

Kazem Gharibabadi, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs, Announced that Tehran Will Host and Chair the 21st Summit of Chief Justices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Member States in 2026

# IRAN NEWS

Referring to the Current Annual Trade Between Iran and Russia of About Five Billion Dollars, Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad Said That the Capacity of Trade Exchanges Between Tehran and Moscow Far Exceeds the Current Figure

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## DOMESTIC



### Iran, Russia Strengthen Ties Through North-South Corridor and Energy Cooperation

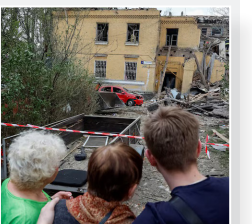
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## INTERNATIONAL

### Russia Ready to Reach a Deal on Ukraine

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### Iran Rejects Baseless Dutch Claims About Role in Assassination Attempts



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The Iranian Embassy in the Netherlands has strongly rejected Amsterdam's accusations of Tehran's involvement in assassination attempts in Europe.

The diplomatic mission issued a statement on Thursday after the Dutch General Intelligence and Security Service, known as the AIVD, claimed in its annual report that Iran was behind two assassination attempts in Europe.

The allegations led the Dutch Foreign Ministry to summon the Iranian ambassador to the European country.

The Iranian embassy said that the AIVD's "baseless claims are nothing more than an attempt by certain individuals to play the victim and gain political leverage or status from the host government."

Iran, which is itself the biggest victim of terrorism, has a stronger commitment than any other country to combat terrorism in all its forms, it added.

The embassy also expressed regret that many individuals and organizations, who have committed terrorist acts in Iran, are now active in Europe under the protection of Western governments, noting that the anti-Iran terrorists are often the source of unfounded accusations against Iran.

He was referring to the Mujahedin Khalq Organization (MKO) terrorist cult which has a dismal history of perpetrating heinous attacks against Iranian civilians and officials, killing around 12,000 people since the victory of Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution.

### UN Envoys of Iran, Russia, China in Vienna Hold Talks With Grossi



VIENNA (Dispatches) - Senior diplomats from Iran, Russia, and China have met with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) director general in Vienna, emphasizing the need for sustained cooperation and dialogue to boost diplomatic efforts.

Iran's ambassador to United Nations organizations in the Austrian capital Vienna, Reza Najafi, together with his Russian and Chinese counterparts, Mikhail Ulyanov and Li Song, met the head of the UN nuclear watchdog Director General Rafael Grossi on Thursday, the Permanent Mission of the Islamic Republic of Iran to the UN in Vienna said on X.

"Amb. Najafi together with Amb. Li and Amb. Ulyanov jointly met IAEA DG, emphasizing the continuation of cooperation and dialogue to support the ongoing diplomatic efforts and also highlight the opportunity for the IAEA to play a professional and constructive role in this regard," the mission said.

This meeting comes following the conclusion of the second round of Iran's indirect negotiations with United States in the Italian capital of Rome on April 19.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi highlighted the IAEA's role in overseeing the Islamic Republic's nuclear program and commented on Grossi's concurrent presence in Rome.

"The Agency will be part of this process and will also have an important role. His presence is useful, though he is not yet involved in the negotiations themselves, as we haven't reached that stage yet," Iran's top diplomat said at the time.

## The Path of the Imams Is One of Resistance and Perseverance



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - In an address during a mourning ceremony marking the martyrdom anniversary of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (AS), Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, emphasized that the historical path of the Shi'a Imams has always been a path of "resistance and steadfastness," underpinned by logic and reason.

The ceremony took place on Thursday morning, at the presence of the Supreme Leader, alongside government officials, scholars, and members of the public. The event honored Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (AS), the sixth Imam of Shi'a Islam and a pivotal figure in the development of Islamic jurisprudence and theology.

In his remarks following the mourning rituals, Ayatollah Khamenei shed light on the divine will as reflected in historical Islamic narratives. He pointed out that based on several narrations from the time of the Imams, a transformative shift in favor of the Imams and the true leadership of Islam had been divinely decreed to occur around the year 70 AH (after Hijrah).

Quoting Imam al-Sadiq (AS), the Supreme Leader referred to a narration stating that God had originally destined the realization of true Islamic leadership (Imamate) for the year 70 AH. However, the event of Karbala, in which Imam Hussein (AS) was martyred, and the broader disregard shown by the people toward religious principles, led to a delay in this divine plan. As explained by Ayatollah Khamenei, this delay pushed the potential for transformation to the year 140 AH — during the era of Imam al-Sadiq (AS), who passed away in 148 AH.

"This is something that the inner circle of Shi'a scholars and followers at the time were aware of," Ayatollah Khamenei stated. He cited historical figures such as Zurarah, a prominent companion of Imam al-Sadiq, who believed the Imam would eventually ascend to leadership. This expectation fueled repeated calls from followers urging the Imam to rise and establish a government — a reflection of their hope in the fulfillment of divine promise.

However, according to Imam al-Sadiq, that opportunity was lost due to the premature revelation of these plans by the Shi'a themselves. "If the followers had remained discreet, perhaps the matter would have concluded at that time, and human history might have taken a

completely different path," Ayatollah Khamenei lamented.

The Supreme Leader warned that such premature actions, impatience, and misjudgments by followers can have historic consequences. "Sometimes it's our own shortcomings — our loose tongues, our failure to help, our misplaced criticisms — that change the course of history. That is why we must always remain vigilant," he stressed.

Reflecting on Imam al-Sadiq's life, Ayatollah Khamenei described it as extraordinarily impactful, especially in terms of religious scholarship. While often cited that the Imam had 4,000 students, the Leader clarified that this figure represents individuals who narrated traditions from the Imam over his lifetime, not attendees of a single class session. This highlights the

widespread influence of the Imam's teachings.

Ayatollah Khamenei also addressed certain historical narratives that portray the Imam as showing submission to the Abbasid Caliph al-Mansur, specifically a story where the Imam allegedly pleads for leniency. The Supreme Leader firmly rejected such accounts, declaring them fabrications aimed at undermining the spirit of Shi'a resistance. "These accounts were transmitted by figures like Rabi', a servant and loyalist of al-Mansur. Such unreliable sources cannot be trusted. The Imams never spoke in a submissive tone, regardless of the threat they faced."

