disclosure of confidential data if Iran normalizes its status with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), stating that it is being on the FATF blacklist—not leaving it—that leads to the exposure of sensitive information.

Hadi Khani criticized what he described as uninformed and untechnical commentary surrounding FATF. He said it was "astonishing" that after numerous technical sessions and the presentation of solid evidence demonstrating that Iran's presence on the blacklist leads to stricter oversight and data demands under the pretext of being a "high-risk country," the same disproven concerns are still being raised.

Khani emphasized that FATF standards are not uniquely tailored to Iran and are currently implemented by over 200 jurisdictions worldwide. He questioned why, if these standards are such a threat—as some suggest—Iran has already incorporated many of them into its domestic laws, including through ratification by the Expediency Council.

"For over a decade, under pretexts such as 'possible disclosure of confidential information' and other misconceptions, the nation and its people have paid a high reputational and financial price," he said. "Yet we continue to insist on policies that run counter to national interests."

Dismissing claims that Iran has already fulfilled 39 items in its FATF action plan, Khani clarified that only 17 have been completed. He noted that for those 17 items, Iranian officials successfully prevented negative votes from opponents during FATF plenary sessions by presenting solid technical documentation. For the remaining items, Khani said, several government bodies are awaiting decisions from the Expediency Council on pending conventions.

Gov't Reiterates Independence from Foreign Talks in National Policy



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TEHRAN - Government spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani has reaffirmed the administration's commitment to independence in national decision-making, stating that the country's affairs should not be tied to ongoing or future international negotiations. In a recent statement, she emphasized that the 14th government remains firmly rooted in the principle of self-reliance and will continue to prioritize internal capacities over external expectations.

In a commentary, Mohajerani outlined the government's vision under the slogan of "National Consensus," describing it as more than political unity. "True national consensus is about restoring public trust, narrowing social divides, listening to diverse voices, and leveraging domestic potential to resolve national issues," she said.

She noted that national strength comes not from natural resources or political power alone, but from social capital—comprised of trust, solidarity, public participation, and hope. According to Mohajerani, this capital is essential for navigating the difficult path toward progress and sustainable development.

Reflecting on the challenges of recent years, the spokesperson warned against relying on external factors or confining national unity to election seasons. "We have learned that when we overlook our social capital, we become more vulnerable in crises," she said, stressing that rebuilding this trust requires honesty, transparency, responsibility, and a realistic understanding of the country's current state.

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Araqchi Meets Qatari PM in Moscow

MOSCOW (IRNA) – Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi meets with the prime minister and the foreign minister of Qatar, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani.

The meeting took place in Moscow on Friday. Araqchi and the Qatari prime minister discussed bilateral relation and recent developments on the region.

Araqchi arrived in Moscow on Thursday at the invitation of his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, for a two-day visit. Upon his arrival in Moscow earlier in the day, Araqchi said that he was in Moscow to deliver a message from Leader of Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei to Russian President Vladimir Putin. He explained that the message addressed international and regional developments as well as bilateral issues.

Iran-Belarus Trade Falls Short of Potential, Says Iranian Official



TEHRAN - In a recent meeting between Dmitry Kaltsov, the Ambassador of Belarus to Tehran, and Mohammad Khaki, President of the Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture of Khorramabad, both sides emphasized the need to strengthen economic, trade, and industrial ties between the western Iranian province of Lorestan and Belarus.

Khaki highlighted Lorestan's vast capabilities in agriculture, industry, and mining, noting that the province has significant economic potential that could be realized through foreign investment. "With foreign investment, we can accelerate the development of Lorestan," he stated.

He added that under the province's five-year development plans and in cooperation with the provincial government, efforts are underway to identify and promote these capacities to international partners. This will involve the exchange of trade delegations to and from Lorestan.

Commenting on the current trade volume between Iran and Belarus, Khaki said the level of exchanges does not reflect the true potential of the two nations. "We hope that by removing certain obstacles, particularly international ones, we will witness an increase in bilateral interactions in the coming years," he said.

Khaki also affirmed Lorestan's readiness to enhance bilateral cooperation, stating that the province will submit a written report detailing its economic capacities and proposed trade expansion strategies to the Belarusian Embassy. He expressed willingness to sign economic agreements with local chambers of commerce in Belarus.

With more than 1,200 active industrial units in the province, the Belarusian ambassador is expected to visit some of these sites during his stay in Lorestan. Thousands of economic actors across various sectors are operating in the province, and Khaki believes they can play a vital role in boosting economic ties with Belarus.

He further noted that easing sanctions and lifting financial restrictions would undoubtedly lead to an increase in trade. "We are working on a structured plan to facilitate mutual visits by trade delegations so both sides can better understand each other's capacities, leading to the signing of joint contracts," he explained.

Iran Aims to Boost Exports of Pharmaceuticals, Medical Equipment to Eurasian Countries



TEHRAN - In a strategic move to expand its footprint in Eurasian markets, Iran has launched a dedicated pavilion showcasing its pharmaceutical and medical technology capabilities at the 30th Belarus Medica International Medical Exhibition, one of Eastern Europe's most prominent healthcare events.

