

The Head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Has Discussed the Latest State of Cooperation Between Iran and the UN Nuclear Agency With the Iranian Foreign Minister

# IRAN NEWS

Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi, in a Phone Call With His Saudi Counterpart Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, Briefed Him of the Latest Developments Regarding the Talks Between Iran and the United States

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DOMESTIC



## NDF of Iran Signs €50m Credit Line Agreement With Kyrgyzstan

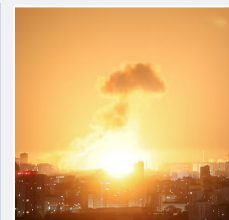
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INTERNATIONAL

## Global Military Spending Hits Record \$2.7 Trillion in 2024

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## Supreme Leader Offers Condolences Over Painful Port Blast in Bandar Abbas



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN – Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei has expressed his condolences to the grieving families of the victims of the “painful” explosion at Shahid Rajaei Port in Bandar Abbas and called for a thorough investigation into the incident.

In a message on Sunday, the Leader said the tragic fire incident at the Shahid Rajaei Port has caused sorrow and concern.

Ayatollah Khamenei urged security and judicial officials to identify any negligence or deliberate acts that may have caused the tragedy and to take necessary legal action in accordance with the law.

All officials must consider themselves responsible for preventing bitter and damaging incidents, he said.

Ayatollah Khamenei wished divine mercy and forgiveness for the deceased, patience and solace for the bereaved families of the victims, and a swift recovery for those injured.

The Leader expressed his sincere appreciation to all those compassionate people who were ready to donate blood to the injured in their time of need.

At least 40 people were killed and over 1,000 others wounded in the immense explosion that rocked the container port, which is located in Bandar Abbas and handles 80 million tons of goods a year.

The Iranian government declared Monday a day of national mourning after the tragic incident.

On Sunday, President Masoud Pezeshkian arrived in Bandar Abbas to monitor response operations a day after a massive explosion rocked the country’s southern port of Shahid Rajaei.

Speaking to reporters upon his arrival in Bandar Abbas on Sunday, Pezeshkian said his administration is following up on all aspects of the deadly blast.

He added that officials were present at the port to take necessary measures.

He noted that efforts by rescue and relief teams from the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) and the Army were underway to contain the fire.

Before landing, the president carried out an aerial survey of the affected site. Later, he went to a hospital and met with people injured in the blast.

## Fourth Round of Iran-U.S. Indirect Talks to Be Held



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The fourth round of indirect negotiations between Iran and the United States will soon take place, according to Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei. Speaking at his weekly press conference, Baghaei confirmed that the upcoming meeting, led by Iran’s Foreign Minister and the U.S. Special Representative, follows discussions referenced recently by Oman’s Foreign Minister.

Baghaei began the conference by offering condolences to the people of Hormozgan Province and the families affected by the recent explosion at Shahid Rajaei Port. He thanked countries, particularly Russia, that expressed sympathy and offered assistance.

On the situation in Palestine, Baghaei strongly condemned the ongoing violence, labeling it “genocide” and calling for global action against the killing of nearly 300 innocent civilians. He urged international organizations tasked with maintaining peace to fulfill their responsibilities.

Addressing indirect negotiations with the U.S., Baghaei emphasized that discussions must remain within previously agreed frameworks and that Iran’s red lines are firmly upheld. He reiterated that Iran’s missile and defense programs remain non-negotiable.

Commenting on the unlawful detention of Iranian citizens in France, Baghaei criticized the French authorities for human rights violations and confirmed that consular access was recently granted for detainee Ms. Esfandiari. He called on France to resolve the issue without politicizing the situation.

## President Says Iran Is the Second Homeland for Azerbaijanis

TEHRAN – President Masoud Pezeshkian emphasized the deep bonds between Iran and Azerbaijan, stating that “Iran is the second homeland for Azerbaijanis,” and that Iranians “never feel like strangers” in the Republic of Azerbaijan.

In an interview with Azerbaijan’s state television ahead of his official visit to Baku, President Pezeshkian outlined the current state of bilateral relations and expressed optimism about the future of cooperation between the two nations.

Speaking warmly, President Pezeshkian said: “Although a border exists between us, in reality, it holds little significance. We have always lived side by side and continue to see each other as close neighbors and family.”

He stressed that Iran’s foreign policy prioritizes neighboring countries, adding: “We believe countries must prioritize strong neighborly ties. We love our Azerbaijani brothers and sisters wholeheartedly.”

Pezeshkian expressed hope that his talks with Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev would further strengthen the already deep-rooted friendship between the two countries.

When asked about the agenda for his talks with President Aliyev, Pezeshkian explained that discussions would center on enhancing scientific, economic, industrial, healthcare, cultural, and trade cooperation.

“As two neighboring nations with shared capabilities, we can help each other grow and create a peaceful, prosperous region.”

He emphasized the importance of facilitating greater academic, economic, and cultural exchanges, making it easier for people of both countries to interact and collaborate.

On reinforcing mutual trust, President Pezeshkian mentioned plans to enhance parliamentary relations, promote academic cooperation, and increase joint cultural initiatives.

“We are ready for any form of cooperation and experience-sharing with Azerbaijan. There are no limits to our collaboration.”

Regarding the stalled peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan, President Pezeshkian reaffirmed Iran’s firm support for the territorial integrity of all nations.

“Conflicts arise when one party covets the land of another. Respecting territorial integrity and sovereignty is fundamental.”

He expressed hope that adherence to international law would lead to the resolution of disputes between Baku and Yerevan.



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

Addressing questions about the strategic Zangezur Corridor, Pezeshkian underscored that territorial integrity must be respected.

He noted that Iran is rapidly building transportation routes to facilitate direct access for Azerbaijanis to the Nakhchivan region through Iranian territory, affirming:

“We consider Iran the second homeland for Azerbaijanis.”

Pezeshkian highlighted Iran’s focus on completing vital infrastructure projects such as the Astara-Astara railway link and connecting Astara to Rasht, noting that these projects would strengthen commercial and cultural ties.

He emphasized the strategic importance of the North-South Corridor, allowing transit between Russia, Iran, and the Persian Gulf, while also providing a major export route for Azerbaijani goods.

On clean energy collaboration, Pezeshkian pointed to the Aras River hydroelectric projects and expressed readiness for further cooperation in solar, wind, and renewable energy sectors through academic and industrial partnerships.

Discussing regional and international organizations, Pezeshkian stated: “Strengthening bilateral relations paves the way for joint action within international bodies like BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and Eurasian alliances.”