Instead, he reiterated, the Imams were teachers of perseverance, logic, and intellectual reasoning. He pointed to historical examples, such as the powerful oratory of Lady Zainab (SA) in the courts of Ibn Ziyad and Yazid after the tragedy of Karbala, as true demonstrations of the Shi'a tradition of resistance.

Ayatollah Khamenei concluded by linking this legacy of steadfastness to current resistance movements in the region. "Those who stand firm today in Gaza and Lebanon are walking the same path as the Imams of guidance," he said, reinforcing the connection between the historical struggle of the Imams and the modern resistance against oppression.

### Building the Nation's Future is in Our Hands



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian underscored the importance of national self-reliance on Wednesday, stating that the responsibility for building Iran's future lies entirely with its people, not with foreign powers.

Speaking at the National Conference on Medical Science Education in Tehran, he emphasized the urgent need to reform Iran's educational system. "Our methods are outdated," he said. "We must raise a new generation equipped with modern knowledge, skills, and values to ensure a strong and independent future."

Pezeshkian stressed that education is about more than just acquiring knowledge—it shapes beliefs, values, and the ability to take initiative. "We cannot afford to fall behind our neighbors. True education empowers people to contribute meaningfully to their country, regardless of differing views," he said.

The President highlighted the classroom as the starting point for building national responsibility. He called for an educational environment that instills confidence in students and teaches them to address problems independently. "If we want to solve our country's challenges, we must first believe that we can," he said. "And that belief must begin in our schools."

President Pezeshkian urged educators to nurture a spirit of collaboration and problem-solving among students. "The true elite are those who work together to tackle social, scientific, and economic issues," he noted. "Those who remain hopeful and committed to progress are the ones who will shape our future."

He also warned against passivity. "Waiting for others to fix things leads only to uncertainty. We must take action ourselves."

Reiterating his core message, the President declared, "It is up to us—no one else will build this country for us. Once we believe in our own power, we will stop looking elsewhere for help."

He called on youth, scientists, and professionals to come together and contribute. "No one holds all the answers. But through unity and shared effort, we can achieve remarkable things."

### Yemen Downs Seven Reaper Drones Worth \$200mn in Six Weeks



SANAA (Dispatches) - Yemeni forces have shot down seven US Reaper drones in less than six weeks, inflicting a loss of more than \$200 million on the US which has stepped up its aggression against the impoverished country, The Associated Press reports.

Citing defense officials, the US news agency said Friday that three of the drones were downed in the past week, indicating an improvement in the Yemeni forces' ability to target unmanned aircraft flying over the country.

The drones were doing attack runs or conducting spy operations, said the officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

While "hostile fire" is likely the cause of the drone losses, the incidents are still under investigation, according to the report.

The sophisticated drones, built by General Atomics, cost about \$30 million each, and generally fly at altitudes of more than 40,000 feet (12,100 meters).

A defense official warned that the increase in US strikes could add to the risk to aircraft.

This comes as the US has intensified its strikes on Yemen since President Donald Trump ordered a "decisive and powerful military action" against Yemen, which had resumed pro-Gaza operations, last month.

Since the onset of Israel's genocidal war on Gaza, Yemeni forces have carried out scores of operations in support of the war-hit Gazans, striking targets throughout the occupied Palestinian territories, in addition to targeting Israeli ships or vessels heading towards ports in the occupied territories.

## FM Ready to Visit Paris, Berlin, London for Diplomacy



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says he is "once again" proposing dialogue and a diplomatic path to France, Germany, and Britain on Iran's nuclear program and other shared interests.

In a post on his X account on Thursday, Araqchi described the status quo of bilateral relations with each of the European trioka a "lose-lose" situation, regretting that despite his call for diplomacy the trio has selected the "hard way."

"Iran's relations with the E3 (France, Germany, and Britain) have experienced ups and downs in recent history. Like it or not, they are currently down. Why? Each side has its own narrative. To me, placing blame is a futile exercise. What matters is that the status quo is lose-lose," Araqchi said.

Araqchi noted that during a meeting with the foreign ministers of the E3 and other European counterparts in New York last September, he offered dialogue and cooperation instead of confrontation.

He told them that his proposal extended beyond the nuclear issue to include all areas of mutual interest and concern, but the Europeans have chosen the harder path, the minister recounted.

"I once again propose diplomacy. After my recent consultations in Moscow & Beijing, I am ready to take the first step with visits to Paris, Berlin & London. I was ready to do it before Iran commenced its indirect dialogue with the U.S., but the E3 opted out," Araqchi stressed.

"The ball is now in the E3's court. They have an opportunity to do away with the grip of Special Interest groups and forge a different path. How we act at this critical juncture is likely to define the foreseeable future," he added.

In 2015, Iran proved the peaceful nature of its nuclear program to the world by signing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with six world powers, including the European trioka. However, the US's unilateral withdrawal in 2018 during the first term of American President Donald Trump and its subsequent re-imposition of sanctions against Tehran left the future of the deal in limbo.

Meanwhile earlier Araqchi warned against "clear" attempts by the Israeli regime and certain groups to spoil diplomacy amid indirect negotiations with the US over Tehran's civilian nuclear

program.

Araqchi said the country's security services are on high alert given sabotage attempts and assassination bids in the past.

"The attempts by the Israeli regime and certain Special Interest groups to derail diplomacy — using a variety of tactics — is abundantly clear for all to see," Araqchi wrote in a post published on X on Wednesday.

He noted that Iran's security services are on high alert given past instances of attempted sabotage and assassination operations, emphasizing that the Islamic Republic will deliver a legitimate response in case of any act of aggression.

The Iranian foreign minister also warned of a propaganda and misinformation campaign against the Islamic Republic.

"Those seeking to manipulate public opinion can also be expected to come up with fantastical claims and props like scary-looking satellite images," Araqchi pointed out.

The top Iranian diplomat underscored that the country's peaceful nuclear activities and its uranium enrichment capabilities are under surveillance of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

"Reality check: Every single milligram of enriched uranium in Iran is under full and constant IAEA supervision and monitoring," Araqchi said.

