

Iran Reportedly Is Planning to Turn Its Qeshm Island Into a Major Bunkering Hub in the Persian Gulf to Rival the UAE's Fujairah, Through Investing Heavily in the Salakh Port of Qeshm, Which Is Only 8 Kms From Major Shipping Routes in the Persian Gulf

IRAN NEWS

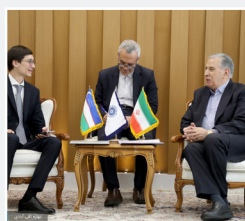
Tajikistan's Minister of Energy and Water Resources Daler Juma, in Meeting With Ali Najafi Khoshrud, Iran's Vice President's Deputy for International and Regional Cooperation, Described Iran as One of the Country's Most Important Strategic Partners in the Region

VOL. XXIX, No. 8246 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

MONDAY APRIL 21, 2025 ORDIBEHESHT 01, 1404

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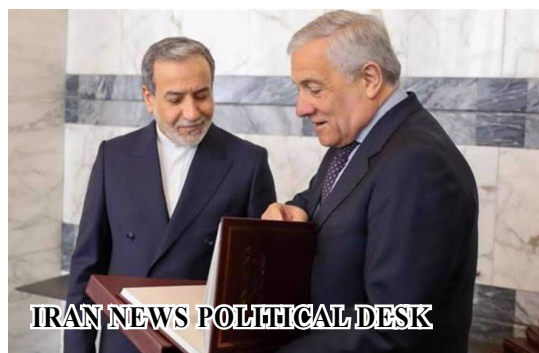
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Rome Talks Made Progress on Principles of Likely Deal



TEHRAN - Iran's foreign minister says the latest round of indirect talks with the United States in Rome yielded progress on principles of a potential agreement, warning, though, that any sense of optimism has to be accompanied by great caution.

In a post on X, former Twitter, on Saturday, Abbas Araqchi said that the "relatively positive atmosphere" characterizing the talks in the Italian capital had resulted in advancement on the foundational aspects of a "possible deal."

The top diplomat, meanwhile, commented on Iran's stance on the 2015 nuclear accord between the Islamic Republic and world countries, which is officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Washington left the deal three years after its conclusion, before returning the illegal and unilateral sanctions that it had lifted as per the agreement, and piling up even more coercive measures on Tehran.

"We made clear how many in Iran believe that the JCPOA is no longer good enough for us. To them, what is left from that deal are 'lessons learned.' Personally, I tend to agree," Araqchi wrote.

His comments came after Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei criticized the country's tying its various affairs to the negotiations that led to the JCPOA's conclusion, advising avoidance of associating national progress with this round of talks.

The Rome talks marked the second round of indirect discussions between Tehran and Washington in recent weeks, with Oman playing the role of the mediator.

Talks were held at the residence of Oman's ambassador to Italy, with both delegations stationed in separate rooms.

Azerbaijan Denies Long-Term Visas to Iranians



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Vice President of the Iran-Azerbaijan Joint Chamber of Commerce, Mehran Fekri, emphasized the urgent need for bilateral negotiations between Tehran and Baku to address growing challenges facing Iranian trade and transportation. He revealed that Azerbaijan currently does not issue long-term visas to Iranian citizens and only grants electronic visas for short visits.

Fekri made these remarks ahead of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian's scheduled visit to Baku, which he described as having strong economic dimensions. The president will be accompanied by a 120-member delegation, including four provincial governors and a number of private sector business leaders.

He said the presence of economic actors in the delegation indicates hopes for progress on trade relations. One of the anticipated outcomes is the reopening of the Astara and Bileh-Savar border crossings for passenger travel—routes that have remained closed since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Currently, direct flights between the two countries are suspended, and overland travel is restricted solely to cargo trucks.

Fekri also addressed political tensions stemming from a 2022 armed attack by an Iranian national on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran, which led to casualties among Azerbaijani personnel. The incident significantly damaged bilateral ties, and Azerbaijani officials continue to demand justice for the attack.

New Markets Await Iranian Oil; 21 E&P Companies Ready for Foreign Partnerships

TEHRAN - The Secretary General of the Federation of Oil Industry has announced that 21 Iranian Exploration and Production (E&P) companies are currently ready to attract investment and collaborate with major international firms, particularly in the development of joint oil and gas fields.

Speaking to ILNA, Erfan Afazeli discussed the prospects for oil and gas development in the event of a successful agreement in ongoing negotiations. "Given our historical ties with European companies, if we manage to reach a strong agreement with the United States, the energy sector will naturally become the primary destination for foreign investment in Iran," he said. He emphasized that the new administration's top priority is investment in energy, particularly due to imbalances in gas, electricity, and oil product sectors.

Afazeli underscored the importance of the oil industry, calling it the backbone of Iran's economy. He explained that for years, Iran has been preparing the necessary infrastructure to attract foreign investors, especially for the development of oil and gas fields. "We currently have 21 E&P companies ready for capital intake and joint operations with international companies. Our top priority remains the development of shared fields," he noted.

The Secretary General stressed that in addition to attracting investment, acquiring modern technology and upgrading equipment is also crucial. "Recently, the National Iranian Drilling Company has moved to purchase \$800 million worth of rigs and drilling equipment, highlighting the industry's need for modernization," he added.

He pointed out that oil production and well drilling are inherently complex and risky processes, necessitating constant equipment upgrades. "By leveraging new technologies, we can significantly improve efficiency in drilling, production, and refining," Afazeli said.

Afazeli also stated that a successful agreement would facilitate Iranian oil exports. "Currently, over 90% of Iranian oil is sold to China due to sanctions. Our goal now must be to diversify both export products and markets. This process will take time, as Iran has not engaged with many countries for years due to the sanctions. Many nations have adapted their refineries to oil from other sources," he explained.



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

He acknowledged the difficulty of securing a favorable agreement with the U.S., noting that it is the world's largest oil producer and consumer, and has urged Iran's customers to purchase American oil instead. "Nevertheless, an agreement, while challenging and time-consuming, is not out of reach," Afazeli said.

Highlighting the importance of long-term strategy, Afazeli stated that if an agreement is reached, foreign companies should engage with Iranian E&P firms not only for joint field development but also for technology transfer and equipment supply. He urged the Ministry of Petroleum to focus on empowering the private sector as a strategic move. "A robust private sector will benefit

not only the companies themselves but also the government and the country as a whole," he said.