He added that collaboration within such frameworks would boost economic power and facilitate the exchange of technology and experience.

President Pezeshkian assured that Iran is ensuring a secure and efficient land corridor linking Azerbaijan’s mainland to Nakhchivan, with Iranian contractors actively constructing the route.

“This project will not only resolve logistical issues for Azerbaijan but also create stronger links with key Iranian cities such as Tabriz, Ardabil, and Urmia.”

Concluding the interview, President Pezeshkian recited verses from the beloved poet Heydar Baba by Mohammad-Hossein Shahriar, expressing nostalgia for shared cultural roots.

He emphasized the importance of preventing misunderstandings and not allowing isolated incidents to undermine the strong bonds between the two nations:

“We love our Azerbaijani brothers and sisters wholeheartedly and wish them success, pride, and prosperity.”

President Pezeshkian on Sunday left Tehran for Baku for talks with Azerbaijani President Aliyev.

## FM Says Iran Will Neutralize Hostile Foreign Efforts



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araqchi emphasized Iran’s confidence in its capabilities to neutralize any malicious foreign attempts to disrupt or dictate its foreign policy. Writing on his personal account on the social platform X, Araqchi stated, “Iran is strong enough and confident in its abilities to counter any sabotage or imposition efforts by hostile external actors.”

He directly addressed Israeli ambitions, describing them as unrealistic. “Israel’s fantasy that it can dictate Iran’s actions is so detached from reality that it does not even merit a response,” Araqchi wrote. Nevertheless, he highlighted what he called the “audacity” of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, accusing him of attempting to dictate U.S. diplomatic strategies toward Iran under President Trump.

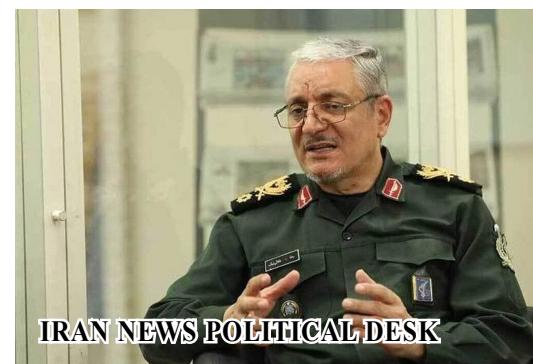
Araqchi also criticized members of the Biden administration, whom he referred to as part of a “failed team,” for mischaracterizing Iran’s indirect negotiations with the Trump administration as another version of the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA). Stressing Iran’s independent stance, Araqchi said, “Let me be clear: Iran is powerful enough to neutralize any hostile foreign attempts to sabotage or dictate its foreign policy. We only hope that our American counterparts are equally steadfast.”

He noted that many Iranians today are skeptical about the effectiveness of the JCPOA and are seeking tangible benefits. “Nothing the allies of Netanyahu in the failed Biden team say or do will change this reality,” he said.

On the topic of military options, Araqchi stated firmly that there is “no military solution” and warned that any attack would be met with an immediate and equivalent response.

The comments come as Iran and the United States, mediated by Oman, are engaged in indirect talks aimed at lifting U.S. sanctions on Iran. Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has been pressuring negotiators, demanding that any agreement with Iran dismantle its nuclear infrastructure, similar to Libya’s 2003 disarmament agreement with Western powers.

## No Military Cargo Involved in Shahid Rajaei Port Fire Incident



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - The spokesperson for Iran’s Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics confirmed on Sunday that no military-related cargo was involved in the recent fire at Shahid Rajaei Port.

Speaking to IRNA, Brigadier General Reza Talaei-Nik addressed the rumors surrounding the incident, stressing that investigations and documented evidence show no import or export cargo intended for military use or fuel was present in the affected area. “Some of the misinformation being spread is part of a targeted campaign by foreign media, aimed at supporting the psychological operations of Iran’s enemies,” he said, adding that the Iranian people’s vigilance has consistently neutralized such media attempts to undermine national strength.

Talaei-Nik further noted that, as announced earlier, the main and secondary causes of the fire — whether safety-related or otherwise — are under investigation by the National Crisis Management Organization and the Ministry of Interior, with assistance from other relevant agencies. The findings will be officially released in due course.

He reiterated the importance of maintaining media awareness in the face of hostile information warfare, emphasizing again that no military or fuel shipments were involved in the incident, either within the specific fire zone or across Shahid Rajaei Port as a whole.

On Saturday, April 26, a powerful explosion rocked Shahid Rajaei Port, located west of Bandar Abbas. Emergency teams were immediately dispatched to contain the fire and assist any potential casualties. The blast was strong enough to damage nearby buildings and vehicles.

## Iran’s Non-Oil Exports Reach Nearly \$58b in 2024

TEHRAN - Minister of Industry, Mine, and Trade announced that despite sanctions, the country’s non-oil exports in the past year amounted to 152 million tons of goods, valued at \$57.8 billion.

Seyed Mohammad Atabak made the announcement on Tuesday during the opening ceremony of the 7th Iran Export Capabilities Exhibition, “Iran Expo 2025,” held at the Summit Hall in Tehran. The event was attended by President Masoud Pezeshkian and trade delegations from over 100 countries.

Atabak stated, “There may be a perception that due to the oppressive sanctions, Iran’s trade and export channels to other countries have been closed. However, let me highlight a few recent achievements made through the efforts of traders and private sector activists.”

He added that in the year 1403 (Iranian calendar year ending in March 2025), Iran’s non-oil exports totaled 152 million tons, worth \$57.8 billion. He noted that the country’s trade balance, excluding imported gold, had improved and posted a positive figure of 8 trillion toman.

Atabak emphasized that Iran’s total trade volume with the world had risen by \$130 billion, reflecting an 11% growth.

“These figures show us that Iran, despite oppressive sanctions, continues to act as a confident, creative, and reliable player on the global stage,” he asserted.

Highlighting the targets set in the Seventh Development Plan, Atabak added that Iran’s non-oil exports must grow by over 23% annually. To achieve this, Iran needs to expand into new markets in Africa, West Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, and strengthen economic diplomacy by enhancing free trade and preferential agreements.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, Head of the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran, described the 7th Iran Export Capabilities Exhibition as more than just a trade event, calling it a platform for advancing economic integration and strengthening relations with countries worldwide.

Welcoming the guests of Iran Expo 2025, Dehnavi introduced it alongside the Iran-Africa



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

Economic Cooperation Summit as one of Iran’s largest trade events. He noted, “Today, we proudly open this exhibition with the participation of political and trade delegations from 111 countries, including 190 official representatives and more than 3,100 foreign economic activists and traders.”