According to an informed source, a third round of talks focusing on technical details between Iran and the United States will take place indirectly on Saturday and will be mediated by Oman.

The source said the upcoming technical talks in Muscat will be attended by Iranian and American specialists, and will focus on nuclear matters and issues pertaining to sanctions.

The experts will be discussing the possibility of achieving an agreement, the source said.

"The technical negotiations will be held with the participation of Iranian and American experts indirectly and with the mediation of Omani experts," the source added.

In the last two weeks, representatives from Iran and the US have engaged in two rounds of negotiations in Oman and Italy. The two sides are set to conduct expert-level technical negotiations on April 26.



# IRAN NEWS



## Tehran Has Always Supported Lebanon's Sovereignty, Independence

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's ambassador to Beirut emphasized the Islamic Republic's unwavering commitment to supporting Lebanon's independence, sovereignty, stability, and security during his visit to Lebanon's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants.

According to a report on Thursday, Mojtaba Amani met with officials at the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Emigrants to clarify any potential misunderstandings arising from a recent tweet he posted.

He explained that the tweet's content was general in nature, applying universally to all countries, including the Islamic Republic of Iran. During the meeting, which aimed to prevent any misunderstanding between the two countries, Amani highlighted the need to thwart the enemies' attempts to create divisions between Tehran and Beirut. He stressed that vigilance and cooperation are essential to neutralizing such attempts.

## Russia-Pakistan Train Corridor Begins Operations Through Iran



TEHRAN - Iran has officially launched the transit of freight trains from Russia to Pakistan via its eastern rail corridor, marking a significant milestone in regional connectivity. According to Jabarali Zakeri, Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development, this development is part of Iran's ongoing efforts to enhance its railway infrastructure and strengthen international transport routes.

Speaking to ILNA, Zakeri announced that the first trial train from Russia to Pakistan successfully passed through Iranian territory a few weeks ago. He noted that further coordination has been made among the railway networks of Russia, Iran, and Pakistan, with Belarus also preparing trains to use this route to reach Pakistan.

The route begins in Belarus and continues through Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan before arriving at Incheh Borun in Iran. From there, trains proceed south toward Pakistan.

Zakeri, who also serves as CEO of the Islamic Republic of Iran Railways, highlighted logistical challenges at the Iran-Pakistan border. One key issue is the incompatibility between track gauges—Pakistan's railways operate on a 1,667 mm broad gauge, which is wider than the Russian and Iranian standards. This requires technical modifications for trains to continue their journey across the border.

"In order to resolve this, we have decided to adjust the bogies of our locomotives to match Pakistan's rail gauge," Zakeri explained. "This process is expected to take about two months, but it will alleviate part of the logistical issues."

Another challenge involves delays caused by the need to wait for Pakistani freight locomotives to collect cargo at the border. Zakeri stated that ideally, Iran should have extended its own railway to the Mirjaveh border station years ago to avoid this dependency.

Despite these issues, Zakeri emphasized that the corridor is economically beneficial for Iran. However, he noted inefficiencies on the Pakistani side, particularly the lack of weight regulations for cargo trucks, which often carry double their recommended capacity without enforcement.

## Foreign Investment in Kerman Triples



TEHRAN - Foreign investment in Iran's Kerman Province tripled last year, reaching a total of \$114 million, according to the province's Director General of Economic Affairs and Finance, Sadeq Soltani-Nejad.

In an interview with IRNA on Thursday, Soltani-Nejad revealed that \$104 million of this total was allocated specifically to the province's automotive sector.

Currently, 11 foreign investment projects are underway in Kerman, with China emerging as the leading investor, Soltani-Nejad noted. The bulk of the investments are focused on the industrial, mining, automotive, and tourism sectors.

"We earned the top national ranking in attracting foreign investment two years ago, and we anticipate another top-tier ranking for the past year as well," he added.

Highlighting Kerman's diverse investment opportunities, Soltani-Nejad emphasized the province's significant potential in solar energy. "With the available capacities and resources, solar power plants represent one of the most promising avenues for foreign investment," he said.

In recent years, Kerman has developed solid infrastructure for solar energy projects, including the establishment of specialized solar energy industrial parks.

Tourism is another major sector being promoted to foreign investors. Soltani-Nejad also pointed to agriculture as an attractive area for investment, thanks to Kerman's unique climate and production of strategic crops such as pistachios, dates, and citrus fruits. "Initial steps are being taken to draw foreign investors into the agricultural sector," he said.

Soltani-Nejad stated that the entry of foreign investment would significantly boost employment and economic activity in the province. However, he stressed that both domestic and international obstacles need to be addressed, despite all procedures being carried out within the legal framework.

He assured that Kerman is fully prepared to provide rapid services to foreign investors, including expedited licensing through Iran's National Permit Portal.

## Iran, Russia Strengthen Ties Through North-South Corridor and Energy Cooperation



TEHRAN - Iran and Russia are accelerating efforts to deepen bilateral cooperation, focusing on strategic transit routes, gas transportation, and trade development. Speaking at the 18th session of the Iran-Russia Permanent Commission for Economic Cooperation, Iranian Ambassador to Russia Seyed Kazem Jalali highlighted what he called a "golden era" in relations between the two neighboring nations.

Jalali emphasized that the expansion of ties is not just strategic but a necessity, driven by geographical proximity and shared geopolitical interests. Quoting Iran's Supreme Leader's recent message to Russian President Vladimir Putin, he reaffirmed Iran's support for a strong, globally influential Russia alongside an independent and powerful Iran.

The ambassador pointed to common regional and international stances as a cornerstone of the growing partnership. He noted Russia's alignment with Iran's discourse in global platforms, such as the BRICS economic group, as a reflection of these shared perspectives.

"Russia has embraced a strategic vision aligned with Iran's in the global arena," Jalali said, noting that both countries view each other as essential partners in confronting Western-dominated narratives and structures.

Jalali underlined that both nations have mutual needs that necessitate close cooperation. He referenced the recent ratification of a comprehensive strategic cooperation treaty by Russia's Federation Council and State Duma, suggesting a serious commitment from Moscow.