According to the Iranian Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), the event, held from April 15 to 18, in Minsk, Belarus, features participation from 193 companies across countries including China, Russia, Turkey, Switzerland, Egypt, Hungary, Iran, and Belarus. Iran's presence includes nine knowledge-based companies, focusing on pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, supported by the TPO and Iran's National Innovation and Prosperity Fund.

Akbar Ghadari, Director General of the Central Asia, Caucasus, and Russia Office at the TPO, stated that the Iranian pavilion is part of a broader strategy to expand high-tech exports in the health sector. "This is Iran's second consecutive year participating in Belarus Medica, and we hope this year's event leads to greater partnerships and export opportunities," Ghadari said.

He highlighted that the exhibition was officially opened by the Belarusian Minister of Health, who expressed satisfaction with Iran's active role and visited the Iranian pavilion along with other international exhibits.

During the four-day event, Iranian representatives are scheduled to hold several high-level meetings, including a B2B session involving the Belarusian Minister of Health, various Belarusian companies, and Iran's participating firms. A special meeting with the Belarus National Marketing Center is also planned to discuss market entry strategies and cooperation.



TEHRAN - Iran's Minister of Agriculture, Jihad Gholamreza Nouri, has proposed the creation of a "Union of Agricultural Research Institutions" and a "Union of Vaccine Production Institutes" within the BRICS framework during the 15th Meeting of BRICS Agriculture Ministers held in Brasilia, Brazil.

Addressing the summit, Nouri emphasized the critical importance of agriculture as the cornerstone of sustainable development for all BRICS member states. "Agriculture forms the foundation of livelihoods, food security, and economic growth in our countries," he said. "Recognizing this essential role, we must prioritize joint policies and practical actions that strengthen our agricultural sectors and maximize BRICS' collective potential."

The Iranian minister thanked the host nation, Brazil, for organizing the conference and highlighted the meeting's theme: building a shared vision for a sustainable agricultural future among BRICS countries.

Nouri described the summit as a crucial step toward achieving shared goals, particularly the goal of sustainable food security. He pointed out that BRICS—comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, and newly associated members like Iran—is increasingly recognized as a major force in global affairs, playing a pivotal role in fostering economic cooperation and strengthening food security.

"BRICS, by enhancing mutual trust among members and expanding its international influence, represents a significant share of global GDP and trade," Nouri noted. "By reducing trade barriers, we are moving toward greater economic integration."

He stressed that cooperation in the agricultural sector could act as a driver for technology transfer, the development of sustainable production methods, and deeper regional and global collaboration.

In his address, Nouri called for agricultural research and innovation centers to be acknowledged as central to collective BRICS efforts. He

stated that by enhancing research partnerships and exchanging expertise, member countries could better equip their farmers with sustainable farming techniques. He formally proposed Iran's initiative to establish the BRICS Union of Agricultural Research Institutions and a corresponding union for vaccine development.

"Iran supports the development of fair agricultural trade among BRICS nations as a key to strengthening food security and fostering economic growth," Nouri said. He proposed the establishment of a dynamic framework to expand agricultural trade and investment across BRICS countries.

Turning to global challenges, Nouri highlighted climate change as a significant threat to agriculture worldwide. "Shifting rainfall patterns, prolonged droughts, and declining water resources directly affect agricultural output and food security," he warned. "We must invest in environmentally friendly technologies, develop climate-smart farming systems, and expand the use of renewable energy in agriculture."

He also emphasized the strategic importance of the fisheries sector, announcing Iran's full support for the formation of a BRICS Fisheries Subgroup. Iran, he said, is ready to provide support, share its experiences, and actively participate in related discussions.

Nouri concluded by underlining the role of advanced technologies such as artificial intelligence in boosting agricultural productivity and mitigating the impacts of climate change. Expressing gratitude once again to the Brazilian authorities for hosting the summit, he reaffirmed Iran's strong commitment to expanding cooperation and unity among BRICS members.

"With collective effort and effective cooperation, we can build a prosperous, sustainable, and fair future for agriculture and ensure the well-being of our people," Nouri said in closing.

Regulatory Burdens Now Outweigh Sanctions for Iranian Traders

TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization (TPO), Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, has stated that inconsistent and excessive regulations are placing a heavier burden on Iranian traders than international sanctions.

Speaking Wednesday evening at a ceremony honoring top exporters in Razavi Khorasan province, Dehnavi highlighted the growing challenges Iranian exporters and importers face. "All traders, whether exporting or importing, are entangled in a maze of cumbersome and sometimes contradictory regulations," he said. "These regulatory obstacles now impose more pressure than the sanctions themselves."

Despite the challenges, he noted Razavi Khorasan achieved a significant 33% increase in the value of its non-oil exports last year—more than double the national average growth of 15.6%, which amounted to \$57.8 billion. Dehnavi praised this as one of the country's most successful export years.

The deputy minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade emphasized that the TPO has three primary objectives: streamlining trade procedures, promoting free trade agreements, and encouraging investment in export-oriented production.