Afazeli emphasized Iran's highly skilled workforce as a key national asset. "If sanctions are lifted, we'll be in a strong position to establish joint ventures with neighbors like Iraq, Oman, and Kuwait, who are eager to work with us," he added.

He also mentioned the importance of energy efficiency. "Until the National Organization for Energy Optimization and Strategic Energy Management is officially established, the Ministry of Petroleum remains responsible for overseeing consumption optimization. It should prioritize increasing efficiency to enhance production while managing consumption," he explained.

Lastly, Afazeli called for greater focus on downstream industries. "Development of the petrochemical value chain is crucial and highly dependent on foreign investment and advanced technologies. Strengthening this sector could significantly boost foreign exchange earnings," he noted.

He concluded by stressing the need to modernize Iran's aging refineries. "Modernization will improve fuel quality, reduce sulfur content in mazut, and increase the overall value of refinery outputs. Iran's existing infrastructure and expert workforce position the country well to welcome foreign partners and expand its global presence in the oil industry."

Iran Launches First Monazite Production Plant in the Country and West Asia

TEHRAN - Iran has inaugurated its first monazite production facility, marking a major milestone in the extraction of rare earth elements. With the launch of this project, the country aims to take significant steps toward manufacturing advanced high-tech equipment.

According to a report from the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade (MIMT), Minister Seyed Mohammad Atabak officially opened the small-scale monazite plant owned by Tajalli Mining and Metals Development Company, located in the Abbasabad Industrial Zone.

Speaking at the opening ceremony, Minister Atabak highlighted the strategic importance of the achievement, noting that only a few countries in the world have succeeded in producing rare earth elements. "This is a critical development for our nation," he said.

He expressed optimism that the activation of such factories would accelerate Iran's progress in high-tech industries. "Processing rare earth elements is a fundamental step toward advancing cutting-edge industrial sectors," he stated, calling for expansion of project-based programs aligned with national development strategies.

Mining expert Morteza Ali Akbari praised the dedication of the company's skilled staff, saying their continuous efforts have placed Iran among the few countries with the capability to extract and process rare earth elements.

Following the minister's visit to the facility, Akbari said Atabak had a very positive outlook and encouraged further development in the sector.

"We have successfully designed, built, installed, and launched 100% of the equipment used in the plant, some of which are being used for the first time in Iran," Akbari noted. The equipment was developed in collaboration with a private sector company using local expertise.



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

He added that the project effectively marked two key milestones: the launch of advanced machinery and the commissioning of the monazite concentrate processing line, leading to the production of rare earth oxides.

Ali Akbari revealed that the Industry Minister encouraged the company to expand its production capacity two to three times beyond initial expectations. "The Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade has pledged full support and coordination to facilitate mass production, which is a great source of encouragement," he said.

Commenting on the future outlook, he emphasized that the strong support from the government would enable the company to advance rapidly and confidently in developing this critical and strategic industry.

The plant also offers capabilities beyond monazite production. "In addition to producing

rare earth oxides, this pilot and semi-industrial line can be used for research and development in other mineral sectors," said Akbari.

The CEO of Tajalli Mining and Metals Development Company stated that the facility could serve as a semi-industrial laboratory and R&D center for testing and processing approximately 90% of the country's key minerals. With the addition of final equipment, the plant is expected to reach full capacity within the next two to three months.

The rare earth elements project for monazite concentrate, developed by Tajalli in partnership with a knowledge-based firm, represents the first of its kind in both Iran and the West Asia region to reach industrial-scale production.

Monazite, a key rare earth mineral, has widespread applications in sectors ranging from agriculture and medicine to aerospace, steel production, electronics, and electric generators.

Isfahan to Host 2026 UNWTO Global Tourism Meeting



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Deputy Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts announced that the city of Isfahan has been selected to host the 2026 UNWTO Global Tourism Commission Meeting, marking a significant step in countering negative perceptions of Iran in the international arena.

Speaking at a press conference in Tehran, Deputy Minister Anoushirvan Mohseni Bandpey emphasized that Isfahan's selection showcases Iran's tourism potential and challenges ongoing Iranophobia campaigns. He noted that the move underscores global recognition of Iran's rich cultural heritage.

The announcement came following the 37th UNWTO East Asia-Pacific and the 60th South Asia Commission Meetings held in Jakarta, where Tehran was also chosen to host the first-ever UN World Forum on Urban Tourism. The forum is scheduled for June 24-25, 2025 (Tir 3-4, 1404) in the Abbasabad Cultural and Tourism Zone.

Mohseni Bandpey also revealed plans to launch direct flights between Tehran and Jakarta, aiming to boost tourism and ease travel between Iran and Indonesia. "During our meeting with Indonesian officials, we agreed on a number of initiatives to enhance bilateral tourism ties, including this direct air route," he stated.

He highlighted Indonesia's interest in pilgrimage tourism, noting that 90% of Indonesians are Muslim. "With 11 million tourists visiting Indonesia annually and 8 million Indonesians traveling abroad, Iran has a unique opportunity to attract visitors seeking religious and cultural experiences," he added.

Addressing domestic tourism efforts, the deputy minister reported strong performance during the recent Nowruz holiday season, citing improvements in travel infrastructure, fuel distribution, and emergency services. Over 146 million liters of gasoline were distributed daily without disruption.

Iran Army Possesses Ultra-Secret, AI-Powered Weapons



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The commander of the Ground Force of the Iranian Army has revealed the existence of domestically-developed, ultra-secret weapons powered by artificial intelligence in the force's arsenal, while reasserting that the Islamic Republic was fully prepared to decisively confront any threat.

"We possess highly advanced weapons, some of which are secret or even ultra-secret. These are extremely sophisticated systems that utilize artificial intelligence. Although still classified as conventional weapons, their capabilities are exceptional," Brigadier General Kioumars Heidari said on Saturday.

The commander, who was speaking during an interview with Iran's al-Alam news network, emphasized that these systems had not been publicly disclosed over strategic concerns, but were fully operational.

Heidari highlighted a significant transformation within the Ground Force since Iraq's 1980-88 imposed war on Iran that had seen it shift from a traditional structure to a modern, dynamic, and highly mobile force.