Highlighting Russia's intent to diversify its export routes beyond the Black Sea, Jalali revealed a \$500 billion allocation for developing the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)—a move he called a "strategic necessity" for Russia and a major opportunity for Iran.

Cargo movement along the northern branch of the INSTC has already seen substantial growth, increasing from 3.7 million tons in 2022 to around 33 million tons in 2023, according to Jalali.

The ambassador echoed comments made by President Putin, who emphasized the strategic importance of alternative trade corridors beyond mere economic calculations. Jalali stated that Iran could emerge as the "second Suez Canal" if the INSTC becomes fully operational and accessible to Europe.

The corridor comprises three routes, with the eastern branch already functional.

Cargo transported through this route rose from 600,000 tons in 2023 to 1.8 million tons in 2024. Iran aims to push this figure to 3 million tons by early 2025, with a full capacity potential of 15 million tons.

"For Russia, the corridor is a necessity. For Iran, it's a competitive advantage," Jalali said. He noted that completing the Iranian segment of the INSTC would significantly boost Iran's international security and geopolitical standing.

Jalali also endorsed Russia's proposal to use Iran as a transit hub for gas exports, calling for swift action on the initiative. He emphasized that such projects should proceed without delay, given their strategic and economic significance.

He further noted that Russia's economy is increasingly reliant on Iranian goods. According to Russian customs data, trade between the two nations has reached \$5 billion—a significant rise in recent years.

With the Iran-Eurasian Economic Union Free Trade Agreement set to take effect on May 15, 2025, Jalali urged Iranian businesses to actively engage with this vital market to boost exports and bilateral trade.

Ali-Mohammad Mousavi, Deputy Minister of Petroleum for International Affairs and Commerce, described the Iran-Russia Economic Commission as a symbol of both countries' political will to foster cooperation and achieve shared success.

Mousavi praised the robust Iranian delegation at the commission's 18th session, noting it reflected Tehran's strong commitment to expanding its relationship with Moscow. He also pointed to recent high-level discussions between Iranian and Russian energy ministers, which have laid the groundwork for tangible agreements.

The expert-level meetings of the commission began on Wednesday, April 23, at Russia's Energy Agency in Moscow. On Thursday, both sides finalized multiple cooperation documents to be signed by Iranian Oil Minister Mohsen Paknejad and Russian Energy Minister Sergey Tsivilov, co-chairs of the commission.

The final signing ceremony will take place on Friday, April 25, at the President Hotel in Moscow, marking another milestone in what both nations consider a deepening strategic alliance.

This growing Iran-Russia partnership is not only reshaping regional transit and energy dynamics but also signaling a shift in global alliances, as both countries seek alternatives to traditional Western-dominated trade routes and energy supply chains.

## Direct Financial Channels and Visa Facilitation Needed Between Iran and Uzbekistan

TEHRAN - During a recent Iran-Uzbekistan business summit, officials emphasized the urgent need to establish direct banking relations as a prerequisite for boosting bilateral trade. It was noted that enabling direct money transfers between the two nations would significantly enhance commercial ties.

The meeting, hosted by Iran's Chamber of Commerce, welcomed an Uzbek delegation led by Duran Vahabov, President of Uzbekistan's Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Ghadir Ghiafeh, Vice President of Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture, highlighted the historical and cultural commonalities between the two countries and expressed hope that recent positive developments in both nations would foster broader cooperation in industrial, commercial, and technological fields.

Ghiafeh noted the participation of 200 Uzbek companies in the Iran Expo and announced that a dedicated event would be organized during the expo to facilitate connections between Iranian and Uzbek business representatives, enabling them to find potential trade partners.

Vahabov acknowledged the steady growth in trade between Iran and Uzbekistan in recent years but pointed out that the full potential of bilateral economic cooperation remains untapped. He stated that closer collaboration between the two nations' chambers of commerce and private sectors, alongside governmental efforts to remove trade barriers, could lead to a trade volume of \$5 billion by 2028.

He emphasized that Uzbekistan offers a strategic location for manufacturing finished products for export to third countries, and Iran, as a source of raw materials, could play a key role in this endeavor. To facilitate such collaboration, he reiterated the necessity of establishing direct financial channels, which would greatly accelerate trade development.

Mousa Aghaei, President of the Iran-Uzbekistan Joint Chamber,



remarked that current trade volumes do not reflect the deep-rooted historical and cultural relations between the two countries. He attributed part of the problem to global restrictions against Iran, but also pointed to shortcomings in bilateral cooperation that could be resolved with realistic planning and collaboration.

Aghaei urged the banks of both nations to work closely with business stakeholders to devise practical solutions that reduce financial transaction difficulties. He affirmed the Joint Chamber's readiness to support these efforts.

He also pointed out the limited variety of Uzbek exports to Iran and emphasized the Chamber's willingness to promote Uzbekistan's capacities and industries within Iran. Establishing a formal Uzbek trade office in Iran could also enhance mutual understanding and cooperation.

Aghaei raised concerns about the slow and complicated process Iranian companies face in obtaining pharmaceutical and health-related permits from Uzbek authorities, despite their proven capabilities in producing such goods. These bureaucratic hurdles have hindered the entry of Iranian products into the Uzbek market.

Highlighting the mutual interest among Iranian entrepreneurs in investing in Uzbekistan, Aghaei lamented the lack of a conducive environment for such ventures. He called for simplifying visa procedures for Iranian businesspeople and reaffirmed Iran's broader request for a visa waiver policy from Uzbekistan.

Tourism was another underexplored area, according to Aghaei. While both countries possess significant potential in this sector, efforts have been minimal. Currently, there are only two direct flights between Iran and Uzbekistan, which he argued are insufficient to support growing ties. He proposed the addition of at least one more direct flight from Uzbekistan to Iran to foster stronger connections.

## China Becomes Top Export Destination for Fars Province's Dried Figs



TEHRAN - In a recent high-level meeting between Chinese Ambassador Zong Pei Wu and economic leaders in Shiraz, China was confirmed as the largest export destination for dried figs from Iran's Fars Province. The meeting, hosted by the Shiraz Chamber of Commerce, Industry, Mines and Agriculture, focused on expanding economic cooperation between the province and various Chinese regions, particularly in agriculture, tourism, and industry.