"Removing bureaucratic barriers is a top priority," he stated, adding that such hurdles harm exporters more than sanctions and need to be eliminated to boost export-led growth and a dynamic economy.

He also addressed the economic relationship with neighboring Afghanistan, describing it as both vital and misunderstood. "Millions of Afghans live and work in Iran, often sending earnings back home for family support or investment. This creates a form of barter—goods exchanged for labor," he explained.

Dehnavi questioned the logic behind demanding foreign currency returns from traders who export to Afghanistan in local currency. "Why must we impose strict foreign exchange compliance when it's clear that financial exchanges with Afghanistan function differently?"



This rigid policy only restricts our exporters," he said.

He called for urgent reforms in foreign exchange commitment regulations, arguing that government intervention in trade processes should be minimized. "We all agree that export earnings belong to the country and should return to the economy. But it should not be up to the government to dictate when, how, and at what price," he said. "Such interference disrupts the flow of currency back into the system."

Dehnavi said exporters should be free to repatriate their earnings without bureaucratic interference.

Regarding free trade efforts, he announced that Iran's Free Trade Agreement with the five Eurasian

Economic Union (EAEU) member countries would take effect on May 14. "This agreement presents both opportunities and challenges for our business community," he said, adding that talks are underway with more than 10 other countries for similar deals.

The third focus of the TPO, he said, is fostering investment in export-oriented industries. "To achieve a major leap in exports, we must prioritize investment in production for export. This strategy is being actively pursued through the High Council for Non-Oil Exports and other bodies," he added.

Dehnavi reiterated that exports to Afghanistan should be treated as barter and not be hampered by rigid currency return regulations. He also highlighted Razavi Khorasan's potential as a leader in export-focused investment.

The TPO, he announced, will support the establishment of seven export terminals in the province, with the local export development task force approving all of them. "This delegation of authority will open a new front for exports in the region," he said.

The event concluded with a ceremony recognizing 44 top exporters from Razavi Khorasan, attended by Dehnavi, the provincial governor, and other officials.

Mersin: A Key Gateway for Iranian Goods to Europe and Africa



TEHRAN - The Secretary General of the Iran-Turkey Joint Chamber of Commerce has highlighted the strategic role of Turkey — and particularly the Port of Mersin — in facilitating the transit of Iranian goods to European and African markets. Discussions between Tehran and Ankara are currently underway to establish a bilateral free trade zone.

Speaking to ILNA, Mehdi Mousaei, Secretary General of the Iran-Turkey Joint Chamber of Commerce, said the creation of a free trade zone between the two nations hinges on future negotiations. "This issue has been raised in bilateral talks, and Iranian representatives have received positive signals from the Turkish side," Mousaei noted. However, he added that the progress of the initiative remains uncertain, with a detailed discussion scheduled for July. Previously, joint border markets have been active along the Iran-Turkey border.

Addressing bilateral trade volumes, Mousaei pointed out inconsistencies in trade data reporting. "Iran includes gas exports in its non-oil trade figures with Turkey, while the Turkish side does not classify gas as a non-oil commodity. As a result, trade statistics from both countries differ," he explained. He emphasized that Turkey functions as a critical transit corridor for Iranian exporters, with the Port of Mersin acting as a bridge to European and African markets. However, Turkish customs do not count re-exported Iranian goods toward bilateral trade, unlike Iranian authorities.

Despite these discrepancies, Mousaei said overall trade between the two countries is on an upward trajectory. "Turkey's total imports in 2024 reached \$300 billion, of which Iran's share was \$5 billion. This is a sharp decline compared to the pre-COVID era when bilateral trade values reached up to \$15 billion."

He also identified petrochemical products as the top category of Iranian exports to Turkey, followed by minerals, dried fruits, dates, pistachios, and saffron — all of which perform well in the Turkish market.

Iran Exports 29,000 Tons of Chicken in Past Year



TEHRAN – Iran exported 29,000 tons of chicken meat in the Iranian calendar year 1403 (March 2024 – March 2025), primarily to Iraq, Turkmenistan, Qatar, and Oman. According to industry officials, Kuwait has recently expressed interest in importing Iranian poultry as well.

Ali Ebrahimi, CEO of the National Union of Agricultural Cooperatives for Broiler Chicken Producers, told ILNA that over the past two years, Iran's poultry production has exceeded domestic consumption. As a result, the government allowed producers to export one kilogram of chicken for every two kilograms delivered to the Livestock Support Company.

"In the first half of the year alone, more than 18,000 tons were exported, and by the end of the year, the total reached 29,000 tons," Ebrahimi said.

He explained that Iraq remained the top destination for Iranian chicken exports in 1403, followed by Turkmenistan, Qatar, and Oman – all of which imported Iranian poultry for the first time. Kuwait has now also requested to import Iranian chicken, and producers are reportedly in discussions with Russia as well.

Ebrahimi noted that while there is still room for improvement in packaging and quality, the taste of Iranian chicken has aligned well with consumer preferences in neighboring countries, helping the product gain market share and outperform competitors.