"Today, our ground units are capable of fast movement, high maneuverability, full offensive capabilities, and rapid intervention," he said.

The senior military official further noted that the Ground Force had employed weapons and systems, which were among the most advanced globally, enabling comprehensive situational awareness and security coverage across the country's borders.



Iran Produces 30.2m Tons of Steel in 1403

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The Iranian Steel Producers Association has announced that the country produced approximately 30.2 million tons of steel during the Iranian calendar year 1403 (March 2024–March 2025). According to a report published on Saturday by IRNA, nearly 2 million tons of semi-finished steel production—worth an estimated \$1 billion—was lost due to electricity and gas shortages. The country’s upward trend in steel production, which had continued for two years after 1400 (2021–2022), came to a halt. Production levels have now returned to figures last seen in 1399 (2020–2021). The report notes that severe gas supply restrictions have rendered new sponge iron capacities ineffective.

Iran to Sign Over 70 Trillion Toman Investment Deal in Rail Fleet Sector



TEHRAN - The Minister of Roads and Urban Development announced that a major investment agreement worth over 70 trillion tomans (approximately \$1.4 billion USD) will be signed for the development and production of the country’s railway fleet. The deal, set to be finalized tomorrow, involves partnerships with domestic investors and aims to enhance both importation and local manufacturing of rolling stock.

Speaking during a joint session of the Provincial Planning and Development Council and the Housing Council in Isfahan, Minister Farzaneh Sadegh emphasized the strategic importance of the transportation and housing sectors. She noted that while housing is a national priority, transportation infrastructure is especially vital in provinces like Isfahan, where key corridors such as the Tehran-Qom-Isfahan high-speed railway pass through.

Sadegh called for a reassessment of the Tehran-Qom-Isfahan high-speed rail project, stressing that the advanced technology introduced through such initiatives should also be extended to other major cities, including Mashhad, to accommodate high volumes of religious tourism.

Highlighting the need to build trust in both domestic and foreign investment, the minister reaffirmed the government’s commitment to upgrading the quality of transportation fleets despite current limitations. She stated, “We are not here to create headlines with tweets. Our aim is to deliver real, tangible improvements that people can experience — such as more available seats once the new aircraft are operational.”

Sadegh also addressed recent criticisms regarding delays in the aviation sector, insisting that progress will be visible once new airplanes are ready for passenger service.

On the housing front, the minister acknowledged delays in land preparation for housing projects, particularly in places like Shahr-e-Reza, where citizens had made contributions as early as 2021. She vowed not to hand over unprepared land to the public, noting that land development across cities and towns is now underway.

She also unveiled new housing support packages aimed at easing rental costs and stimulating the housing market, particularly in large cities. These include two financial aid packages worth 20 and 200 trillion tomans, targeting both rental deposits and the purchase of completed housing units.

European Airlines Set to Return to Tehran if Agreement Reached



TEHRAN - In a significant development that could reshape Iran’s aviation sector, Saeed Chalenderi, CEO of Imam Khomeini Airport City, announced that European airlines and international transit companies such as DHL and NACO are ready to resume operations at Tehran’s Imam Khomeini International Airport, pending a potential agreement with the United States.

Chalenderi emphasized that the airport’s development has not been dependent on international sanctions, noting that over 250 trillion rials (approximately \$500 million) have been invested in the airport, with 50 trillion rials of that amount already completed. Remarkably, a portion of these investments came from foreign companies, despite the existing sanctions.

“We have never tied Imam Airport’s progress to international conditions,” Chalenderi said. “We’ve used every opportunity and domestic capacity to move forward, particularly during the toughest years of sanctions.”

He added that while local capabilities remain a priority, the lifting of sanctions would likely boost the number of flights and lead to the return of European airlines to Iran’s airspace — increasing revenue and revitalizing the aviation sector.

According to Chalenderi, mutual agreements between countries determine aviation rights, meaning that if Air France, for example, resumes flights to Tehran, Iranian carriers would also be allowed to fly to European destinations.

One major goal, he said, is to revive the country’s air transit program. “During the JCPOA era, we had promising negotiations with global logistics firm DHL. If a new agreement is reached, we aim to renew that cooperation and make Iran a regional hub for air cargo transit.”

Regarding the Dutch consulting firm NACO, which had been involved in the airport’s development during the JCPOA period, Chalenderi clarified that the company was never officially dismissed. “We placed NACO on standby due to currency payment challenges, but if an agreement is reached, we plan to reactivate their role in overseeing the airport’s expansion.”

Iranian Private Sector Ready for Joint Investment in Uzbekistan

TEHRAN - Iran’s private sector is prepared to deepen economic ties with Uzbekistan through joint investments, particularly in the textile and garment sectors, according to Samad Hassanzadeh, President of Iran’s Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture.

Speaking during a high-level meeting with Shakhrukh Ghulamov, Uzbekistan’s Deputy Minister of Industry, Trade, and Investment, Hassanzadeh emphasized the need for stronger cooperation and outlined key steps to expand bilateral trade.

The meeting coincides with growing economic exchanges between the two countries, and ahead of the upcoming Iran-Uzbekistan Joint Economic Commission set to convene next month. A Preferential Trade Agreement is expected to be signed on the sidelines of the commission, which could significantly elevate trade relations.

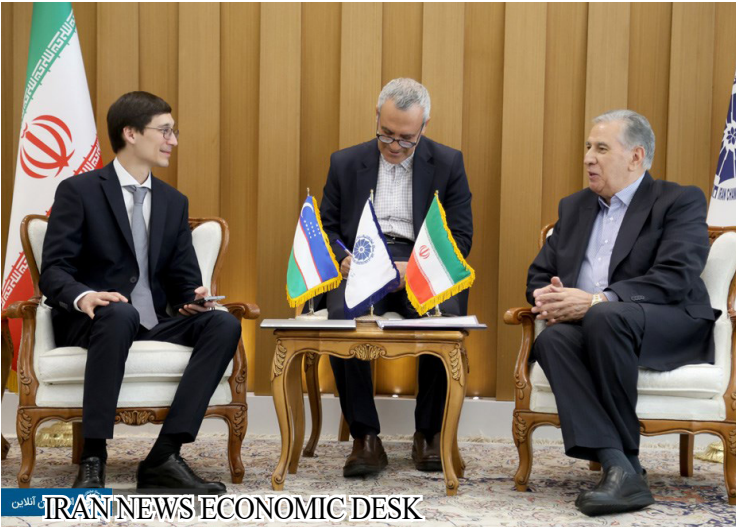
“The current trade volume of approximately \$500 million does not reflect the real potential of our two nations,” Hassanzadeh stated. “Iran’s private sector, represented by the Chamber of Commerce, is fully prepared to take every necessary step to boost this figure.”