Mohammad Sadegh Hamidian, President of the Shiraz Chamber of Commerce, highlighted the strategic economic potential of Fars, which spans 122,000 square kilometers and is home to nearly 5 million people. The province accounts for 7% of Iran's land area, 6% of its population, and contributes approximately 5% to the national GDP. Agriculture dominates the local economy, with Fars producing over 35% of Iran's agricultural and dried fruit exports.

Hamidian noted that the province is a major player in the global fig market. "Over 90% of Iran's organic dried figs are produced in Fars, with China being the top export market," he said. However, he raised concerns about high tariffs on direct fig exports to China, which inflate export costs. He urged for a revision of tariff policies to facilitate smoother trade.

In addition to figs, Fars also exports aluminum ingots, iron ore, refractory soil, and decorative stones to China. The province has also become a hub for Chinese automotive assembly, hosting six vehicle manufacturing units where Chinese experts actively collaborate.

Hamidian emphasized that beyond agriculture and industry, there is significant untapped potential in tourism, mining, and services sectors for deeper economic ties with China. "Although current trade volumes are substantial, there's ample room for growth," he said, expressing hope that improved bilateral cooperation will foster business development on both sides.

Touching on global economic dynamics, Hamidian commented on U.S. trade policies, particularly tariffs, suggesting that America's long-term success in global markets might be challenged. He noted China's strategic response to global economic shifts, highlighting recent incentives offered by Chinese companies to their international partners.

## Iran Shifts Trade Strategy in Africa, Boosts Exports via UAE and Turkey



TEHRAN - Iran is adopting a new approach to trade with Africa, focusing on long-term engagement and increased cooperation, according to Mohammad Sadegh Ghanadzadeh, Acting Deputy for Trade Services at the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran.

In an interview with ILNA, Ghanadzadeh noted that Iran currently accounts for a very small share of Africa's \$1.5 trillion annual trade. Approximately 95% of Iran's trade with the continent consists of exports from Iran to Africa, a model he described as unsustainable.

To address this imbalance, Iran is concentrating its efforts on four key sectors: petrochemicals, mining and mineral industries, healthcare, and agriculture and food processing. "Both Iran and Africa are rich in these areas," he explained. "Africa, for instance, is a key source for essential goods like grains, livestock feed, and meat, and is ideal for overseas farming, which Iran has yet to tap into effectively."

Ghanadzadeh described Africa as a "construction workshop," highlighting that in 2021 alone, the continent saw over \$320 billion in engineering and technical service projects. This, he said, presents significant opportunities for Iranian companies, provided that challenges such as issuing guarantees can be resolved.

He also pointed out Africa's vast untapped mineral reserves, which could complement Iran's demand for raw materials in its steel industry. At the same time, Africa's growing construction and industrial sectors have a rising demand for semi-finished Iranian steel products like billets and rebar. "Trade with Africa should be based on mutual exchange and cooperation — a model that successful trading nations with Africa already follow," he said.



### Student Kills One, Wounds 3 in French High School Stabbing

NANTES (Dispatches) - A 15-year-old boy killed a fellow pupil and wounded three others in a stabbing attack at a high school in the western French city of Nantes on Thursday before he was overpowered by teachers, police said.

BFM TV reported that the student who died was a girl and that the three injured students were boys. Police did not confirm the age or gender of the victims.

Teaching staff subdued the attacker at the Notre-Dame-de-Toutes-Aides, a private Catholic school, before law enforcement officials arrived, a police spokesperson said.

She said there was nothing to indicate a terrorist motive.



### Modi Vows to Punish Kashmir Attackers, Accuses Pakistan of Backing Cross-Border Terrorism



NEW DEHLI (Dispatches) - Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi vowed to punish those responsible for killing 26 civilians in Kashmir, after his government blamed arch-rival Pakistan for backing the gruesome attack.

India accused Pakistan of supporting “cross-border terrorism” in the tourist hotspot of Pahalgam, where shooters carried out the worst attack on civilians in contested Muslim-majority Kashmir for a quarter of a century.

“I say to the whole world: India will identify, track and punish every terrorist and their backer,” Modi said in his first speech since the attack in the Himalayan region. “We will pursue them to the ends of the Earth”.

His government later ordered all Pakistani citizens in India to leave by April 29, with the exception of remaining diplomats.

While no group has claimed responsibility for the attack, Indian police have issued wanted notices for two Pakistanis and one Indian who they say are members of the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) group, designated by the United Nations as a terrorist organisation.

Police have offered a two million rupee (\$23,500) bounty for information leading to each man’s arrest.

Modi, speaking in Bihar state to launch development projects, led two minutes of silence in memory of those killed, all but one of whom was Indian.

Pakistan, which denies any role in the Pahalgam attack, held a rare national security meeting on Thursday after New Delhi issued a raft of punitive diplomatic measures.

### China Considers Exempting Some Goods From U.S. Tariffs



BEIJING (Dispatches) - China is considering exempting some U.S. imports from its 125% tariffs and is asking businesses to identify goods that could be eligible in the biggest sign yet that Beijing is worried about the economic fallout from its trade war with Washington.

A Ministry of Commerce taskforce is collecting lists of items that could be exempted from tariffs and is asking companies to submit their own requests, according to a source who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Financial news magazine Caijing reported on Friday citing sources that Beijing was preparing to include eight semiconductor-related items, although not memory chips.

“The Chinese government, for example, has been asking our companies what sort of things are you importing to China from the U.S. that you cannot find anywhere else and so would shut down your supply chain,” American Chamber of Commerce in China President Michael Hart said on Friday.

Some chamber members say they have imported goods in the past week without the new tariffs being applied, Hart added.

A list of 131 categories of products eligible for exemptions was circulating widely on social media and among businesses and trade groups on Friday. Reuters could not verify the list, whose items ranged from vaccines and chemicals to jet engines.

### Russia Ready to Reach a Deal on Ukraine



MOSCOW (Dispatches) - Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Thursday that Moscow was ready to reach a deal on its war in Ukraine after US President Donald Trump urged Russian President Vladimir Putin to halt attacks, in a rare rebuke following the deadliest strikes on Kyiv in months.

