

Iranian Authorities Report Seizing a Foreign-Flagged Oil Tanker in the Gulf of Oman for Smuggling Six Million Liters of Fuel, Detaining 18 Crew Members

# IRAN NEWS

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## DOMESTIC



### Gov't Intervention in the Transport Economy to Be Minimized

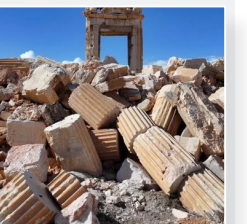
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## INTERNATIONAL

### Two U.S. Troops and an American Civilian Killed in Syria

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### Security and Stability in Eastern Borders Remain a Key Priority for Iran



#### IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Esmail Baghaei, emphasized that security and stability in the eastern regions of the country are of "paramount importance" as he addressed questions about a special meeting of Afghanistan's neighboring countries, plus Russia, held in Tehran.

Baghaei explained that all neighboring countries, including Afghanistan, were invited to the meeting. "We wished for Afghanistan's participation, believing it could strengthen understanding and help resolve regional challenges. However, we respect Afghanistan's decision not to attend," he said.

Speaking at a press briefing on Sunday, coinciding with Transport and Drivers' Day, Baghaei offered a special acknowledgment of drivers who supported the country, particularly highlighting those who contributed during the 12-day conflict against Israeli and U.S. military aggression. He paid tribute to one such hero, Mohammad Dalvand, honoring his memory and service.

He also outlined recent diplomatic activity, including the ongoing Afghanistan neighbors' meeting, President Masoud Pezeshkian's recent visits to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, and upcoming ministerial visits to Russia and Belarus. Additionally, he referenced a trilateral meeting between Iran, China, and Saudi Arabia held in Tehran last week.

### U.S. Advised to Respect Iranian People, Their Elected Establishment



#### IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has urged the United States to respect the Iranian people and the ruling establishment they have chosen.

The top diplomat made the remarks in an interview with Al Jazeera as part of a documentary examining the Israeli regime and the US's 12-day unprovoked war on the Islamic Republic in June.

He said it was solely up to the Iranian people to judge the country's standing, and strongly advised the US to respect both the nation and the establishment they had chosen through democratic electoral procedure.

The foreign minister, meanwhile, reminded Iran's longstanding distrust of the US as a negotiating partner, stating that Washington had withheld sincerity in its dealings.

He cited the Islamic Republic's long experience with sanctions as a case in point.

Araqchi, though, underlined that years of economic pressure had failed to resolve standing problems,

Nor can military force achieve lasting results, the official added, pointing out that while bombardment might destroy buildings and equipment, it cannot eliminate technology, erase knowledge from people's minds, or break the will of a nation.

## No External Prescriptions Can Bring Stability: Iran Highlights Regional Solutions for Afghanistan

#### IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Foreign Minister emphasized on Sunday that no external or imported solutions can resolve regional crises, underlining the importance of neighbor-led initiatives in addressing Afghanistan's challenges. Speaking at the "Review of Developments in Afghanistan" meeting in Tehran, attended by neighboring countries and regional partners, Minister Seyed Abbas Araqchi stressed that Afghanistan's neighbors are the most reliable and natural actors to foster sustainable stability and development.

The gathering, hosted by Iran's Foreign Ministry, brought together special representatives from Afghanistan's neighboring countries, along with delegates from Russia, Uzbekistan, China, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Pakistan. Representatives included envoys from the presidents of Russia and Uzbekistan and the prime minister of Pakistan. The meeting provided a platform to discuss the latest regional developments and cooperation opportunities regarding Afghanistan.

Araqchi opened the session by welcoming participants, noting Afghanistan's historical role as a bridge between regions and its untapped potential in economic, human, transit, and natural capacities. "Afghanistan's geoeconomic position places it at the center of Central, West, and South Asian connectivity. Stability and development in Afghanistan are not only a humanitarian necessity but a strategic imperative for the entire region," he said.

Reflecting on decades of regional experience, the minister stressed that Afghanistan's security, development, and prosperity are directly tied to the interests of all neighboring countries. "As the Pakistani Persian-language poet Iqbal Lahori observed, our region's shared future is intertwined with Afghanistan's future," he added.

Araqchi highlighted that the meeting is the first of its kind at this level, aiming to encourage dialogue and coordination among regional countries. Key discussion points included collective security, integration of Afghanistan into regional political and economic processes, mutual responsibility, and confidence-building between states based on cooperative behavior.