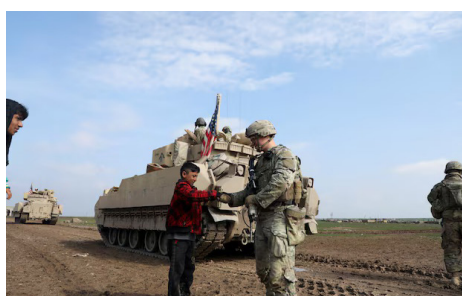
He criticized the government's pricing policy for poultry, stating that while the state sets a fixed price for chicken, it only provides corn and soy (used as poultry feed) at a subsidized rate of 28,500 toman per dollar. However, other costs—such as vaccines, transport, supplements, and labor—follow national inflation trends.

"The actual production cost of each kilogram of chicken now exceeds 70,000 toman, but producers are forced to sell at 59,000 to 60,000 toman per kilo. Chicken is currently the cheapest source of protein available," Ebrahimi said.

U.S. Military to Slash Troops in Syria to Under 1,000

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. military will consolidate its presence in Syria over the coming weeks and months in a move that could reduce the number of troops it has in the country by half, chief Pentagon spokesperson Sean Parnell said on Friday. The U.S. military has about 2,000 U.S. troops in Syria across a number of bases, mostly in the northeast. The troops are working with local forces to prevent a resurgence of Islamic State, which in 2014 seized large swathes of Iraq and Syria but was later pushed back.

"This deliberate and conditions-based process will bring the U.S. footprint in Syria down to less than a thousand U.S. forces in the coming months," Parnell said in a statement.



Ecuador Opposition Candidate Loses Coalition Backing



QUITO (Dispatches) - Ecuador's leftist presidential challenger Luisa Gonzalez plans to formally challenge the result of Sunday's election, claiming widespread fraud, although she has lost the support of a key allied party in disputing her defeat.

Election authorities and outside observers have said incumbent President Daniel Noboa secured a full term after sweeping the runoff vote that was held after a tight first round in February.

Noboa leads the official vote tally by more than 1 million votes with 55.62% support, while Gonzalez has 44.38%, with almost all votes counted, according to official data.

Noboa said in an interview with CNN this week that his win was so large it was "not up for discussion."

Gonzalez has alleged since Sunday that there was "grotesque" fraud and said late on Wednesday she would contest the results with the elections authority, without saying when. Results must be challenged within two days after the vote count closes.

In a video posted on social media, Gonzalez said thousands of ballots with irregularities had been identified and should be annulled.

"All of these findings, which are very serious, will be presented to authorities," Gonzalez said, adding that officials were "unfortunately, under the thumb of those in power."

Tanzanian Opposition Party Says Its Leader's Whereabouts Unknown



NAIROBI (Dispatches) - Tanzania's main opposition party said on Friday it could not establish the whereabouts of its leader Tundu Lissu after he was moved from a jail where he was being held following his arrest on treason charges last week.

Senior CHADEMA party officials, Lissu's lawyers and family members said they had tried unsuccessfully on different occasions on Friday to get access to him at a jail in the capital Dar es Salaam where he has been held since April 9.

"CHADEMA would like the Prisons Service, and concerned government agencies to give information on where Lissu has been taken," the party said in a statement.

The Prisons Service denied Lissu had been moved from jail.

"Such information is misinformation and false. We would like to inform the public that Tundu Lissu is safe and he is still detained at Keko Prison in Dar es Salaam according to the country's laws and procedures," Elizabeth Mbezi, Tanzania Prisons Service spokesperson, said in a statement.

Lissu, the runner-up in the country's 2020 presidential election, was charged with treason last week over what prosecutors said was a speech calling on the public to launch a rebellion and disrupt the election. He was not allowed to enter a plea on the treason charge.

Hezbollah Refuses Disarmament Under U.S. Pressure



BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Hezbollah "will not let anyone disarm" it, the Lebanese group's leader Naim Qassem said, as Washington presses Beirut to compel the Iran-backed movement to hand over its weapons.

Hezbollah, long a dominant force in Lebanese politics, was left weakened by more than a year of hostilities with Israel sparked by the Gaza war, including an Israeli ground incursion and two months of heavy bombardment that decimated the group's leadership.

The fighting was largely brought to an end by a November ceasefire, but not before the group's longtime leader and Qassem's predecessor Hassan Nasrallah was martyred in an Israeli air strike.

"We will not let anyone disarm Hezbollah or disarm the resistance" against Israel, Qassem said in remarks on a Hezbollah-affiliated TV channel.

"We must cut this idea of disarmament from the dictionary."

Lebanese President Joseph Aoun said this week that he wanted "to make 2025 the year of restricting arms to the state", adding he hoped to achieve that objective through "dialogue" with Hezbollah.

Qassem said his group was ready for dialogue on a "defence strategy", "but not under the pressure of occupation" by Israel. "Israel must withdraw (from south Lebanon) and cease its aggression, and the Lebanese state must begin the process of reconstruction," he added.

His comments came hours after another Hezbollah official said the group refused to discuss handing over its weapons until Israel withdrew completely from south Lebanon.