“We are ready to reach a deal, but there are still some specific points ... which need to be fine-tuned, and we are busy with this,” Sergei Lavrov said in an interview with CBS News.

Trump’s envoy Steve Witkoff is due in Russia on Friday where he is expected to hold another round of ceasefire talks with Putin.

Lavrov said the talks process was moving in the right direction, and negotiations would continue with Washington.

He said the US president was “probably the only leader on Earth who recognised the need to address the root causes of this situation”, but said Trump “did not spell out the elements of the deal”.

Trump, however, issued a direct appeal to Putin following missile and drone strikes on the Ukrainian capital early Thursday which left at least 12 people dead.

It was the latest in a wave of Russian aerial attacks that have killed dozens of civilians, defying Trump’s push to bring about a rapid end to the bloodshed.

“I am not happy with the Russian strikes,” Trump said on social media. “Not necessary, and very bad timing. Vladimir, STOP!”

Trump, who is accused of favoring Russia and has often vilified Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, was asked by reporters what concessions Moscow had offered in negotiations to end the war.

“Stopping taking the whole country – pretty big concession,” he replied.

Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, hoping to take the country in days, but has since been bogged down in a bloody war with huge casualties on both sides.

Zelensky cut short a trip to South Africa to deal with the aftermath of the latest strikes.

He questioned whether Kyiv’s allies were doing enough to force Putin to agree to a full and unconditional ceasefire.

“I don’t see any strong pressure on Russia or any new sanctions packages against Russia’s aggression,” Zelensky said, highlighting that Trump had previously warned of repercussions if Moscow did not agree to pause the fighting.

Trump on Wednesday had accused Zelensky of frustrating peace efforts by ruling out recognising Russia’s claim over

Crimea, a territory the US president said was “lost years ago”. Moscow annexed the peninsula in 2014.

“We do everything that our partners have proposed; only what contradicts our legislation and the Constitution we cannot do,” Zelensky said in response to a question about Crimea.

In contrast, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte said Thursday it was Moscow, not Kyiv, that needed to move forward in negotiations.

“The balls are clearly in the Russian court now,” Rutte told reporters at the White House after meeting Trump.

Russia fired at least 70 missiles and 145 drones at Ukraine between late Wednesday and early Thursday, the main target being Kyiv, the Ukrainian air force said.

“As of 5:30pm (2:30pm GMT), the death toll in Kyiv’s Sviatoshynsky district has risen to 12,” Ukraine’s state emergency services reported, with the number of wounded rising to 90.

Russia said it had targeted Ukraine’s defense industry, including plants that produced “rocket fuel and gunpowder”.

Asked about the strikes, Lavrov told CBS News: “We only target military goals or civilian sites used by the military.”

“If this was a target used by the Ukrainian military, the Ministry of Defense, the commanders in the field have the right to attack them.”

Ukraine has been battered by aerial attacks throughout Russia’s three-year invasion but strikes on Kyiv, better protected by air defenses than other cities, are less common.

Zelensky said Russia used a North Korean ballistic missile in the strikes.

Olena Davydiuk, a 33-year-old lawyer in Kyiv, told AFP she saw windows breaking and doors “falling out of their hinges”. “People were being pulled out of the rubble,” she added.

Zelensky said that on the ground, Russian forces had been attacking Ukrainian positions on Thursday, following the Kyiv strikes.

“Basically, the Russians tried to go on the offence under the cover of their massive strike,” he said on X.

“While the bulk of our forces were focused on protection from missiles and drones, the Russians significantly intensified their ground attacks.”

### Trump Poised to Offer Saudi Arabia Over \$100b Arms Package

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The United States is poised to offer Saudi Arabia an arms package worth well over \$100 billion, six sources with direct knowledge of the issue told Reuters, saying the proposal was being lined up for announcement during U.S. President Donald Trump’s visit to the kingdom in May.

The offered package comes after the administration of former President Joe Biden unsuccessfully tried to finalize a defense pact with Riyadh as part of a broad deal that envisioned Saudi Arabia normalizing ties with Israel.

The Biden proposal offered access to more advanced U.S. weaponry in return for halting Chinese arms purchases and restricting Beijing’s investment in the country. Reuters could not establish if the Trump administration’s proposal includes similar requirements.

The White House and Saudi government communications office did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

A U.S. Defense official said: “Our defense relationship with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is stronger than ever under President Trump’s leadership. Maintaining our security cooperation remains an important component of this partnership and we will continue to work with Saudi Arabia to address their defense needs.”

In his first term, Trump celebrated weapons sales to Saudi Arabia as good for U.S. jobs.

Lockheed Martin Corp could supply a range of advanced weapons systems including C-130 transport aircraft, two of the sources said. One source said Lockheed would also supply missiles and radars.

RTX Corp, formerly known as Raytheon Technologies, is also expected to play a significant role in the package, which will include supplies from other major U.S. defense contractors such as Boeing Co, Northrop Grumman Corp and General Atomics, said four of the sources.



All the sources declined to be named due to the sensitivity of the matter.

RTX, Northrop and General Atomics declined to comment. Boeing did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A Lockheed Martin spokesperson said foreign military sales are government-to-government transactions. Questions about sales to foreign governments are best addressed by the U.S. government.

Reuters could not immediately establish how many of the deals on offer were new. Many have been in the works for some time, two of the sources said. For example, the kingdom first requested information about General Atomics’ drones in 2018, they said. Over the past 12 months, a deal for \$20 billion of General Atomics’ MQ-9B SeaGuardian-style drones and other aircraft came

into focus, according to one of the sources.

Several executives from defense companies are considering traveling to the region as a part of the delegation, three of the sources said.

The U.S. has long supplied Saudi Arabia with weapons. In 2017, Trump proposed approximately \$110 billion of sales to the kingdom.

As of 2018, only \$14.5 billion of sales had been initiated and Congress began to question the deals in light of the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

In 2021, under Biden, Congress imposed a ban on sales of offensive weapons to Saudi Arabia over the Khashoggi killing and to pressure the kingdom to wind down its Yemen war, which had inflicted heavy civilian casualties.