"Iran, as a long-standing neighbor and close partner to Afghanistan, has consistently emphasized the need for the full integration of Afghanistan into regional frameworks. Constructive dialogue,



active participation by all countries, mutual respect, and reliance on local mechanisms and sustainable regional cooperation are essential for addressing challenges effectively," Araqchi said.

The minister also stressed the limitations of external interventions. "Recent years have shown that foreign-imposed approaches do not lead to stability or sustainable development. The two-decade NATO presence in Afghanistan, overly security-focused solutions, and neglect of social, cultural, and regional actors led to structural corruption and an abrupt withdrawal in 2021, exemplifying failure," he noted.

He emphasized that neighbor-led solutions have far greater potential for achieving sustainable development and security. "Countries with deep historical, cultural, human, and economic ties to Afghanistan must play a central role in facilitating

regional cooperation processes," he said.

Araqchi outlined the importance of creating a coordinated and sustainable regional framework that moves beyond short-term rivalries and prioritizes collective interests and shared security. He highlighted the potential of regional transit and energy networks to not only support Afghanistan's growth but also strengthen regional integration. Enhancing road and rail connectivity, facilitating trade, and developing transit corridors can position Afghanistan as a vital hub linking Central Asia, West Asia, and South Asia.

"Iran is ready to expand cooperation with all neighboring countries in transportation, trade, consular services, and energy. By promoting regional coordination, we can establish a sustainable cooperation framework around Afghanistan, benefiting the country and the entire region. At the center of these efforts are the Afghan people, who deserve a secure and prosperous future," Araqchi said.

Esmail Baghaei, Foreign Ministry spokesperson, noted that the meeting resulted from weeks of consultations with regional neighbors and other stakeholders. He expressed hope that the initiative would enhance regional convergence, reduce tensions, and strengthen mutual understanding among neighboring countries, contributing to peace, stability, and prosperity across the region.

## Caspian Maritime Consortium to Be Formed With Private Sector Participation

#### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESKDESK

TEHRAN - The CEO of the Ports and Maritime Organization announced that a maritime consortium in the Caspian Sea will be formed in the coming months with the participation of the Iranian and Russian private sectors.

Saeed Rasouli said on Saturday at a meeting with journalists that despite the Caspian Sea facing challenges due to receding water levels—leading some to suggest activities there may come to a halt—he does not share that view and believes the Caspian's capacity should be used to expand interaction with neighboring countries.

The Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development stressed that Iran has five neighboring countries along the Caspian Sea, all of which maintain important economic and trade relations with the country.

He noted that while nature cannot be confronted, it can be managed, adding that one of the organization's serious approaches is to activate the Caspian's potential for cargo and passenger transportation.

Referring to the proposal made in Ordibehesht (April-May) to establish a Caspian maritime consortium with the participation of Iran's and Russia's private sectors, Rasouli said that another meeting on the issue was recently held in Makhachkala, Russia, where a clear roadmap was defined. It was agreed that the document establishing the consortium would be signed within the next one to two months.

He added that Iran currently has good maritime cooperation with other countries as well, including Kazakhstan in the Caspian Sea and southern waters, as well as with the Republic of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Oman, noting that these collaborations are expanding.

The CEO of the Ports and Maritime Organization also announced the experimental launch of a regular shipping line between Chabahar and Muscat, Oman, emphasizing that the Caspian Sea and southern seas should not be viewed separately. "Today, we see the Caspian as a transit route, and if rail and road routes are developed alongside it, we will have a very strong transit corridor," he said.

Turning to Chabahar, Rasouli stated that the port has now become a major construction workshop. He explained that the internal rail network is under construction, while silos, warehouses, and container facilities are being completed, and new and necessary equipment is being installed. He stressed that Indian foreign investment in the port is ongoing and has not faced any interruption, adding that the full amount of Indian investment has been committed, with equipment currently being procured and installed.

Rasouli also underlined that the entire Chabahar Port is not controlled by a single investor, as other individuals and legal entities have also invested in the port.



Rasouli noted that container transport at Chabahar Port has increased by more than 70 percent compared to last year, saying the port is flourishing, although it still faces development constraints despite its favorable geographical position.

He added that executive operations for the port's hinterland logistics zone will begin soon, and its rail connection to Zahedan will be completed by the end of the year.

According to him, Shahid Rajaei Port of Chabahar covers an area of 2,400 hectares, with an additional 2,400-hectare development phase defined, for which the connecting bridge is currently under construction.

The Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development also highlighted the importance of a maritime-oriented

economy, saying that over past years and decades, the drawbacks of an oil-dependent economy have caused the country to overlook many of its advantages, including maritime transport.

However, he said that following the Supreme Leader's emphasis and the nine-point policy outline on the maritime-oriented economy, the issue is now being pursued seriously.

Rasouli described the maritime-oriented economy as a source of prosperity for future generations and a means of addressing economic imbalances, noting that various institutions have roles and responsibilities in this area. "All must work together to create a maritime civilization and make proper use of the country's full maritime capacity, especially its 5,800 kilometers of coastline," he said.

He added that while conferences on the maritime-oriented economy are frequently held across the country, the focus should be on implementing the relevant directives rather than merely explaining the concept through events.

Rasouli noted that coastal communities have long understood and practiced economic resilience through lived experience, building their livelihoods accordingly. "Today, we must ask what we have done to support these small ports," he said.

Referring again to Chabahar as the country's only oceanic port, for which there is widespread anticipation of a rail connection, he questioned whether rail connectivity alone would be sufficient to trigger an economic leap in the region, or whether broader preparations and problem-solving measures are required.

He concluded by stating that one of the country's major challenges is a lack of coordination within and between institutions, warning that without the necessary synergy, progress will remain slow.

### America and Europe on the Divorce Highway

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

Over the past two weeks, we have heard statements from the United States and Europe from official podiums saying that although the U.S. National Security Strategy 2025 document has not formally "removed" Europe from its relationship with Washington, it has, in unprecedented and harsh language, sharply downgraded the continent's position in U.S. priorities and pushed it to the margins. Instead, the main focus of the new strategy is on establishing and realizing exclusive U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere (the Americas).

Europe's new position in U.S. calculations is portrayed as follows: unlike past documents that emphasized alliance and cooperation, the 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy's view of Europe is entirely critical and demeaning. The document explicitly warns that Europe faces a "real and severe prospect of civilizational erasure" over the next two decades and that, if current trends continue, it will become politically completely unreliable within 20 years.

The European Union's migration policies, "censorship of freedom of speech," suppression of political opponents, low birth rates, and loss of national identity are cited as among the reasons for this decline.

The document explicitly states that "the era of Europe being a burden is over," and it is unclear whether some European countries will, in the future, have the necessary economic and military capacity to remain reliable allies of the United States. In contrast to this view of Europe, the prevailing spirit of the new document is a redefinition of the Monroe Doctrine with a Trumpian addendum, aimed at America's unchallenged dominance over its own continent. This is because absolute priority is given to border security and the halting of mass migration as the foremost national security priority, along with preventing the influence of rival powers such as China, Russia, and Iran in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Ensuring reliable access for the United States to strategic routes, resources, and critical supply chains in the region is also emphasized.

With the issuance of the new U.S. security document, Europe first responded with an official protest, followed by practical measures to reduce its dependence.

This two-pronged approach indicates a serious strategic reassessment of Europe's relations with Washington.

No better title can be given to this than traveling on the divorce highway of the two Western continents.



### BRICS Offers New Model for Deeper Politico-Economic Ties



#### IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

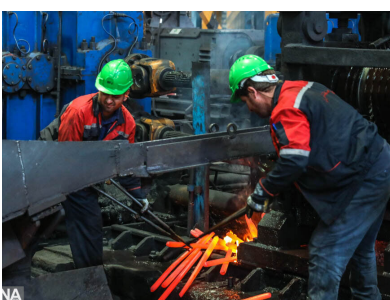
TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian says the BRICS group of emerging economies plays a strategic role in enhancing political and economic interaction and countering unilateralism in the international system.

Pezeshkian made the remarks in a meeting with Speaker of the Ethiopian House of Peoples Representatives Tadesse Chafo in Tehran on Saturday.

"BRICS can provide a new model of communication based on mutual respect for national sovereignty, territorial integrity, and the diverse cultures and civilizations of countries. It can pave the way for just and balanced cooperation at a global level," he said.

The Iranian president expressed the country's keenness to expand ties with Ethiopia in various fields, including the economic, diplomatic, cultural, and security sectors.

# IRAN NEWS



## Iran's Steel Output Up 5.4% in First Eight Months of the Year

### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Iranian Steel Producers Association has released data on the country's steel chain production for the first eight months of the year 1404, showing a 5.4% increase in the output of intermediate steel products, while total steel product output declined by 1.1% compared with the same period last year.