"It is not a question of disarming," Wafic Safa said in an interview with Hezbollah's Al-Nur radio station.

Safa, believed by experts to belong to the movement's most radical faction, said Hezbollah had conveyed its position to Aoun.

In his interview, Safa asked: "Wouldn't it be logical for Israel to first withdraw, then release the prisoners, then cease its aggression... and then we discuss a defensive strategy?"

"The defensive strategy is about thinking about how to protect Lebanon, not preparing for the party to hand over its weapons."

Analysts have said that the once unthinkable idea of Hezbollah disarming may no longer be so, and may even be inevitable. Under the November ceasefire, Israel was meant to withdraw all of its forces from south Lebanon.

But despite the deal, its troops have remained at five south Lebanon positions that they deem "strategic".

Israel has also continued to carry out near-daily strikes against Lebanon -- including on Friday -- saying it is targeting members of Hezbollah.

Under the truce, Hezbollah was to pull its fighters back north of Lebanon's Litani River and dismantle any remaining military infrastructure in the south.

Lebanon's army has been deploying in the south as Israeli forces pulled back.

Hezbollah says the ceasefire does not apply to the rest of Lebanon, despite being based on UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which calls for the disarmament of non-state groups.

Hezbollah was the only group to keep its weapons after Lebanon's 15-year civil war ended in 1990, saying that they were for "resistance" against Israel, which continued to occupy the south until 2000.

US special envoy for the Middle East Morgan Ortugas, who visited Beirut this month, said Washington continued to press Beirut "to fully fulfil the cessation of hostilities, and that includes disarming Hezbollah and all militias".

In his remarks on Friday, Qassem said Hezbollah rejected "American control over Lebanon".

Safa said that both Hezbollah and the Lebanese army were respecting the terms of the truce.

"The problem is Israel, which has not done so," he said.

On Saturday, a source close to Hezbollah told AFP that the group had ceded to the Lebanese army around 190 of its 265 military positions south of the Litani.

U.S. Will Abandon Ukraine Peace Push If No Progress Soon

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The United States will walk away from efforts to broker a Russia-Ukraine peace deal unless there are clear signs of progress soon, U.S. President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio said on Friday.

"Quickly, we want to get it done," Trump told reporters at the White House. "Now if for some reason one of the two parties makes it very difficult, we're just going to say, 'you're foolish, you're fools, you're horrible people, and we're going to just take a pass. But hopefully we won't have to do that.'"

Trump's comments followed remarks by Rubio, his top diplomat, who said the sides had just days to show progress or Washington would walk.

"We're not going to continue with this endeavour for weeks and months on end. So we need to determine very quickly now, and I'm talking about a matter of days, whether or not this is doable in the next few weeks," Rubio said in Paris after meeting European and Ukrainian leaders.

"If it's not possible, if we're so far apart that this is not going to happen, then I think the president is probably at a point where he's going to say, 'well, we're done'."

Trump, when asked, declined to set a specific deadline for how long he was willing to wait.

"Marco's right in saying ... we want to see it end," Trump said. Asked if Russian President Vladimir Putin was stalling, Trump replied: "I hope not."

Over the past few weeks, Trump officials have acknowledged privately that the chances of a quick peace deal in Ukraine have grown elusive. Rubio's comments, three European diplomats said, reflected growing frustration in the White House over Russian intransigence to end the war.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said some progress on a peace settlement had already been made but that contacts with Washington were difficult. He said



Russia was striving to resolve the conflict while ensuring its own interests. Moscow remained open to dialogue with the United States, he added.

U.S. officials were also frustrated by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskii's comment this week that Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, was "spreading Russian narratives," and said that was not helpful to the process, one U.S. official said.

The talks in Paris on Thursday were the first substantive, high-level and in-person talks on Trump's peace push that have included European powers. Rubio said a U.S. peace framework he presented received an "encouraging reception." Zelenskii's office called the talks constructive and positive.

Vice President JD Vance, speaking in Rome as he met Italian Prime Minister

Giorgia Meloni, said he was optimistic the United States could help end this "very brutal war".

A U.S. official said the sides would re-engage in London next week, giving Ukraine time to agree fully to a "term sheet" presented by Washington. Kyiv was ready for a comprehensive ceasefire over sea, land and air for at least 30 days or longer, the official said.

Trump promised during his election campaign to end the war in Ukraine within his first 24 hours in the White House. He moderated that claim on taking office, suggesting a deal by April or May as obstacles mounted.

He has pressured both sides to come to the negotiating table, threatening tougher sanctions on Russia or an end to billions of dollars in U.S. military support for Kyiv.

Both Ukraine and Russia showed up for U.S.-brokered talks in Saudi Arabia, which resulted in a partial ceasefire, but nothing more. Meanwhile, the war has continued, including a recent Russian missile attack that hit Stryi in northeastern Ukraine, killing 35 people - an attack Trump called a "mistake".

A source familiar with internal deliberations said Trump had made clear to his team he was questioning whether it was worthwhile sticking with the talks to break the impasse.

The first U.S. official said Rubio's comments were reflecting Trump's frustration with the issue and a concern that this will soon be "Trump's war."