He highlighted the significant growth in participation, noting it as a testament to Iran’s expanding trade capacities. “Iran Expo offers a unique platform for business opportunities,” he said, adding that over 1,000 Iranian companies are showcasing their export capabilities, facilitating commercial dialogues and political consultations that pave the way for new trade agreements.

Dehnavi emphasized that Iran’s Trade Promotion Organization believes international trade fosters not only economic ties but also political and cultural bonds between nations. He reiterated that this event seeks to promote broader economic integration and stronger relationships across all sectors.

According to Dehnavi, “We view business opportunities as a foundation for collaboration toward building a better world, creating prosperity for nations, and fostering friendship and brotherhood among peoples.”

Following the official opening, the Iran Expo 2025 ribbon was cut by Minister Seyed Mohammad Atabak, Trade Promotion Organization Head Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, and Sadeef Beikzadeh, CEO of Iran International Exhibitions Company.

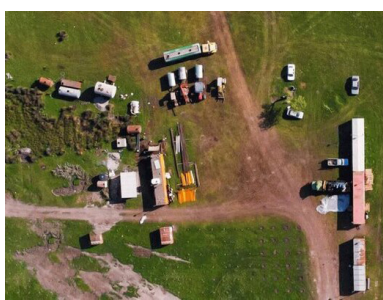
The 7th Iran Export Capabilities Exhibition, the country’s largest and most significant export event for connecting with international markets, officially opened today in Tehran with participation from companies representing over 100 countries. The exhibition will run until May 2, 2025, at Tehran’s Permanent International Fairgrounds.

During the event, more than 2,000 companies and their representatives from around the world will engage with Iran’s leading industrial brands, exploring potential business partnerships.

According to event organizers, over 800 major Iranian companies will display their products and achievements over the five-day exhibition.



# IRAN NEWS



## Miankaleh Petrochemical Plant Returns to National Lands

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Administration spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani says the Miankaleh petrochemical zone in northern Iran has been returned to the national lands following a directive issued by the president last week.

In a message posted on her official X account on Sunday, Mojaheerani said the decision followed a directive issued by President Masoud Pezeshkian last week to halt the petrochemical project.

The president's order came in response to growing environmental concerns raised by activists and the public. The project faced renewed scrutiny in recent days after images shared on social media showed road construction machinery entering the rangelands of Hosseinabad in the city of Behshahr.

## Iran Allocates \$2b Credit Line for African Imports



TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Trade Promotion Organization announced the allocation of a \$2 billion credit line for the purchase of goods from Africa, a decision made by the Iran-Africa Cooperation Headquarters.

Mohammad Ali Dehghan Dehnavi, speaking at the specialized session of the Third Iran-Africa Economic Cooperation Summit, said a special headquarters chaired by the First Vice President has been established in Iran to promote relations with Africa. This headquarters includes several key ministers and related agencies focused on strengthening economic ties.

Dehnavi emphasized the strong commitment of the First Vice President to this effort and noted that the headquarters has been revitalized and highly active under the 14th government.

"We must all prepare for this new era," he said, adding that significant decisions have already been made, marking the beginning of broader cooperation and deeper trade relations between Iran and Africa.

Highlighting some of the key resolutions, Dehnavi pointed out that the permanent secretariat for the Iran-Africa Summit is housed within the Trade Promotion Organization. He expressed hope that in the coming years, the summit would be held on a larger scale with greater achievements.

The Deputy Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade further stated that the establishment of shipping lines to West and South Africa has been approved by the headquarters, complementing the existing lines to East and North Africa. Additionally, the launch of new airline routes has also received approval.

The head of the Trade Promotion Organization explained that to facilitate currency exchanges, the headquarters has approved the creation of a barter system or a fund to manage trade exchanges between merchants and traders, which is currently being designed.

## Iran-Africa Agricultural Trade Reaches \$300m Annually



TEHRAN - In his address at the Agriculture Panel of the Third Iran-Africa Cooperation Summit, Iran's Minister of Agriculture, Gholamreza Nouri Ghezjelreh, announced that the annual agricultural trade volume between Iran and Africa stands at \$300 million, highlighting that this figure only represents a fraction of the potential available.

Nouri emphasized the urgent need for collaboration in a world grappling with poverty, hunger, food security challenges, climate change, and economic instability. He described the summit as a unique opportunity to explore the vast agricultural capacities of Iran and Africa.

Highlighting Africa's abundant natural resources and youthful labor force, Nouri noted that agriculture is a crucial sector in Africa's economy. He stressed that expanding agricultural trade with the continent could serve as a major driver for Africa's economic development. "Africa possesses vast fertile lands suitable for cultivating a wide range of agricultural products," he added.

The minister pointed to the formation of a Joint Agricultural Cooperation Committee as an important initiative that could enhance Iran-Africa partnerships. He noted Iran's significant advances in agricultural innovation, underlining that the current trade volume reflects only part of the true potential.

Nouri highlighted Iran's ability to export high-quality agricultural products and pointed to the country's technological growth in producing cost-effective agricultural goods, small-scale farming tractors, and efficient drip irrigation systems. These innovations, he said, could help transform agricultural practices across Africa.

He also stressed the importance of adopting forward-looking strategies, proposing areas for cooperation such as joint agricultural investments, technology transfer and capacity building, collaboration in research and development, and improving market access for agricultural products.

Additionally, Nouri proposed the establishment of a preferential trade agreement between Iran and the African Continental Free Trade Area to reduce tariffs on agricultural goods.

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



## NDFI of Iran Signs €50m Credit Line Agreement With Kyrgyzstan

TEHRAN - A €50 million credit line agreement between Iran's National Development Fund (NDFI) and Kyrgyzstan was officially signed on Sunday.

The credit line will be allocated by the NDFI to Iranian exporters of technical and engineering services, through banks selected by the exporters themselves.

The agreement was signed by Mehdi Ghazanfari, Chairman of the NDFI, and Bakyt Toromushevich Seydikov, Minister of Economy and Commerce of the Kyrgyz Republic.

At the beginning of the meeting, Minister Seydikov expressed his condolences on behalf of the Kyrgyz government and people regarding the recent incident at Shahid Rajaei Port, stating his belief that the damaged infrastructure would soon be rebuilt.

Highlighting the bright future of economic relations between Iran and Kyrgyzstan, Seydikov emphasized the importance of strengthening bilateral ties, noting that the National Development Fund's role in this regard is crucial. He added that the signing of this memorandum of understanding would contribute to boosting investment and expanding bilateral cooperation.