Highlighting Iran’s economic strengths, Hassanzadeh invited Uzbek participation in the Iran Expo, scheduled to begin April 28. He cited Iran’s extensive capabilities in engineering services, petrochemicals, oil, food industries, and automobile manufacturing as attractive areas for collaboration.

He further noted that both Iran’s government and private sector are keen to foster ties with neighboring and regional nations. “Our shared historical, religious, and cultural bonds provide a strong foundation for broader cooperation—not just economically, but also in education and cultural exchanges,” he said.

Praising Uzbekistan’s decision to remove a \$400 transit fee on Iranian trucks, Hassanzadeh said the move would enhance cooperation along the North-South Corridor, a strategic trade route linking Central Asia with the Persian Gulf.

In a significant policy suggestion, Hassanzadeh urged the Uzbek government to waive visa requirements for Iranian citizens on a reciprocal basis.



“Facilitating travel will not only support business interactions but also promote tourism. Iran has strong capabilities in medical tourism, healthcare services, and pharmaceutical production, all of which offer promising grounds for cooperation.”

He reiterated Iran’s interest in joint ventures in Uzbekistan and called for supportive policies from the Uzbek government to facilitate private sector investment. “With closer cooperation between our chambers of commerce, I am confident that bilateral trade could reach one billion dollars,” he concluded.

Abdollah Mohajer Darabi, a member of the Iran Chamber’s board, echoed these sentiments. He pointed out the long-standing commercial ties between the two countries and emphasized the need for institutional support to reach the \$1 billion trade target.

“The opening of Iran’s commercial office in Tashkent, planned for late May, will be a key step forward,” Mohajer announced. However, he warned that without a well-defined joint financial and banking framework, further trade expansion would be difficult.

Shakhrukh Ghulamov, leading a delegation of over 100 Uzbek companies, praised the strong national network of Iran’s chambers of commerce and emphasized Uzbekistan’s readiness to engage in all sectors proposed by Iran.

“Our two nations share deep-rooted ties that can be the basis for joint ventures and enhanced cooperation,” he stated. Ghulamov emphasized the significance of Uzbekistan’s presence at the upcoming Iran Expo, noting that it reflects Iran’s importance to Tashkent.

He warmly welcomed Iranian private sector investment in Uzbekistan and set a bold target for future trade. “Given our capacities, there is no reason we cannot push our trade volume to five billion dollars. The potential is there—now is the time to act,” he concluded.

Iran, Azerbaijan Poised for Stronger Economic Cooperation in Engineering, Construction Sectors

TEHRAN - In a recent meeting of the Iran Chamber of Commerce’s Commission for Engineering and Construction Services, experts emphasized the high potential for economic cooperation between Iran and the Republic of Azerbaijan. The discussion focused on boosting Iran’s technical and engineering service exports and preparing the private sector for participation in international projects.

The meeting, chaired by Deputy Presidents of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Peyman Bagheri and Ghadir Ghiafah, reviewed the upcoming visit of Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian to Azerbaijan. The President will be accompanied by a high-ranking economic delegation, including over 120 private sector representatives and four provincial governors from northwestern Iran. The visit, scheduled for April 27, aims to open a new chapter in Iran-Azerbaijan economic relations.

A major highlight of the meeting was the announcement of an international workshop on the export of engineering services, co-organized by Iran’s Organization for Investment and Economic and Technical Assistance and the OPEC Fund for International Development. Scheduled for May 13–14, the workshop will cover key areas such as project identification for financing through OPEC, and training Iranian consulting firms in drafting competitive technical and financial proposals.

Amir-Reza Ahmadi-Motlagh, an advisor to the commission, noted that the workshop will also help Iranian contractors enhance their ability to compete in international tenders. Participants will gain insight into how the OPEC Fund evaluates and scores consultants and contractors—an essential step in securing future international projects.

Behrouz Poursoliman, Deputy President of the Ardabil Chamber and Iran-Azerbaijan Joint Chamber, pointed out that while Iran has a historical trade relationship with Azerbaijan, Iranian firms currently have a minor role in Azerbaijan’s engineering market. Most reconstruction projects in the Karabakh region are dominated by Turkish and Pakistani firms. He stressed that Iranian companies have significant potential to contribute, especially in rebuilding efforts in liberated regions of Azerbaijan.

Ghadir Ghiafah emphasized Azerbaijan’s vast opportunities, particularly in oil and gas sectors, where global giants like Shell are active. He urged Iranian firms to build their international networks and financial strength to win future bids.

Peyman Bagheri highlighted past engineering collaborations between the two countries, such as Iranian companies’ work in electricity transmission during the late 2000s. He noted that political issues have overshadowed these achievements but expressed



optimism that the President’s visit could help resolve longstanding barriers.

He called for strategic private-sector involvement in the upcoming delegation, suggesting that Iranian businesses prepare specific, written proposals to present during B2B meetings in Baku.

Ali Naqavi, head of the commission, discussed potential scenarios if sanctions on Iran are lifted following negotiations with the United States. Citing a study, he estimated that if Iran is allowed to sell 3 million barrels of oil per day at an average price of \$75 per

barrel, annual revenues could reach \$82 billion. However, fully realizing Iran’s development goals—including expanding power generation, high-speed railways, airports, and 5G infrastructure—would require an estimated \$270 billion over a decade.

Several commission members highlighted systemic issues, including lack of reliable data and poor strategic planning. Soheil Al-Rasoul, Deputy President of the Commission, stressed the need for a robust national database to support evidence-based policymaking and reduce uncertainty for private investors.

Reza Hajikarim, President of Iran’s Water Industry Federation, warned that economic development must not ignore the country’s water crisis. He added that even under current legislation, progress is possible if regulators and policymakers align.