If Washington walks away, efforts to broker a peace would likely founder because no other nation is able to bring similar pressure on both Moscow and Kyiv.

Other impacts are unclear. The United States could keep its current policy on the conflict unchanged, maintaining sanctions on Russia and keeping U.S. aid flowing to Kyiv. Alternatively, Trump could decide to halt payments to Ukraine.

Gaza Strip Shrinks as Israeli Military Expands Buffer Zones

GAZA CITY (Dispatches) - By seizing large swathes of the Gaza Strip, Israel is redrawing the map of the Palestinian territory, one of the most densely populated places on Earth, making it increasingly "unlivable".

On Wednesday, Defence Minister Israel Katz said the military has transformed vast areas representing 30 per cent of Gaza into buffer zones and displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestinians.

Agnes Levallois, lecturer at the Foundation for Strategic Research, said that leaving the buffer zones cleared and empty could be an end in itself.

"Israel's strategy in the Gaza Strip is to make the territory unlivable," she said, with some analysts saying that Israel now controls even more than 30 per cent of the territory.

An AFP calculation based on maps issued by the military found that the total area under Israeli control was more than 185 square kilometres or around 50 per cent of the territory.

On the ground, the Israeli army has created a wide security zone that follows Gaza's perimeter along its borders with both Israel and Egypt, particularly to reduce the risk of cross-border smuggling with the latter.

Troops have also established three militarised corridors — Philadelphia,



Morag, and Netzarim — cutting across the Gaza's width and dividing it into sections.

With 2.4 million people packed into 365 square kilometres, Gaza was already one of the world's most densely populated places before the war started on October 7, 2023 when Hamas attacked Israel.

"The Israeli army is increasingly resorting to so-called 'evacuation orders' which are, in fact, orders of forced displacement," said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights spokesperson Ravina Shamdasani.

"This has led to the forced transfer of Palestinians in Gaza into increasingly confined areas, where they have little or no access to vital services."

The remaining space is covered in ruins, with 80 per cent of civilian infrastructure totally or partly destroyed, according to the UN.

Nearly all Gazans have been displaced at least once, and many now live in schools turned shelters, under tents and in other makeshift shelters.

"We don't know what this government's strategy is, maybe we'll end up controlling all of Gaza, which means we'll have to set up a civil administration or a military regime," Michael Milshtein, Palestinian affairs expert at Tel Aviv University, told AFP.



Heat Pull Away From Hawks in OT

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Tyler Herro had a game-high 30 points, Davion Mitchell buried three 3-pointers in overtime and the Miami Heat advanced into the NBA playoffs with a 123-114 road victory over the Atlanta Hawks in the Eastern Conference play-in finale.

The No. 10 Heat, who began the four-team playoff-qualification tournament needing to win consecutive road games in order to advance, successfully followed up a 109-90 romp at Chicago in order to earn a first-round matchup with the East's top seed, the Cleveland Cavaliers.

"The whole season has led up to this," said Herro. "It wasn't the exact perfect season, but we fought back. We had a 10-game losing streak. ... We're (10-4) since then. To come back says a lot about our organization. And we've got to keep getting better."

The eighth-place Hawks failed to advance despite needing to win just one of two games. They were coming off a 120-95 defeat at Orlando on Tuesday.

After Trae Young hit a floater following a Herro 3-pointer to begin the extra session, Mitchell took over, bombing in a pair of threes to give Miami a lead it wouldn't relinquish.

"He's a pit bull," Herro said about Mitchell. "He's been a tremendous pickup. I'm so glad we got him." Andrew Wiggins' hoop gave Miami a nine-point cushion, after which the Hawks got no closer than three. Three-pointers by Herro and Mitchell in the final 1:41 iced the win, sending the Heat to the playoffs for the sixth consecutive season.

"They were, what, 5 of 6 on threes in overtime?" Hawks coach Quin Snyder said. "That's hard to overcome. We had some breakdowns. You are always going to look back and wish that was different. But give Miami credit."

Down by as many as 17 points early on and up by six in the fourth quarter, the Hawks needed two layups from Young in the final 52.3 seconds of regulation to force overtime.

His second basket, a driving layup with 1.3 seconds left, followed a missed free throw by Herro with 12.2 seconds left when the Heat had a chance to go up by three.

Wiggins misfired from the left corner at the regulation horn, extending the game an extra five minutes.

"I thought both teams played at a high level of competitiveness," said Snyder. "I'm very proud of our guys."

Half of Herro's 30 points came on 3-pointers. He hit 5 of 10 from beyond the arc, while Mitchell went 4-for-9 as part of his 16-point effort off the bench.

Bam Adebayo chipped in with 17 points, a team-high 11 rebounds and five blocks, while Wiggins totaled 20 points to go with eight rebounds and a team-high eight assists. Kel'el Ware and Haywood Highsmith added 12 points apiece, with Highsmith completing a double-double with 10 rebounds.