Discussing Kyrgyzstan's current economic situation, the Minister stated that the country has experienced notable growth, achieving a 9% economic expansion in recent months and currently reaching 13%. He added that government debt remains under control, and inflation is maintained between 5-7%, thanks to ongoing economic reforms.

Seydikov further noted significant investments in Kyrgyzstan's transportation and energy sectors, explaining that these efforts have reduced the time and cost of goods transportation to and from China. The new infrastructure projects, once operational, will greatly enhance logistics and natural resource exploitation opportunities.

He also revealed plans to construct a 1,900-megawatt hydroelectric power plant this year, supported by external financing. He stressed that Iran has an excellent

opportunity to invest in Kyrgyzstan, where there is high demand for Iranian goods and services. Kyrgyzstan is particularly eager to cooperate with the NDFI.

The Kyrgyz minister also pointed out that Kyrgyzstan collaborates with development funds from Azerbaijan, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Hungary, and now looks forward to expanding cooperation with Iran's National Development Fund. He added that the planned NDFI office within Kyrgyzstan's Ministry of Economy would significantly contribute to modernizing Kyrgyzstan's economy.

Seydikov announced that a dedicated space would be provided for the Iran-Kyrgyzstan Joint Committee within his Ministry and assured that investment risk in Kyrgyzstan is very low. He also emphasized that Kyrgyzstan's financial markets have performed very well this year, declaring that the country's economic doors are wide open for Iranian investors and the NDFI.

In a press briefing after the signing ceremony, Minister Seydikov described the memorandum of understanding as a foundation for enhancing economic cooperation between the two countries, enabling Iranian investors to participate in technical and engineering projects across Kyrgyzstan.

He noted that the initial phase aims to attract €50 million in investment, with an option to extend it by another €50 million if the first phase proves successful.

Seydikov praised Iran's strong industrial and economic capabilities, particularly in providing technical and engineering services. Given Kyrgyzstan's high demand for investment, the agreement aligns well with the needs of both countries, he said, reiterating that Kyrgyzstan offers a promising and welcoming market for Iranian investors.

Regarding Kyrgyz interest in investing in Iran after the lifting of sanctions, he remarked that the two nations have always maintained good-neighborly relations, and removing barriers to investment would further strengthen their friendly ties.

## Iran to Host Global Tour Operators From 33 Countries

TEHRAN - The Director General of Marketing and Development of International Tourism announced that Iran will host the "Global Tour Operators Gathering" with the participation of over 100 leading tour operators from 33 countries, coinciding with Iran Expo 2025. He described the event as a valuable opportunity to promote Iran as a safe travel destination and counter negative perceptions of the country.

Speaking to ILNA, Moslem Shojaei stated that the Iranian Association of Travel Service Offices is organizing the event, expressing hope that similar initiatives would increasingly be led by the private sector, with the government continuing to provide full support as a policymaker and facilitator.

At a press conference held on Sunday, at the Persian Gulf Hall of the Tourism Deputy's Office, Shojaei revealed that the event, titled the Iran Travel Forum (ITF), will coincide with the Seventh Exhibition of Export Capabilities (Iran Expo 2025).

Shojaei noted that more than 100 tour operators from 33 different countries—including Vietnam, Thailand, India, Tajikistan, Armenia, Turkey, Uganda, Mauritius, Bosnia, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the Netherlands, Kazakhstan, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan, South Africa, Pakistan, Bulgaria, Turkmenistan, Oman, Malaysia, Slovakia, Azerbaijan, Iraq, Afghanistan, Italy, Germany, the United Kingdom, Tunisia, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, France, and Brunei—will participate in the event. A B2B meeting will be held on Tuesday at the Esteghlal Hotel.

Shojaei emphasized that the gathering represents a golden opportunity for Iran's tourism industry, which plays a critical role in generating foreign exchange revenue and employment.

As part of the program, participants will visit major historical and cultural attractions in Iran, including the Sa'dabad Palace Complex, the National Museum of Iran, and the Abbas Abad Lands. They will also travel to Kish Island to experience Iran's tourism offerings firsthand.

He highlighted the significant role played by the Iranian Association of Travel Agencies in organizing the event, stating that the selection of invited countries was strategic to maximize impact.



Shojaei further explained that the aim was to engage with countries in a way that would lead to creating customized travel packages, and praised the private sector's cooperation, expressing optimism that future initiatives will increasingly be spearheaded by private players with continued government support.

Shojaei underlined that the Office of Marketing and Development of International Tourism has two main missions: promoting Iran's image abroad and attracting foreign tourists. International events and tourism promotion are considered essential

strategies to improve Iran's global image. He stressed the significance of tourism as a key tool of public diplomacy and identified hosting international events as a strategic pillar of Iran's approach.

Shojaei also referred to Iran's recent participation in the 37th East Asia and Pacific Regional Commission Meeting and the 60th South Asia Regional Commission Meeting of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) held recently in Jakarta. Iran's active involvement, including its membership in the UNWTO Executive Council, has opened new opportunities for developing the tourism industry.

In addition, he mentioned a new memorandum of understanding signed with UNWTO to host the Urban Tourism Summit in Tehran. Shojaei highlighted the importance of influencer marketing to build trust and present a modern image of Iran to the world, hoping to expand Iran's presence in digital media through interactive content and strategic communications.

He also announced plans for Iran to participate in 10 international tourism exhibitions and organize five roadshows in cities such as Basra, Baghdad, Karbala, and Najaf, as well as in countries like Poland, Hungary, Serbia, and Russia, aiming to attract more foreign visitors.

Furthermore, Shojaei revealed that Semnan will host the Silk Road Summit, and Hamedan will host the Third International Health Tourism Conference for ECO member states in 2025.

## Iran Aims to Strengthen Tourism Cooperation With ECO Member States



TEHRAN - Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts, Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri, emphasized Iran's commitment to expanding international cooperation in tourism and investing in infrastructure, during the Sixth Meeting of Tourism Ministers of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) held in Erzurum, Turkey.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of the event, Salehi Amiri highlighted Iran's strategic goal of attracting 15 million tourists by 2028 (1407 Iranian calendar). He described the summit, which brought together tourism ministers from 10 ECO member states, as a major step towards strengthening regional cooperation and tourism capacities.

Among the key outcomes of the meeting, Salehi Amiri announced the approval of 10 major resolutions, including the establishment of a consultative committee aimed at boosting tourism infrastructure and investment among ECO countries. This committee will focus on developing joint strategies and optimizing regional tourism resources.