Other experts, including Alireza Moghaddaszadeh and Mohammad Halvaei, emphasized the need to define new financial models and support mechanisms for infrastructure projects. They called for reforms in Iran’s economic governance to strengthen the role of the private sector, and criticized the government’s lack of attention to long-term vision documents and the competitive challenges posed by semi-state-owned enterprises.

In the final part of the meeting, Isa Mansouri, head of the Iran Chamber’s Research Center, advocated for transforming the center’s role from merely producing academic studies to developing actionable policy frameworks. He emphasized the need for a new cooperation framework between the Commission and the Research Center, suggesting that research projects be aligned with national development goals and converted into practical legislation.

Mansouri identified engineering services and construction as key sectors for national development, especially in logistics, and outlined four scenarios for Iran-U.S. negotiations, stressing the importance of regional economic development using international experience.

The session concluded with a proposal to define large-scale national projects in sectors such as oil, gas, petrochemicals, digital economy, logistics, and development of the Makran region.

U.S. Companies See Investment Potential in Iran



TEHRAN - Tehran, Iran – The Chairman of the Iranian Foreign Joint Investment Association (IFJIA), Hossein Salimi, has highlighted Iran’s strong potential to attract American investment, particularly in the oil and energy sector, should diplomatic relations between the two countries improve. According to Salimi, Iran offers a unique investment advantage due to its abundance of raw materials, inexpensive labor, and significantly lower production costs—about 50% less than in the U.S. or Europe.

In an interview with ILNA, Salimi emphasized that American oil giants, such as Shell, are well-positioned to invest heavily in Iran’s energy sector. He noted that Iran’s oil production, once nearing 7 million barrels per day, has dropped to around 3 million barrels due to sanctions and a lack of foreign investment in necessary extraction equipment. Easing tensions and allowing U.S. investors into Iran could swiftly increase the country’s oil revenues, helping alleviate foreign currency shortages.

Beyond oil, Salimi pointed out that American investment would also bring advanced technology and modern machinery into Iran, giving a much-needed boost to domestic production. He said improved ties with the U.S. would likely encourage other international investors to follow suit.

He also referenced recent policy changes aimed at supporting foreign investors, including new regulations allowing machinery imports using export earnings or gold-based currency settlements. However, he stressed that lifting sanctions would reduce the need for workaround strategies that increase transaction costs and complicate trade.

Drawing comparisons with China and Turkey, Salimi explained that China attracted \$300 billion in foreign investment within a year of opening its economy, with many U.S. manufacturers setting up operations there despite China’s lack of oil or gas resources. Similarly, Turkey achieved economic growth and global connectivity through foreign investment, despite not being a major energy producer.

60,000 Tons of Goods Transported to Afghanistan via Khaf-Herat Railway



TEHRAN - A total of 60,000 tons of export and transit goods were transported to Afghanistan in 2024 via the Khaf-Herat railway, according to Mustafa Rezaei, CEO of the Afghanistan Railway Development Consortium.

Rezaei told IRNA that the volume of goods moved across the “Shantigh” border station in Khaf County, northeastern Iran, has seen a sharp rise. In 2023, only 11,500 tons of goods had been transferred along the same route, most of which consisted of materials for railway construction.

Of the 60,000 tons transferred in 2024, about 20,000 tons were railway construction supplies, including concrete sleepers, rails, and building materials for Afghanistan’s rail infrastructure. The remaining 40,000 tons included both Iranian exports and transit goods from other countries.

Iran’s exports through this corridor comprised mainly cement, chemical fertilizers, and food products. Transit goods included soybean meal, iron products, and sugar—largely originating from China, India, and the United Arab Emirates.

Rezaei noted a sharp increase in rail trade during the winter months, with 35,000 tons moved in that season alone. He projected a significant leap in freight volume in 2025, estimating that up to 200,000 tons of goods may be transported via the route.

The Khaf-Herat railway line, which currently extends from the Iranian border to the Rozanak station in Afghanistan, is undergoing rapid expansion. A new station—Robat Parian, located 20 kilometers from Herat—is expected to be completed in the first half of 2025. Once operational, the standard-gauge railway will stretch 105 kilometers into Afghanistan, further enhancing cross-border trade capacity.

Around 160 Arrested After Mobs Attacked KFC Outlets in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD (Dispatches) - Around 160 people have been arrested after mobs carried out 20 separate attacks on KFC restaurants, with one employee shot dead, the government said.

The American-founded fast food chain has become a target of protest and boycott calls by Islamist parties since the start of the war in Gaza, linking the brand to U.S. support for Israel.

Crowds have protested outside KFC repeatedly this month, breaking windows, setting fires and threatening staff. "A total of 20 incidents occurred across Pakistan with one fatality reported. The man was a staff member at KFC," deputy interior minister Talal Chaudhry told a news conference, describing KFC as "under attack".

The KFC employee was shot dead at a branch on the outskirts of Lahore, the capital of Punjab province, on Sunday.



Ecuador on Maximum Alert Over Alleged Assassination Plot Against President-Elect Noboa



QUITO (Dispatches) - Ecuador is on maximum alert over an alleged assassination plot against recently reelected President Daniel Noboa, the government said.

Noboa won the race in an April 13 runoff vote, but his main rival Luisa Gonzalez has accused him of committing "grotesque electoral fraud."

A military intelligence report saying that assassins entering Ecuador from Mexico and other countries planned to carry out "terrorist attacks" against Noboa was leaked on social media this week.

"We strongly condemn and repudiate any intention against the life of the president of the Republic, state authorities or public officials," Ecuador's Ministry of Government said in a statement early Saturday.

"The state is on maximum alert," it added.

The government accused "criminal structures in complicity with political sectors defeated at the polls" of hatching the plot, though it did not offer any specific names.

Ecuador's electoral council and international observers have dismissed claims of fraud in the runoff vote, but Mexico and Colombia have yet to officially recognize Noboa's win.

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum has expressed support for leftist Gonzalez, who has said she will seek a recount.

Zelensky Commits to Easter Truce, Accuses Russia of Breaking It



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelensky said Saturday his forces would observe a surprise Easter truce announced by Russian President Vladimir Putin that is set to last until midnight on Sunday, even as air-raid sirens sounded in Kyiv.

The truce would be the most significant pause in the fighting throughout the three-year conflict.