Young had 29 points and a game-high 11 assists for the Hawks. Onyeka Okongwu (28 points, game-high 12 rebounds) and Dyson Daniels (11 points, 10 rebounds) also recorded double-doubles, while Georges Niang went for 20 points off the bench and Caris LeVert had 15.

Meanwhile Bryce James, the second and youngest son of LeBron James, is officially a member of the Arizona Wildcats' 2025 class.

Committed to Arizona since January, Bryce signed with the Wildcats on Thursday, which the school announced on social media.

"What's going on Wildcat nation, can't wait to get there and start working. Bear Down," Bryce said in a video posted to the school's X account.

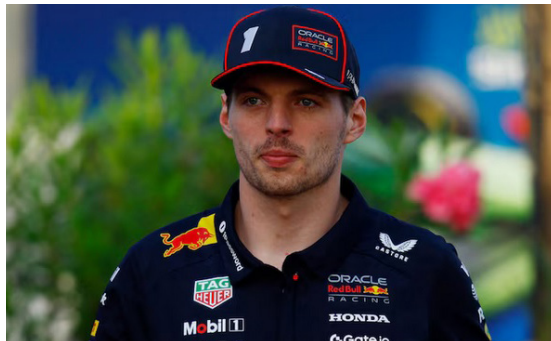
Like his older brother, Bronny, Bryce played at Sierra Canyon in the Los Angeles area. The 6-foot-4 player is listed by the 247Sports composite as a three-star recruit and the No. 45 shooting guard in the nation.

Bryce was part of a Sierra Canyon team that won the CIF State Division I title last month, beating Lincoln High School of Stockton 58-53.

In the title game, he recorded three points, five rebounds and two assists. On the season, he averaged 8.0 points and 4.2 rebounds a game.

Bryce turns 18 in June. He was born during the 2007 NBA Finals when his father's Cleveland Cavaliers were swept by the San Antonio Spurs.

Verstappen Very Relaxed About His F1 Future



JEDDAH (Dispatches) - Max Verstappen played it cool as speculation swirled around his Formula One future, with Red Bull's four-times world champion saying it was not on his mind and he was 'very relaxed'.

Red Bull's motorsport consultant Helmut Marko said after last Sunday's Bahrain Grand Prix that the team were concerned the Dutch driver might leave at the end of the season.

Verstappen finished only sixth, a week after he won in Japan, with McLaren's Oscar Piastri winning from pole with fastest lap.

"I don't know," Verstappen said when asked by an Italian reporter ahead of the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix why Ferrari were not being mentioned as a possible destination as well as Mercedes and Aston Martin.

"I mean, honestly, a lot of people are talking about it, except me.

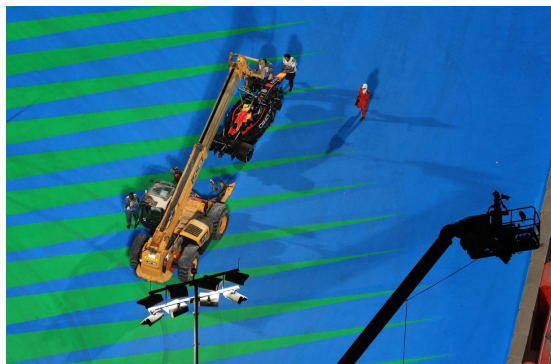
"I just want to focus on my car, work with the people in the team. That's the only thing that I'm thinking about in Formula One at the moment. I'm very relaxed."

Verstappen, who has a contract to 2028 with exit clauses, had led the championship for more than two years, since May 2022, until McLaren's Lando Norris won the season-opener in Australia.

The Red Bull driver is still only eight points adrift of Norris, and third overall in the standings, but McLaren have won three of four races.

"I just keep working, keep trying to improve the car. Naturally, Bahrain wasn't a great weekend for us. I think we were all pretty disappointed with that," said Verstappen.

McLaren Go 1-2 in Saudi GP Practice as Norris Hits Form



JEDDAH (Dispatches) - Lando Norris drew a line in the sand after his trying time in Bahrain last weekend and bossed a second practice at the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix marred by a crash for Red Bull's Yuki Tsunoda.

The Briton led a McLaren 1-2 in the night run at the Jeddah Corniche Circuit, his best time of 1min 28.267s edging his in-form teammate Oscar Piastri by a tenth of a second.

Piastri arrived at the Red Sea track on a high, after his second win of the season in Sakhr moved him to second, three points behind Norris, in the fledgling world championship standings.

In contrast, Norris, winner of the season-opener in Melbourne, was out of sorts in qualifying in Bahrain and in the race itself, doing well in the circumstances to make the podium.

Reflecting on his practice performance Norris said: "A good start to the weekend, getting comfy in the car and building confidence."

Piastri rated it "a solid Friday".

He added: "The competition doesn't seem far away, so we need to iron out a couple of things to put us in the best place for qualifying."

Max Verstappen and Red Bull had a rough time in Bahrain, the four-time world champion only finishing sixth, sparking crisis talks in the team on how to improve their car.

The Dutchman, a winner in Jeddah last year and 2022, posted the third quickest time, almost three tenths of a second behind.