He also pointed to the approval of a Health Tourism Conference to be held in Hamedan, Iran, in 2025. Citing Iran's strengths — including highly skilled doctors, advanced hospitals, and competitive treatment costs — Salehi Amiri said Iran is emerging as a global hub for health tourism. In 2024, over 1.2 million health tourists visited Iran, and plans are underway to double this figure, potentially generating \$6 billion in revenue.

Regarding bilateral relations, Salehi Amiri noted his productive talks with Turkey's Minister of Tourism, which resulted in plans for the first joint expert meeting to draft a tourism cooperation agreement. The agreement is expected to be finalized during the Turkish President's upcoming visit to Tehran.

He also emphasized the significance of the Iran-Turkey Cultural Year as a historic opportunity to strengthen ties, aiming to balance the flow of tourists between the two countries. While 3.5 million Iranians visit Turkey annually, fewer than 600,000 Turkish tourists travel to Iran — a gap Iran hopes to narrow with targeted promotional campaigns.

## Oil Sector Poised for Major Gains if Sanctions Are Lifted



TEHRAN - The spokesperson for the Iranian Oil, Gas, and Petrochemical Products Exporters' Union stated that lifting sanctions could significantly boost Iran's oil sector, allowing for exports of around 3 million barrels per day.

Speaking to ILNA, Seyed Hamid Hosseini said if production reaches 5.3 million barrels per day, Iran can comfortably export about 3 million barrels without needing new markets. Traditional buyers like China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Europe could absorb the entire export volume.

Hosseini emphasized that a positive outcome in ongoing negotiations would have wide-ranging impacts on Iran's economy. Referring to a 2016 McKinsey report, he noted that the lifting of sanctions could enable Iran to achieve an annual growth rate of 6.3%, increase GDP to over \$1 trillion by 2035, and create up to 9 million jobs.

McKinsey identified Iran's abundant natural resources — estimated at \$27 trillion — as a key driver for economic growth, alongside a diversified economy, a highly educated young workforce, a sizable middle class, high urbanization rates, strong entrepreneurial culture, and a strategic geographic location.

Hosseini highlighted that the oil and gas sector, Iran's most internationalized industry, stands to benefit the most. Sanctions have inflicted \$200 billion worth of damage on the Iranian economy, mainly hitting the oil sector. However, if sanctions are lifted, Iran can tap into foreign investment, advanced technology, and international expertise to upgrade its refineries and gas fields — as seen during the post-JCOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) period.



## Ecuador Opposition Objects to Election Results

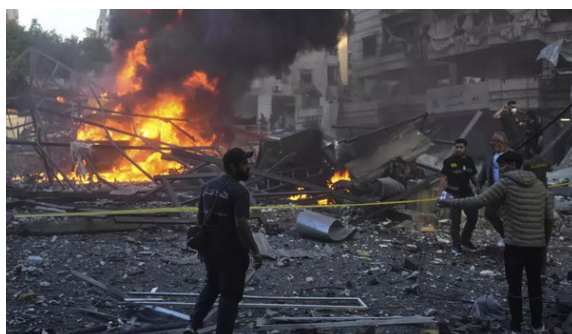
QUITO (Dispatches) - Ecuador's opposition party filed another objection to the recent presidential election results late on Saturday night, according to a video released by the Citizens' Revolution party.

Ecuador's elections body denied a request from the leftist opposition to recount votes on Thursday, but the Citizens' Revolution party said it handed in a new report detailing numerous irregularities.

Incumbent President Daniel Noboa won the election earlier this month and the election authority and the Organization of American States (OAS) have certified the election and ruled out fraud.



## Israel Strikes South Beirut for Third Time Since Ceasefire Began



BEIRUT (Dispatches) - Israel struck south Beirut on Sunday for the third time since a fragile November 27 ceasefire, prompting Lebanese President Joseph Aoun to call on its guarantors France and the United States to force a halt.

But Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said the strike targeted a building used by Hezbollah to store "precision-guided missiles" and vowed to stop the Iran-backed militant group using Beirut's southern suburbs as a "safe haven".

An AFP correspondent saw a plume of smoke rising over the building in the Hadath neighbourhood after the strike.

Lebanese television channels broadcast images of a fire around the hangar-like building.

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The Israeli military had earlier issued a warning to civilians to evacuate the densely populated neighbourhood.

"An urgent warning for those in the southern suburbs of Beirut, especially in the Hadath neighbourhood: Anyone present in the building marked in red on the attached map as well as the surrounding buildings, is near Hezbollah facilities," said military spokesman Avichay Adraee on X, adding: "You must evacuate".

Netanyahu's office said Israel "will not allow Hezbollah to grow stronger and create any threat against it - anywhere in Lebanon".

"The Dahiyeh neighbourhood in Beirut will not serve as a safe haven for the terrorist organisation Hezbollah," it vowed, using the Arabic name for the southern suburbs.

## North Korea Confirms Troop Deployment to Russia's Kursk



PYONGYANG (Dispatches) - The admission comes just days after Russia confirmed the North's participation, with South Korean and Western intelligence agencies having long reported that Pyongyang sent more than 10,000 soldiers to help in Kursk last year.

"The sub-units of our armed forces," the North's Central Military Commission said in the KCNA report, had "participated in the operations for liberating the Kursk areas according to the order of the head of state of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea".

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's decision to deploy the troops, it said, was in accordance with a mutual defence treaty.

"They who fought for justice are all heroes and representatives of the honour of the motherland," Kim said according to KCNA.

Kim added that a monument to the "battle feats" would soon be built in the capital, and referred to "the tombstones of the fallen soldiers", publicly confirming that North Korean troops had been killed in combat.

The country must "take important national measures to specially honour and care for the families of war veterans," said Kim.

According to the Central Military Commission, "the operations for liberating the Kursk area to repel the adventurous invasion of the Russian Federation by the Ukrainian authorities were victoriously concluded".

# Global Military Spending Hits Record \$2.7 Trillion in 2024



LONDON (Dispatches) - Worldwide military expenditure surged to \$2.7 trillion in 2024, marking the sharpest annual increase since the Cold War, driven by escalating conflicts and geopolitical tensions, SIPRI reported Monday. Europe and the Middle East saw the steepest rises, with some European nations posting "unprecedented" spending hikes, the research institute said.

Worldwide military expenditure saw its steepest rise in 2024 since the end of the Cold War, reaching \$2.7 trillion as wars and rising tensions drove up spending, researchers said Monday.