But just hours after the order was meant to have come into effect, air-raid sirens sounded in the Ukrainian capital and Zelensky accused Russia of having maintained its artillery fire and assaults on the frontline.

Also on Saturday, Russia and Ukraine held a large exchange of prisoners, each side saying they had handed back more than 240 captured fighters.

The order to halt all combat over the Easter weekend came after months of efforts by US President Donald Trump to get Moscow and Kyiv to agree a truce. On Friday, Washington even threatened to withdraw from talks if no progress was made.

"Today from 18:00 (17:00 Paris time) to midnight Sunday (23:00 Paris time), the Russian side announces an Easter truce," Putin said earlier Saturday in televised comments during a meeting with the Russian chief of the general staff Valery Gerasimov.

Zelensky responded by saying Ukraine would follow suit, and proposed extending the truce beyond Sunday. But the Ukrainian leader also accused Russia of having already broken its promises.

Air-raid sirens sounded in Kyiv and several other regions Saturday evening.

"Russian assault operations continue on several frontline sectors, and Russian artillery fire has not subsided," Zelensky said. Putin's Easter ceasefire will be "cautiously observed" by Ukrainians

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Putin had said the truce for the Easter holiday celebrated on Sunday was motivated by "humanitarian reasons".

He said he expected Ukraine to comply but Russian troops "must be ready to resist possible breaches of the truce and provocations by the enemy".

Zelensky in a social media post wrote: "If Russia is now suddenly ready to truly engage in a format of full and unconditional silence, Ukraine will act accordingly – mirroring Russia's actions."

He pointed out that Putin earlier rejected a proposed 30-day full and unconditional ceasefire and urged Russia to extend the ceasefire.

"If a complete ceasefire truly takes hold, Ukraine proposes extending it beyond the Easter day of April 20," Zelensky said, adding that "30 days could give peace a chance".

Oleksandr Prokudin, governor of Ukraine's southern Kherson region, said Saturday evening there had been several Russian drone attacks since Moscow had announced the truce.

"Unfortunately, we do not observe any lull" in the fighting, he said.

Soldiers in the eastern Ukrainian city of Kramatorsk close to the front line, were greeted the announcement with scepticism.

Putin "might do it to give some hope or to show his humanity. But either way, of course, we don't trust (Russia)," said Dmitry, a 40-year-old soldier.

Putin's truce announcement came day after Russia abandoned a moratorium on striking Ukrainian energy targets, which in any case each side had accused the other of having failed to respect.

Putin said the latest truce proposal would show "how sincere is the Kyiv's regime's readiness, its desire and ability to observe agreements and participate in a process of peace talks".

Previous attempts at holding ceasefires for Easter in April 2022 and Orthodox Christmas in January 2023 were not implemented after both sides failed to agree on them.

Ukraine last month agreed to Trump's proposal for a full and unconditional 30-day ceasefire, only for Putin to reject it.

"There is no trust in words coming from Moscow," Zelensky said. "We know all too well how Moscow manipulates, and we are prepared for anything. Ukraine's Defense Forces will act rationally – responding in kind."

"Every Russian strike will be met with an appropriate response," he added.

In Kramatorsk, one soldier, Vladislav, 22, recalled a ceasefire agreement soon after the start of armed hostilities in 2014, the year Russia seized the Crimean peninsula from Ukraine.

That truce had collapsed days afterwards, he said.

"I feel like it's going to start again after a while, and it's going to go on and on," he said of the conflict.

Earlier on Saturday, Ukraine and Russia said they had each returned 246 soldiers being held as prisoners of war in a swap mediated by the UAE.

Zelensky said the total of returned POWs now stood at 4,552.

Russia also said it had retaken the penultimate village still under Ukrainian control in its Kursk frontier region.

Kyiv had hoped to use its hold on the region as a bargaining chip in the talks.

Hamas Armed Wing Says Fate of U.S.-Israeli Captive Unknown



GAZA CITY (Dispatches) - The fate of a U.S.-Israeli hostage who Hamas said had featured in an Israeli truce proposal remains unknown, the group said on Saturday, separately releasing a video of another captive alive.

The body of a guard assigned to the American-Israeli, Edan Alexander, had been recovered from the site of a recent Israeli strike, Hamas's armed wing the Ezzedine Al-Qassam Brigades said in a statement.

"But the fate of the prisoner and the rest of the captors remains unknown," the militants said.

Hamas on Thursday signalled its rejection of the plan, which would have involved Alexander.

A senior Hamas official had on Monday said Israel proposed a 45-day ceasefire in exchange for the release of 10 living hostages, the first of whom would have been Alexander.

He is among the dozens of living and dead captives still held in Gaza, 18 months after Hamas's war with Israel began, and weeks into a renewed Israeli offensive that rescuers in Gaza said killed 54 people on Saturday.

Alexander had also featured in a proposal one month earlier from the United States Middle East envoy Steve Witkoff.

Fresh Wave of Anti-Trump Rallies Erupt Nationwide in U.S.



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Thousands of protesters rallied Saturday in New York, Washington and other cities across the United States for a second major round of demonstrations against Donald Trump and his hard-line policies.

In New York, people gathered outside the city's main library carrying signs targeting the US president with slogans like "No Kings in America" and "Resist Tyranny."

Many took aim at Trump's deportations of undocumented migrants, chanting "No ICE, no fear, immigrants are welcome here," a reference to the role of the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency in rounding up migrants.

In Washington, protesters voiced concern that Trump was threatening long-respected constitutional norms, including the right to due process.

The administration is carrying out "a direct assault on the idea of the rule of law and the idea that the government should be restrained from abusing the people who live here in the United States," Benjamin Douglas, 41, told AFP outside the White House.

Wearing a keffiyeh and carrying a sign calling for the freeing of Mahmoud Khalil, a pro-Palestinian student protester arrested last month, Douglas said individuals were being singled out as "test cases to rile up xenophobia and erode long-standing legal protections."

"We are in a great danger," said 73-year-old New York protester Kathy Valy, the daughter of Holocaust survivors, adding that their stories of how Nazi leader Adolf Hitler rose to power "are what's happening here."

"The one thing is that Trump is a lot more stupid than Hitler or than the other fascists," she said. "He's being played... and his own team is divided."