Under U.S. law, major international weapons deals must be reviewed by members of Congress before they are finalised.

The Biden administration began to soften its stance on Saudi Arabia in 2022 after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine impacted global oil supplies. The ban on offensive weapons sales was lifted in 2024, as Washington worked more closely with Riyadh in the aftermath of Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack to devise a plan for post-war Gaza.

A potential deal for Lockheed’s F-35 jets, which the kingdom has been reportedly interested in for years, is expected to be discussed, three of the sources said, while downplaying the chances for an F-35 deal being signed during the trip.

The United States guarantees that its close ally Israel receives more advanced American weapons than Arab states, giving it what is labeled a “Qualitative Military Edge” (QME) over its neighbors.

Israel has now owned F-35s for nine years, building multiple squadrons.

### Tight Vatican Security for Pope Francis Funeral

VATICAN CITY (Dispatches) - The Vatican was to make final preparations Friday for Pope Francis’s funeral as the last of the huge crowds of mourners file through St Peter’s Basilica to view his open coffin.

Many of the 50 heads of state and 10 monarchs attending Saturday’s ceremony in St Peter’s Square, who include US President Donald Trump and Ukraine’s President Volodymyr Zelensky, were expected to arrive on Friday in Rome.

Italian and Vatican authorities have placed the area around St Peter’s under tight security ahead of the funeral, with drones blocked, snipers on roofs and fighter jets on standby.

Further check-points will be activated Friday night, police said.

Tens of thousands of people have already queued for hours to pay their last respects to Francis, whose coffin will be closed at 8.00pm in a ceremony attended by senior cardinals.

Cardinal Kevin Farrell, the camerlengo who is running the Vatican’s day-to-day affairs until a new pope is elected, will preside over the so-called “Rite of the Sealing of the Coffin”.

The Catholic Church’s first Latin American pope died on Monday aged 88, less than a month after spending weeks in hospital with severe pneumonia.



Veronique Montes-Coulomb, a tourist from Toulouse in France, who attended the lying-in-state Thursday at St Peter’s, said she had been at the mass on Easter Sunday — the pontiff’s last public outing.

“We saw the pope passing by in the ‘popemobile’; he seemed relatively healthy, and we were surprised to learn that he had died on Monday morning,” she told AFP.

The Argentine pontiff, who had long suffered failing health, defied doctors’ orders by appearing at Easter, the most important moment in the Catholic calendar.

Condolences have flooded in from around the world for the Jesuit, an energetic reformer who championed those on the fringes of society in his 12 years as head of the world’s 1.4 billion Catholics.

He used his last speech to rail against those who stir up “contempt... towards the vulnerable, the marginalised, and migrants”.

At least 130 foreign delegations are expected at his funeral, including Argentina’s President Javier Milei and Britain’s Prince William, and a no-fly zone will be in force.

The pope’s coffin was set before St Peter’s altar for his three days of lying-in-state, with Francis dressed in his papal vestments — a red chasuble, white mitre and black shoes.





## Thunder Rally Past Grizzlies to Take 3-0 Series Lead

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 31 points and Jalen Williams had 26 to lead the Oklahoma City Thunder to an improbable 114-108 win over the Memphis Grizzlies on Thursday to take a 3-0 lead in their Western Conference first-round series.

Chet Holmgren scored 23 of his 24 points in the second half as the Thunder overcame a 29-point deficit in the first half and didn't lead in the game until Williams dropped in a free throw with 1:20 remaining to go ahead 109-108.

Holmgren added two free throws with 57.4 seconds left and Alex Caruso scored on a breakaway layup with 19.4 seconds to go. The Grizzlies did not score in the final 4:51.

"We kind of re-connected to who we are (in the second half)," Oklahoma City coach Mark Daigneault said.

"We were very out of character in the first half, and some of that had to do with how well Memphis played and the way they landed the first punch and multiple punches after that. So credit to them. But I thought our response in a game that doesn't feel attainable, our response was great," Daigneault said.

Memphis played without Ja Morant in the second half after he sustained a hip injury late in the first half. Scotty Pippen Jr. scored 28 points to lead the Grizzlies. Jaren Jackson Jr. added 22.

Morant had 15 points and five assists in 15 minutes before the injury. He was diagnosed with a left hip contusion. Without Morant, the Grizzlies were outscored 63-31 in the second half.

Morant left the game with 3:14 to go in the second quarter after falling hard on his left side while soaring in for a layup on a fastbreak. Morant was undercut by Luguentz Dort on the play. He hobbled slowly to the sideline after spending several minutes on the floor being attended by the Grizzlies' training staff.

Morant returned to the court to take two free throws, which he missed, before being helped to the locker room.

Memphis interim coach Tuomas Iisalo said after the game that Morant will be evaluated on Friday, "and then we'll know more."

Memphis was coming off lopsided losses in the opening two games of the series in Oklahoma City -- by 51 points in Game 1 and by 19 in Game 2 -- but played with renewed vigor in their home playoff opener.

Down 26 at the half, the Thunder doubled up the Grizzlies 36-18 in the third quarter. Midway through the period, Oklahoma City trimmed the lead to 10 points, mostly behind Holmgren. Holmgren had 16 points during a 25-9 run to open the quarter. A 3-pointer by Williams as the quarter ended cut the Thunder deficit to 95-87.

"I give a lot of credit to Chet because he had one point at halftime," Oklahoma City coach Mark Daigneault said.

"He had a very, very quiet, subdued first half. And then the mental toughness to stay in it ... was really impressive. And he did a good job defensively as well," Daigneault said.

The Grizzlies built a double-digit lead in the first quarter. The catalyst was Pippen, who had four of the team's eight 3-pointers in the quarter. The Grizzlies led by 12 points on three occasions late in the period.

The Grizzlies extended their advantage to 28 points (65-37) midway through the second quarter following a 25-5 run that included 16 consecutive points. Morant scored nine points during the run, and Pippen had seven. The lead stretched to 29 points at 69-40 with 3:07 to go on a layup by Desmond Bane.

"We did a great job fighting for 48 minutes, but against this team it's not enough to fight, you also have to be able to execute," Iisalo said.