Military spending rose worldwide with particularly large increases in Europe and the Middle East, according to a new report by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

Several European countries had seen "unprecedented" rises in their military spending, the report noted.

In real terms, spending rose by 9.4 percent globally compared to 2023, with 2024 marking the 10th year of consecutive spending increases.

"This was really unprecedented," Xiao Liang, a researcher with the SIPRI Military Expenditure and Arms Production Programme, told AFP.

"It was the highest year-on-year increase since the end of the Cold War."

While there may have been steeper increases during the Cold War, data for the Soviet Union is not available, Liang added. More than 100 countries, including all of the 15 largest spenders, increased their military budgets last year, said the report. "This really speaks to the heightened geopolitical tensions," Liang said. The spending increase was likely to have "a very profound socio-economic and political impact", he added.

"Countries have to make trade-offs in their budgetary decisions," he said.

"For example, we've seen many European countries cutting other spending like international aid to fund the increase in military spending, and... trying to raise taxes or rely on loans or debt to fund the spending," Liang said.

The main contributor to the rise in expenditure was the European region including Russia, where spending rose by 17 percent to \$693 billion.

All European countries, except Malta, expanded their budgets, "pushing European military spending beyond the level recorded at the end of the Cold War," SIPRI said.

Russia's military expenditure reached \$149 billion in 2024: a 38-percent increase on the previous year and a doubling since

2015.

Ukraine's military spending grew by 2.9 percent to reach \$64.7 billion.

While that sum only corresponds to 43 percent of Russia's arms spending, for Ukraine it is the equivalent of 34 percent of its GDP. That means it is carrying the highest military burden of any country.

Germany's spending increased by 28 percent, reaching \$88.5 billion, overtaking India as the fourth largest in the world. "Germany became the biggest spender in Central and Western Europe for the first time since its reunification," Liang noted.

The world's largest spender, the United States, increased expenditure by 5.7 percent, reaching \$997 billion. That alone accounts for 37 percent of worldwide spending and 66 percent of the military spending among NATO countries.

Total military spending by the 32 members of the US-led alliance rose to 1.5 trillion as all members increased their spending. "We've seen in 2024 that 18 out of the 32 NATO countries reached the two-percent GDP spending target, which is the highest since the founding of the alliance," Liang said.

While some of the increases have been a result of European military aid to Ukraine, it has also been fuelled by concerns of potential US disengagement with the alliance.

"There has really been a shift in European defence policies, where we will see large-scale procurement plans into the arms industry in the years to come," Liang explained.

Military budgets also drastically grew in the Middle East to an estimated \$243 billion, an increase of 15 percent from 2023. As Israel continued its offensive in Gaza, its military expenditure surged by 65 percent to \$46.5 billion in 2024. SIPRI noted that this represented "the steepest annual increase since the Six-Day War in 1967".

In contrast, Iran's fell by 10 percent to \$7.9 billion in 2024, "despite its involvement in regional conflicts and its support for regional proxies", the report added.

"The impact of sanctions on Iran severely limited its capacity to increase spending," said SIPRI.

The world's second-largest spender, China, increased its military budget by 7.0 percent to an estimated \$314 billion, "marking three decades of consecutive growth".

China - which has been investing in modernising its military and expansion of cyberwarfare capabilities and nuclear arsenal - accounted for half of all military spending in Asia and Oceania.

# Macron Warns Against Religious Hate After Muslim Killed in Mosque



LA GRAND-COMBE (Dispatches) - France's President Emmanuel Macron lashed out against "racism and hatred" after the brutal stabbing to death of a Muslim in a mosque in the south of the country.

Officials said the attacker, who is on the run, stabbed Aboubakar Cisse, a young Malian in his early 20s, dozens of times and then filmed him with a mobile phone while shouting insults at Islam.

The attack in the village of La Grand-Combe in the Gard region was the latest in a series of deadly stabbings in France in recent years.

It shocked the country's leaders, with Macron finally speaking out on X on Sunday.

"Racism and hatred based on religion can have no place in France. Freedom of worship cannot be violated," he wrote, offering support to "our fellow Muslim citizens".

French Prime Minister Francois Bayrou earlier branded it an "Islamophobic atrocity"—although the prosecutor in the case emphasised that Islamophobia is just one of the motives being considered.

Interior Minister Bruno Retailleau said in televised comments on Sunday that he had ordered police to tighten security at mosques around the country.

Around 1,000 people yesterday marched through La Grand-Combe, which has just 5,000 inhabitants, to remember the victim.

Hundreds also rallied in Paris, where far-left leader Jean-Luc Melenchon accused the government of nurturing a "climate of Islamophobia" at a time when immigration is top of the political agenda.

Retailleau accused Melenchon's party of exploiting the attack for political ends.

Investigators said the alleged killer sent the video he had filmed with his phone—showing the victim writhing in agony—to another person, who then shared it on a social media platform before deleting it.

A source close to the case, who asked not to be named, said the suspected perpetrator, while not apprehended, had been identified as a French citizen of Bosnian origin who is not a Muslim.

After initially praying alongside the man when they were alone in the mosque, the attacker stabbed the victim up to 50 times before fleeing the

scene.

The body of the victim was discovered later in the morning when other worshippers arrived at the mosque for Friday prayers.

The French Council of the Muslim Faith (CFCM) said it was "horrified" by the "anti-Muslim terrorist attack" and urged Muslims in France to be "extremely vigilant".

"The murder of a worshipper in a mosque is a despicable crime that must revolt the hearts of all French people," added the Representative Council of Jewish Institutions of France (CRIF).

The attacker has been named only as Olivier A., born in France in 2004 and unemployed without a criminal record.

He is "potentially extremely dangerous" and it is "essential" to arrest him before he claims more victims, said regional prosecutor Abdelkrim Grini.

But while the motive of Islamophobia is the lead that the 70 investigators are "working on as a priority... it is not the only one", Grini said.

There are "certain elements (which) could suggest that this motive was perhaps not the primary motive... or the only motive," he added, without elaborating.

Grini was speaking in the regional centre of Ales, near La Grand-Combe, alongside Retailleau, a hardline right-winger who takes a tough line on immigration and Islamism.

Retailleau emphasised that "the possibility of an anti-Muslim act has not been neglected at all, quite the contrary"

# Trump Urges Russia to Stop Attacks

MORRISTOWN (Dispatches) - President Donald Trump urged Russia to stop its attacks in Ukraine while his top diplomat said the United States might walk away from peace efforts if it does not see progress.