Daniella Butler, 26, said she wanted to "call attention specifically to the defunding of science and health work" by the government.

Studying for a PhD in immunology at Johns Hopkins University, she was carrying a map of Texas covered with spots in reference to the ongoing measles outbreak there.

Trump's health chief Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a noted vaccine sceptic, spent decades falsely linking the measles, mumps, and rubella (MMR) jab to autism.

"When science is ignored, people die," Butler said.

In deeply conservative Texas, the coastal city of Galveston saw a small gathering of anti-Trump demonstrators.

"This is my fourth protest and typically I would sit back and wait for the next election," said 63-year-old writer Patsy Oliver. "We cannot do that right now. We've lost too much already."

On the West Coast, several hundred people gathered on a beach in San Francisco to spell out the words "IMPEACH + REMOVE," the San Francisco Chronicle reported.

Others nearby held an upside-down US flag, traditionally a symbol of distress.

Organisers hope to use building resentment over Trump's immigration crackdown, his drastic cuts to government agencies and his pressuring of universities, news media and law firms, to forge a lasting movement.

The chief organiser of Saturday's protests — the group 50501, a number representing 50 protests in 50 states and one movement — said some 400 demonstrations were planned.

Its website said the protests are "a decentralised rapid response to the anti-democratic and illegal actions of the Trump administration and its plutocratic allies" — and it insisted on all protests being non-violent.

The group called for millions to take part Saturday, though turnout appeared smaller than the "Hands Off" protests across the country on April 5.

U.S. Supreme Court Pauses Trump's Deportations of Venezuelan Migrants

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. Supreme Court, in a dramatic nighttime intervention Saturday, paused President Donald Trump's unprecedented use of an obscure law to deport Venezuelan migrants without due process.

The emergency ruling, delivered in two terse paragraphs, noted that two of the most conservative of the nine justices had dissented.

The order temporarily prevents the government from continuing to expel migrants under the 1798 Alien Enemies Act — last used to round up Japanese-American citizens during World War II.

Trump invoked the law last month to deport Venezuelans to a notorious prison in El Salvador.

The unusual decision was triggered by imminent plans late Friday to expel dozens more Venezuelans under the Act, meaning they would have been deported with next to no ability to hear evidence against them or challenge their cases.

The court said "the government is directed not to remove any member of the putative class of detainees from the United States until further order."



Trump justifies summary expulsions — and the detention of people in El Salvador — by insisting that he is cracking down on violent Venezuelan criminal gangs now classified by the US government as terrorists.

But the policy is fueling opposition concerns that the Republican is ignoring the US constitution in a broader bid to amass power.

The row over the Alien Enemies Act comes amid muscular assaults by the administration on big law firms, Harvard and other universities, and major independent media outlets.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which took the lead in seeking to halt Friday's planned deportations, welcomed the Supreme Court ruling.

"These men were in imminent danger of spending their lives in a horrific foreign prison without ever having had a chance to go to court. We are relieved that the Supreme Court has not permitted the administration to whisk them away the way others were just last month," lead attorney Lee Gelernt said.



Man City Edge Everton; Villa Thrash In-Form Newcastle in Style

LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester City bolstered their bid to qualify for the Champions League with a dramatic 2-0 win at Everton, while Aston Villa thrashed Newcastle 4-1.

City were heading towards a damaging draw before Nico O'Reilly's 84th-minute strike put them on course for a vital victory that was sealed by Mateo Kovacic's goal in the final seconds.

Pep Guardiola's side climb to fourth place, but still just one point above sixth-placed Villa, who they face on Tuesday.

At a stage of the season when they are usually embroiled in a battle to win the title, City — champions in six of the previous seven campaigns — have been reduced to scrapping for a Champions League berth after a dismal season.

They remain on course to achieve their bare minimum target of finishing inside the top five after a hard-fought success on Merseyside.

In the 84th minute, Matheus Nunes's low cross into the six-yard box was met by the 20-year-old O'Reilly, who got in front of Michael Keane to poke home from close range.

Kovacic wrapped up City's victory on their last visit to Goodison Park before Everton move to a new stadium next season.

"To win here at Goodison Park, where Liverpool and Arsenal couldn't, is massively important," Guardiola said.

"Now it is in our hands. Three games at home, two away and hopefully we can achieve this big success to qualify for the Champions League."

Villa travel to the Etihad full of confidence after a fifth consecutive Premier League win.

Unai Emery's men bounced back from their Champions League quarter-final elimination to Paris Saint-Germain by ending Newcastle's six-game winning run in style.

Ollie Watkins took less than a minute to justify Emery's decision to recall him in the place of Marcus Rashford with a deflected opener.

Fabian Schar hit back to equalise for Newcastle, who were without manager Eddie Howe for the third consecutive game to pneumonia.

Watkins teed up Ian Maatsen to coolly restore Villa's lead and kick off a three-goal blitz in 11 minutes just after the hour mark.

Dan Burn turned Jacob Ramsey's cross into his own net before Amadou Onana fired into the top corner. Villa's victory means they close to within just two points of third-placed Newcastle with five games to go.

Already relegated Southampton's last-gasp equaliser at West Ham ensured they will not have sole possession of the lowest points total in Premier League history.

Jarrod Bowen struck for the Hammers in the 47th minute, holding off Ryan Manning before lashing a fierce finish past Aaron Ramsdale.

But Lesley Ugochukwu equalised three minutes into second-half stoppage time as he lashed past Alphonse Areola.

Bottom of the table Southampton are now on 11 points — the same number Derby managed in 2007-08 — and have five games left to leave the Rams with the lowest total ever recorded in the Premier League.

Bryan Mbeumo scored twice as Brentford beat 10-man Brighton 4-2 to damage the Seagulls' prospects of qualifying for Europe with their first home win since December.

Crystal Palace held on for a 0-0 draw against Bournemouth despite playing half the match with 10 men after Chris Richards' first-half red card.

Wolves Take Playoff Opener From Lakers

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Jaden McDaniels collected 25 points with nine rebounds and Anthony Edwards added 22 points, eight rebounds and nine assists as the visiting Minnesota Timberwolves rolled to a 117-95 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers in the opener of a first-round Western Conference playoff series.

Naz Reid scored 23 points and Julius Randle had 16 as the No. 6 seed Timberwolves improved to 5-0 in first-round games over the past two seasons.