"For tomorrow (qualifying) it is difficult to say how competitive we will be," said Verstappen.

"McLarens look really competitive. There is still a bit of work to do and things to understand, so we'll see."

Ferrari's Charles Leclerc and Williams' Carlos Sainz completed the top five.

The session began with one driver missing.

Gabriel Bortoletto's Sauber developed a fuel leak before the session began forcing the Brazilian out.

That was not helpful for the rookie, as it robbed him of a crucial run out in evening race conditions under the floodlights.

In the early stages, with the track as busy as downtown rush hour in Jeddah, Lance Stroll came to an unscripted stop at turn one, the Canadian locking up his Aston Martin prompting a brief yellow flag.

Zverev Rallies to Reach Munich Semis

MUNICH (Dispatches) - Home favorite Alexander Zverev rallied for a 6-7 (6), 7-6 (3), 6-4 quarterfinal win against Dutchman Tallon Griekspoor at the BMW Open in Munich, Germany.

Griekspoor served for the match at 5-4 in the second set before the top-seeded Zverev dug deep to finish in 3 hours and 14 minutes. Closing in on his third Munich title, Zverev's opponent in Saturday's semifinal will be unseeded Hungarian Fabian Marozsan, a 6-3, 7-6 (4) winner over Belgium's Zizou Bergs.

The other semifinal pits No. 2 seed Ben Shelton against No. 5 Francisco Cerundolo of Argentina. Shelton struck seven aces and never faced a break point in a 6-4, 6-3 defeat of Italy's Luciano Darderi. Cerundolo moved on with a 6-2, 6-4 victory against Belgium's David Goffin.

Meanwhile top-seeded Carlos Alcaraz moved closer to his third Barcelona title with a 7-5, 6-3 quarterfinal win against No. 5 seed Alex de Minaur of Australia in Spain.

Alcaraz fell behind 3-1 in the opening set before finding his form and advancing to the semifinals against seventh-seeded Frenchman Arthur Fils, who had a 2-0 lead over Stefanos Tsitsipas when the third-seeded Greek retired due to an injury.



No. 6 seed Holger Rune of Denmark and unseeded Russian Karen Khachanov meet in the other semifinal. Rune took down No. 2 Casper Ruud of Norway 6-4, 6-2 and Khachanov advanced with a 6-4, 7-5 victory against Spain's Alejandro Davidovich Fokina.

Meanwhile in a two-hour, 30-minute battle, No. 3 seed Olga Danilovic of Serbia defeated No. 5 seed Moyuka Uchijima of Japan

7-6 (9), 4-6, 6-1 in the quarterfinals of the Open Capfinances Rouen Metropole in Rouen, France.

Uchijima saved four set points in the first-set tiebreaker and served for the set at 8-7. Danilovic won that point to stay alive, failed to convert at 9-8 and finally put the set away on her sixth set point. She finished the match with a 4-1 edge in aces and a 7-for-10 success rate in saving break points.

Danilovic's semifinal opponent will be Suzan Lamens. The Netherlands native defeated French teenager Tiantsoa Rakotomanga Rajaonah 6-3, 6-3.

No. 1 seed Elina Svitolina of Ukraine won in straight sets for the third consecutive round, 6-3, 6-2 over Spaniard Jessica Bouzas Maneiro. Svitolina will face Romania's Elena-Gabriela Ruse, who swept past France's Jessika Ponchet 6-2, 6-2.

There were no matches played in Stuttgart, Germany, due to a state rule prohibiting sporting events on Good Friday.

The quarterfinals will be played Saturday, the semifinals on Easter Sunday and the final on Monday. No. 1 seed Aryna Sabalenka of Belarus has yet to play in the event after receiving a first-round bye and a second-round walkover. She'll face Belgium's Elise Mertens in the quarterfinals.

Messi Risks More Mexican Backlash by Dismissing Rivalry With Argentina

BUENOS AIRES (Dispatches) - These days, it seems everywhere Lionel Messi goes, he's welcomed with praise and adoration. But there's a country where there's still polarizing opinions regarding the Argentine star: Mexico.

Messi reignited the fury of Mexican fans this week when he spoke on Argentina's rivalry with Mexico, or rather, how it's non-existent.

In an interview with Quique Wolff on *Simplemente Futbol*, Messi dismissed Argentina's rivalry with Mexico. "I don't know what happened with Mexicans, when this rivalry and their anger started," Messi said. "I think they [Mexicans] put themselves in a position to have a rivalry with us [Argentina] that doesn't really exist. There's no comparison between Argentina and Mexico."



The 2022 FIFA World Cup champion admitted he felt surprised at the anger of Mexican fans because he's "always felt very loved by the people of Mexico," adding that he "never disrespected anyone."

Messi recalled the goal he scored against Mexico during the 2022 Qatar World Cup and his passionate celebration that followed. "[The celebration] was more relief because of the importance of the goal, it wasn't against the people. The match was tense because Mexico always brings people everywhere, to World Cups and other competitions and I think it was the only game [during the 2022 World Cup] where you could feel, I don't know if there were more Mexicans than Argentinians [in the stands], but it was very even."