Speaking to reporters in New Jersey, Trump said he was disappointed that Russia has continued to attack Ukraine, and said his one-on-one meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the Vatican on Saturday had gone well.

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"I see him as calmer. I think he understands the picture, and I think he wants to make a deal," Trump said of Zelenskyy.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, meanwhile, said the Trump administration might abandon its attempts to broker a deal if Russia and Ukraine do not make headway.

"It needs to happen soon," Rubio told the NBC program "Meet the Press." "We cannot continue to dedicate time and resources to this effort if it's not going to come to fruition."



Trump and Zelenskyy, in Rome for the funeral of Pope Francis, met in a Vatican basilica on Saturday to try to revive faltering efforts to end the war in Ukraine. The meeting was the first between the two leaders since an angry encounter in the White House Oval Office in February and comes at a critical time in negotiations aimed at bringing an end to the conflict.

Trump rebuked Russian President Vladimir Putin after that meeting, saying on social media that there is "no reason" for Russia to shoot missiles into civilian areas.

In a pre-taped interview that aired on the CBS program "Face the Nation" on Sunday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Russia would continue to target sites used by Ukraine's military. When asked about a Russian strike on Kyiv last week that killed civilians, Lavrov said that "the target attacked was not something absolutely civilian" and that Russia targets only "sites which are used by the military."

Zelenskyy wrote on the messaging app Telegram that his top military commander reported that Russia had already conducted nearly 70 attacks on Sunday.



## Imperious Liverpool Smash Tottenham to Win Premier League Title

LIVERPOOL (Dispatches) - Liverpool demolished Tottenham 5-1 to clinch the Premier League title at an impassioned Anfield yesterday, sealing a record-equalling 20th English top-flight crown.

Arne Slot's men stormed back after conceding a surprise early goal to dominate the match, feeding off the crackling energy from the 60,000-plus crowd.

Liverpool, who can no longer be caught by second-placed Arsenal, are now level with bitter rivals Manchester United as the joint-most successful club in English top-flight history.

It is just their second title of the Premier League era and the first they have celebrated in front of fans since 1990 -- their 2020 triumph came at a near-empty stadium due to Covid restrictions.

Slot, who is in his first season in English football, said he had built on solid foundations left by Jurgen Klopp, who departed last year after a successful nine-year reign.

"Almost the whole season we were on the top of the league and had a team that could win it," he told Sky Sports.

"We know how tough the Premier League is, but we always had the belief we could win it.

"The work Jurgen (Klopp) and (assistant) Pep (Lijnders) left, the culture, work-rate, quality, was outstanding. We started (the season) really well and maybe it helped that (Manchester) City had a difficult spell that they have not had in five years.

"When the season started we would have been happy with top four. But I don't think that is fair on the players as they are much better than that and they have shown it this season."

Slot's men started on the front foot at an expectant Anfield after a stirring rendition of club anthem "You'll Never Walk Alone" in the warm spring sunshine, but they were rocked by an early goal from Tottenham's Dominic Solanke.

However, Liverpool barely blinked and roared back with a Luis Diaz tap-in and a screamer from Alexis Mac Allister.

Now the party was well and truly started and Cody Gakpo made it 3-1, slamming a shot into the bottom corner after a much-changed Spurs team failed to clear.

The Liverpool fans ran through their full repertoire of songs as their team pushed for a fourth goal in the second half.

Top-scorer Mohamed Salah scored the goal the crowd craved, collecting Dominik Szoboszlai's pass before cutting in and blasting his shot into the bottom corner.

He celebrated by grabbing a fan's phone before taking a selfie in front of the Kop.

Deafening cheers of "We're going to win the league" and "We shall not be moved" rang out.

Liverpool had a fifth when Spurs defender Destiny Udogie poked the ball past his own goalkeeper from close range with 21 minutes to go.

As the game went into added time the club's anthem rang out again as scarves were held aloft and the final whistle elicited a thunderous roar.

The win leaves Liverpool on 82 points, 15 clear of nearest challengers Arsenal with just four games remaining.

Tottenham are a miserable 16th in the Premier League table after their 19th defeat of the season, putting manager Ange Postecoglou under enormous pressure.

Tens of thousands of fans swarmed around Anfield in the build-up to kick-off in anticipation of Liverpool's coronation, setting off flares as the home team bus arrived.

Flags and scarves saying "Liverpool 20-time Champions" were on sale from stalls outside the ground.

At the start of the campaign, Pep Guardiola's City were favourites to extend their dynastic Premier League reign and make it five titles in a row but their form collapsed.

Arsenal emerged as Liverpool's closest challengers but they drew too many games, failing to take advantage of the rare slip-ups from Slot's team.

It was feared the club's players would need time to adapt to the methods of Slot but the former Feyenoord boss has sailed serenely through the season despite relentless speculation over the futures of three of his biggest stars--Salah, captain Virgil van Dijk and Trent Alexander-Arnold.

Both Salah and Van Dijk have now signed two-year extensions, though England defender Alexander-Arnold is believed likely to be on the verge of a move to Real Madrid.

"A lot of emotions before the game, during the whole week, but we got the job done and we are truly deserved champions of England," said Van Dijk.

"The most beautiful club in the world and I think we deserve all of this."

## Mensik Sees off Shelton in Madrid

MADRID (Dispatches) - Jakub Mensik had all the answers on Sunday at the Mutua Madrid Open, where he moved past a physically impaired Ben Shelton.

The 19-year-old Czech was imperious on serve throughout his 6-1, 6-4 clinic, during which he dropped just two of 28 points behind his first delivery, according to Infosys ATP Stats. Shelton called for the doctor after an error-strewn opening set and upped his level in the second, but Mensik remained locked in to seal his spot in the fourth round.

"Today was a good day in the office on my return," said Mensik, who improved to 2-1 in his Lexus ATP Head2Head series with Shelton. "I know Ben can serve much better, but in this high altitude, it's always tough to break him.

"I knew that he was not feeling very well, me neither... But I still tried to reach my best level and that was the key. I'm glad I came out with the win."

Mensik is now on an eight-match winning streak at ATP Masters 1000s, having claimed his maiden tour-level title in Miami last month, where he defeated Novak Djokovic in the final. After a confident start to the year, in which he boasts a 16-7 record, the Czech is ninth in the PIF ATP Live Race To Turin.

"I enjoyed it a lot with my family, my friends, my close ones," said



Mensik when asked of his Miami triumph. "But it's just one tournament. I'm trying to improve myself every week, the journey is still long and my goals are even further."