Minnesota shot 51.2 percent from the floor and went 21 of 42 from 3-point range while continuing its success from the end of the regular season, when it closed with a 17-4 record.

"It was just going out and playing with confidence," McDaniels said on the ABC broadcast. "I know all my teammates trust me. (Edwards) always tells me, shoot the ball no matter what, miss or make, and that's what I did tonight."

On an otherwise ideal night, the Timberwolves saw Edwards depart to the locker room late in the third quarter with an apparent left leg injury before he returned in the fourth quarter. Reid was also injured



late in the game.

Luka Doncic scored 37 points with eight rebounds, and LeBron James added 19 points for the No. 3 seed Lakers, who shot 39.8 percent from the floor and lacked the energy present after Doncic

was acquired in a February trade from the Dallas Mavericks.

Austin Reaves had 16 points after a slow start for Los Angeles, which was outscored 25-6 on fast-break points and 43-13 in bench points.

Game 2 in the series is set for Tuesday at Los Angeles.

The Lakers owned the first quarter, taking a 28-21 lead before the Timberwolves took charge in the second quarter to take a 59-48 lead into halftime. Minnesota shot 54.2 percent in the second quarter while scoring 38 points.

The Timberwolves punctuated their second-quarter domination when Donte DiVincenzo made a 30-foot 3-pointer at the halftime buzzer.

The Timberwolves continued their push into the second half, opening on an 11-0 run to take a 70-48 lead less than two minutes into the third quarter.

Minnesota had an 88-64 lead when Edwards landed hard after a drive to the basket and walked back to the locker room with 2:58 left in the third quarter. He checked back into the game with 10:57 remaining in the game.

Reid departed with 9:26 remaining after taking an inadvertent elbow to the head from the Lakers' Jarred Vanderbilt.

Red Bull Comes Alive Under Jeddah Lights to Claim Record Pole



JEDDAH (Dispatches) - Max Verstappen said his Red Bull car had "come alive" after he nailed pole for the Saudi Arabian Grand Prix from McLaren's Oscar Piastri with a track record in a gripping qualifying session.

Piastri's teammate, championship leader Lando Norris, crashed in the top 10 shoot-out and will start on the fifth row of Sunday's race.

Four-time world champion Verstappen was in irrepressible form under the floodlights on the high-speed Jeddah Corniche Circuit, grabbing the front of the grid with a 1min 27.294sec lap, one hundredth of a second quicker than Piastri.

It was a huge turnaround for the Dutchman after he and his Red Bull team had struggled in Bahrain last weekend.

"Simply lovely! I definitely didn't expect to be on pole here," said a beaming Verstappen.

"The car came alive in the night, we made some final changes and it was more enjoyable to drive, the grip was coming to me.

"I think tomorrow in the race, it will be tough to keep them (McLaren) behind, but we'll give it a good go," he added.

Norris leads the drivers' standings by three points from Piastri with Verstappen five points back ahead of this fifth round of the 24-race season.

George Russell will set off on the second row in his Mercedes alongside the Ferrari of Charles Leclerc.

McLaren are seeking their fourth win from five on Sunday, after Norris took the season-opener in Melbourne with Piastri clicking in China and Sakshir.

Sinner Backed to Hit Top Gear in Time for French Open



LONDON (Dispatches) - World number one Jannik Sinner may take time to hit his stride on his return from a three-month doping ban next month but will be in top form when he heads to the French Open, Italy's Davis Cup captain Filippo Volandri said.

Sinner has not played since winning the Australian Open at the start of the season. He accepted a ban in February following a deal with the World Anti-Doping Agency, which had challenged a tribunal's decision to clear him after two positive tests.

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The 23-year-old's ban will end on May 4 and he will make a return at the Rome Masters that begins three days later. His national team captain believes Sinner will hit top gear, though, only in time for the year's second Grand Slam, which starts on May 25.

"His physical preparation is focused on Roland Garros. It's a gruelling event with long, best-of-five-set matches," Volandri told Italy's La Gazzetta dello Sport earlier this week.

"I'm convinced the preparation he's had over the past three months will be beneficial in the long run. He has not been able to complete a proper winter pre-season in recent years and this break allows him to recharge for the next two to three seasons."

Sinner, who was cleared to return to training from April 13, ramped up his preparations this week with a stint in Monte Carlo, and also practised with Indian Wells champion Jack Draper of Britain at the Tennis Club de Beaulieu in France.

Volandri, who guided Italy to Davis Cup glory in the last two years, said he had spoken to Sinner's coach Simone Vagnozzi and had no doubt about the player's mindset before his comeback in Rome.

"He told me Jannik is extremely motivated, fully focused on upcoming tournaments and mentally calm," Volandri said.

"Let's not forget nothing replaces match adrenaline and that's why I don't expect a winning streak right away ... But the more matches he plays, the closer he'll get to his ideal form for Paris."

Alcaraz, Holger Rune to Clash in Barcelona Final

BARCELONA (Dispatches) - Top seed Carlos Alcaraz moved a step closer to winning his home-nation tournament for a third time, topping Arthur Fils of France 6-2, 6-4 to move to the finals of the Barcelona Open Banc Sabadell in Spain.

Alcaraz fought off both the seventh-seeded Fils and a sustained wind to run his winning streak to nine matches. He won the title in Barcelona in both 2022 and 2023. Fils, of France, was hampered by 38 unforced errors, compared to 13 for Alcaraz in the 75-minute match.

In the final, Alcaraz will meet sixth-seeded Holger Rune of Denmark, a 6-3, 6-2 winner over Karen Khachanov of Russia. Rune converted four of six break chances against Khachanov, who also was bitten by his ratio of winners (five) to unforced



errors (17) in 67 minutes.

This will be the first clay-court final since Rome in 2023 for Rune, who will climb back into the Top 10 when new rankings are released Monday.

Meanwhile Ben Shelton became the first American man since Andre Agassi in 2002 to reach the final of a clay-court ATP 500 or 1000 tournament -- or the French Open -- as he came back to top Francisco Cerundolo of Argentina 2-6, 7-6 (7), 6-4 in Munich.

Cerundolo twice was within two points of winning the match in the second-set tiebreaker but couldn't reach match point. Instead, Shelton converted his fourth set point to force the decider.