Memphis led 77-51 at halftime by shooting 57.4 percent and committing only three turnovers. The Grizzlies scored only 80 points in Game 1.

## Atletico Thrash Rayo as Betis Hammer Valladolid



MADRID (Dispatches) - Atletico Madrid cruised to a 3-0 La Liga win over Rayo Vallecano as they bounced back from defeat at Las Palmas last weekend.

Real Betis bolstered their Champions League ambitions with a 5-1 win over Real Valladolid, confirming the visitors' long-expected relegation.

Atletico have little to play for in the rest of the season with leaders Barcelona 10 points clear with five matches remaining, but produced a solid derby display.

Alexander Sorloth opened the scoring in the third minute after Giuliano Simeone, son of coach Diego, crossed for the Norwegian target man to nod home at the back post.

It was a formula which should have led to more goals for Atletico but the striker wasted several presentable opportunities.

Sorloth headed over a few minutes later and then was denied by Rayo goalkeeper Augusto Batalla.

Atletico were outplaying Rayo but the visitors could have levelled when Isi Palazon drilled towards the far corner and Jan Oblak made a fine save.

Sorloth spurned another headed opportunity before Conor Gallagher struck just before half-time.

Rodrigo de Paul lofted a cross into the area which the former Chelsea midfielder nodded beyond Batalla.

Oblak tipped over a Palazon header as Rayo looked for an equaliser, before Atletico substitute Antoine Griezmann fired narrowly wide after a Julian Alvarez backheel teed him up.

Julian Alvarez rounded off the win in the second half with his 15th La Liga goal of the season after Griezmann sent him through.

## Djokovic Flying the Flag for the Older Guys



LONDON (Dispatches) - Novak Djokovic acknowledges the generational shift in tennis that has brought a new crop of players into the limelight but the 24-time Grand Slam champion says he has no intention of quietly fading into the background.

The 37-year-old won three out of the four major titles in 2023 but has not been able to reproduce that kind of form since, being shut out of the game's biggest tournaments last year as Jannik Sinner and Carlos Alcaraz took two apiece.

With the retirements of Roger Federer, Rafa Nadal and Andy Murray, Djokovic is the last member of the "Big Four" still standing and the Serb said he wanted to continue giving to the sport.

"The last 20 years were dominated mostly by the four of us and when three of my biggest rivals retired you can feel there's a shift," Djokovic said at the Madrid Open.

"Not only in terms of the generations of players (who now have) the main focus and attention on them, but it takes a bit of time for people to accept the fact that Roger and Rafa are not playing, and Murray, and one day myself.

"But I'm still trying to stay and represent the older guys, the older generation. Hopefully that brings the positive effect to the tournaments and to the tour itself," he added.

"That's also one of the reasons why I keep on playing, because I feel like it also helps tennis still thrive on the attention and crowd coming in and watching tournaments and getting interested."

Djokovic, who is eyeing his 100th tour-level title before the French Open starts on May 25, said no player would ever be bigger than tennis.

"The sport should outlive everyone, the sport will outlive everyone, and it's more important than anybody individually," he added.

"We're all here in the service of the sport."

## Injured Alcaraz Pulls Out of Madrid Open With Eye on Roland Garros

MADRID (Dispatches) - Carlos Alcaraz withdrew from the Madrid Open on Thursday after the second seed said he was struggling with hamstring and groin injuries as the 21-year-old takes a break to recover for his French Open title defence next month.

Alcaraz sustained the injury during the final of the Barcelona Open where he was denied a third title by Denmark's Holger Rune, who stunned the Monte Carlo Masters champion in straight sets.

"I couldn't practice the entire week and found out I had hamstring and groin injuries. I needed to listen to my body and make the right decision," Alcaraz told reporters.

"On Monday I'll have more medical tests and after that we will have a better idea on how long I'll be out.

"This tournament is very exciting, but things haven't worked out the way I wanted to be able to compete. It hurts me not to be able to play here in Madrid in front of my people, my friends and my family."

Alcaraz had received a bye into the second round and was



scheduled to play his first match on Friday.

He took a medical timeout during the Barcelona Open final and continued to receive treatment in the next changeover before Rune prevailed, dropping the Spaniard to number three in the world rankings.

The next major tournament in the claycourt swing is the Italian Open, a Masters 1000 event from May 7-18 in Rome, where world number one Jannik Sinner is expected to make a comeback from his doping ban.

The French Open main draw gets under way on May 25.

"I expect to go back to court and start practising in a couple of weeks. Rome is still a possibility, but for sure I'll be in Paris," Alcaraz added.

"It's not an easy decision because Madrid is the first tournament I have ever been to as a young kid, it's the most special place for me to play.

"But (prioritising Roland Garros) was a big part of my decision to stop and recover properly."

Meanwhile Corentin Moutet was booed off the court after smashing his racket and retiring midway through the second set of his first-round match against fellow Frenchman Harold Mayot at the Madrid Open.

## Await Crowning Moment After Arsenal Stumble

LONDON (Dispatches) - Liverpool are on the brink of winning the Premier League title after Arsenal were held to a 2-2 draw by Crystal Palace.

Arne Slot's side were watching in anticipation of an Arsenal defeat that would have secured Liverpool's record-equalling 20th English title.

They didn't get their wish to start the party just yet, but Liverpool look certain to lift the trophy for the first time since 2020 after Jean-Philippe Mateta's late equalizer for Palace at the Emirates Stadium.

Liverpool are 12 points ahead of second-placed Arsenal, who have just four games left and an inferior goal difference of +34 compared to the leaders' +44.



The Reds, who have five matches remaining, will be assured of matching the 20 titles won by bitter rivals Manchester United if they avoid defeat against Tottenham at Anfield on Sunday.

While the champagne remains on ice for Slot's men, it is only a matter of time before Liverpool finish their relentless march to the title after Arsenal's third draw in their last four league games.

Jakub Kiwior put the Gunners ahead early on but Eberechi Eze equalized for Palace.

Leandro Trossard restored Arsenal's advantage before half-time, only for Mateta to come off the bench and bag a sublime leveller with seven minutes left.