With his 67-minute victory over Shelton, Mensik improved to 6-1 against Top 20 players this year. Mensik, who sits at a career-high World No. 23, could crack the Top 20 himself this week in Madrid.

He next faces Alexander Bublik, who earlier upset defending champion Andrey Rublev 6-4, 0-6, 6-4.

Meanwhile Alexander Zverev survived a major test from Spaniard Alejandro Davidovich Fokina on Sunday at the Mutua Madrid Open, where he earned a thrilling 2-6, 7-6(3), 7-6(0) third-round win.

Facing a pumped-up Davidovich Fokina and a vocal Spanish crowd inside Manolo Santana Stadium, Zverev overcame moments of difficulty to keep his title hopes alive. After dropping the first set, Zverev rallied from a break down in the second set, crucially winning the tie-break before he recovered from failing to serve out at 5-4 to eventually advance after two hours and 44 minutes.

"The first set wasn't my best tennis but it is sport and it can change quickly," Zverev said. "I was down a set and a break and I had to fight. I am very happy with the win. Alejandro is playing unbelievable tennis, the best of his life, so I am happy to be through."

Davidovich Fokina is enjoying an impressive season, highlighted by final runs in Delray Beach and Acapulco and a semi-final showing at the ATP Masters 1000 event in Monte-Carlo. The 25-year-old played with confidence and aggression for large parts of his sixth Lexus ATP Head2Head meeting against Zverev (1-5).

## Man City Beat Forest 2-0 to Reach Third Straight FA Cup Final



LONDON (Dispatches) - Manchester City beat Nottingham Forest 2-0 at Wembley on Sunday to reach their third straight FA Cup final, with goals from Rico Lewis and Josko Gvardiol keeping alive City's hopes of avoiding a rare season without a trophy.

Lewis scored inside two minutes when he was fed by the influential Mateo Kovacic and given time and space to fire into the bottom corner and silence the Forest fans.

Conceding an early goal was certainly not in the gameplan for Forest, who struggled to gain a foothold in the first half, registering just 25% possession and no shots on goal.

"We started really badly, City started really well," Forest boss Nuno Espirito Santo told reporters, adding that conceding so early "makes everything hard".

The halftime introduction of Anthony Elanga almost turned the tie for Forest, but he scuffed Callum Hudson-Odoi's cross wide with his first touch in the 46th minute.

City punished the miss five minutes later when Gvardiol rose highest to nod home an Omar Marmoush corner for his sixth goal of the campaign.

Forest, seeking to reach their first FA Cup final since 1991, went close to pulling one back with Morgan Gibbs-White cannoning a volley off the bar with City goalkeeper Stefan Ortega beaten.

"I've never hit a ball as sweetly on my weak foot in my life," Gibbs-White told ITV. "As soon as that hit the crossbar I knew it wasn't going to be our day."

Gibbs-White hit the post again with 20 minutes to play after Gvardiol was caught in possession, rounding Ortega but unable to finish from a tight angle.

"I'm devastated," Gibbs-White said. "I feel sorry for the fans. I hold my hands up and apologise, I should've scored at least one of them."

## Napoli Take Sole Lead in Serie A After Torino Win



NAPLES (Dispatches) - Two first-half goals from Scott McTominay helped Napoli to a 2-0 home win against Torino in Serie A on Sunday as the hosts reclaimed the sole lead in the standings with four games left to play.

Napoli top Serie A with 74 points, three points clear of defending champions Inter Milan, who were handed a 1-0 home defeat by AS Roma earlier on Sunday.

The win also secured Napoli a top-four finish, meaning they will make a return to the Champions League following a one-season absence.

The 2023 champions had moved level with Inter at the Serie A summit in the previous round when they earned a 1-0 win at bottom side Monza and Simone Inzaghi's men suffered a last-gasp loss at Bologna the following day.

Napoli raced to a seventh-minute lead through McTominay, who bundled the ball in from close range. Frank Anguissa squared it to the in-form Scotland midfielder, who found the net with a composed first touch.

The 28-year-old doubled the advantage just before halftime, striking from around the penalty spot from a neat lofted cross by Matteo Politano, making it his fifth goal in the last three appearances.

McTominay, who joined Napoli in August from Manchester United, has now scored 11 goals in his debut Serie A season.

Napoli, however, slowed down significantly ever since taking the lead and their only two attempts on goal were the ones converted by the Scot.

Torino, who sit 10th on 43 points, ended the game with no shots on target.

Napoli lost midfielder Anguissa and defender Alessandro Buongiorno to injuries around the hour mark. They were replaced by Philip Billing and Rafa Marin.

Billing, on loan at Napoli from Premier League side Bournemouth, hit the bar with a header shortly after coming on.

Napoli travel to relegation-threatened Lecce on Saturday before facing Genoa, Parma and Cagliari -- all in the bottom half of the table -- in their final rounds.

## Jayson Tatum, Celtics Too Sharp for Magic

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Jayson Tatum collected game highs of 37 points and 14 rebounds to lead the visiting Boston Celtics to a 107-98 victory over the Orlando Magic on Sunday in Game 4 of their Eastern Conference first-round playoff series.

The second-seeded Celtics made 30 of their 32 free-throw attempts as they took a 3-1 edge in the best-of-seven series.

"All their guys are really hard to guard," said Orlando's Franz Wagner, who finished with 24 points, six rebounds and seven assists. "We just have to be better (on defense)."

Orlando tied the game at 91 on Wendell Carter Jr.'s putback with 4:18 to play, but Boston seized control by scoring 10 of the next 11 points.

"We defended without fouling and we limited them to one shot -- then there was some great shot-making at the other end," Boston coach Joe Mazzulla said of the late-game success.

Four of Boston's five starters scored at least 18 points. Jaylen



Brown had 21 points and 11 rebounds, Kristaps Porzingis tossed in 19 points and Derrick White finished with 18 points, seven rebounds and seven assists.

Paolo Banchero led seventh-seeded Orlando with 31 points. Carter supplied nine points and a team-high 11 rebounds.

Cory Joseph added 12 points and Anthony Black had 10 for the Magic.

"I feel like we still haven't played our best basketball," Wagner said. "We'll be better in Game 5, and we'll make sure we have the right mentality."

Boston's Jrue Holiday missed his second straight game in the series with a right hamstring strain. Boston's reserves were limited to six points, all from Sam Hauser.

The Celtics were 9 of 31 (29 percent) on 3-point attempts, while Orlando was 8 of 30 (26.7 percent).