According to IRNA, citing the Iranian Steel Producers Association, production of sponge iron rose by 8.1% in the first eight months of 1404 compared with the same period in 1403. Iron ore concentrate production increased by 8.2%, while iron ore pellet production remained nearly unchanged.

## Iran, Armenia Hold Talks to Increase Electricity Imports Next Summer



### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran and Armenia have held consultations on increasing sustainable electricity imports during the summer of next year at the fifth meeting of the Joint Committee on the Operation of Power Grids of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Armenia.

According to IRNA, citing the Ministry of Energy, the fifth meeting of the joint committee was held in Yerevan, with the participation of Ardeshtir Mazkooni, accompanied by the Deputy for Power Grid Operations and the Director of the Office of Cross-Border Exchanges, as well as Narek Apitonyan, CEO of Armenia's Electricity Network Management Company, along with his deputies and senior managers.

During the meeting, the two sides reviewed the history of continuous cooperation between Iran and Armenia in electricity exchange and gas-for-electricity swaps, joint operation of transmission lines, and the development and modernization of telecommunications and metering infrastructure. They emphasized the need to continue and deepen bilateral cooperation in these areas.

Issues related to increasing sustainable electricity imports during next summer, updating operational protocols, and strengthening technical coordination—particularly under emergency conditions—were also placed on the agenda.

Following the meeting, the Iranian delegation visited Armenia's National Power Grid Control Center.

Later, a joint session was held with the CEO of the Yerevan Thermal Power Plant and officials from Armenia's electricity transmission company.

During this session, plans for supplying the gas required by the power plant and, in return, generating and exporting electricity to the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1405, especially during the summer peak consumption period, were reviewed.

It was agreed that the maximum available operational capacity for supplying electricity exports to Iran, based on gas exports to Armenia, would be utilized to strengthen the stability of energy exchanges between the two countries next year.

The existing obstacles to completing the third electricity transmission line between Iran and Armenia were also outlined, and both sides stressed the need to accelerate follow-up measures and necessary actions to complete the project.

## Iran's Transport and Logistics Costs Double Global Average



### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The head of the Tehran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture said Iran's aging transport infrastructure and high logistics costs—up to twice the global average—have weakened the competitiveness of Iranian companies against their foreign rivals.

Mahmoud Najafi Arab made the remarks on Saturday at the second Conference on Transport and Economic Development, held at the Raizen Conference Center. He said the future of Iran's economy depends on major decisions, with the modernization of the transport sector being among the most critical.

Najafi Arab noted that the private sector is ready to invest in and contribute to national development, but the current business environment does not provide sufficient guarantees.

He added that high regulatory risks, instability, and the frequent and rapid changes in directives—particularly customs and tax regulations—along with worn-out infrastructure and logistics costs that are up to twice the global average, have reduced incentives for private sector participation.

He stressed that this comes despite Iran's unique geopolitical opportunities, including the North-South and East-West corridors, which could help secure the country's position in global trade.

# Gov't Intervention in the Transport Economy to Be Minimized

### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development, Farzaneh Sadegh, announced a shift in the government's approach toward pricing, investment, and transport diplomacy, emphasizing that state intervention in the transport economy will be reduced to a minimum and the role of the private sector will be strengthened.

Speaking at the Second Conference on Transport and Economic Development, jointly organized by the Tehran Chamber of Commerce and the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development, the minister outlined the government's new policies aimed at reforming revenue mechanisms and expanding private sector participation in the transport sector.

The conference was held at the Raizen Conference Center on the eve of National Transport Day and was attended by senior officials from executive bodies, members of parliament, and representatives of private sector associations. In her address, Sadegh said that under current conditions, "the government has no choice but to reconcile with the private sector."

She noted that in past decades—and even in recent years—governments were able to postpone decisions and defer opportunities with relative ease. "Today, however, we have reached a point where there is no 'next opportunity,'" she said, adding that the long-standing barrier of distrust toward the private sector has begun to crack.

Referring to the nearly two-year lifespan of the 14th administration, the minister said several projects have already been implemented under public-private partnership (PPP) frameworks. She stressed that the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development is seriously pursuing this model of cooperation and considers it essential for the future of the country's transport infrastructure.

Addressing reforms in tariffs and revenue mechanisms in the transport sector, Sadegh Malvajerd explained that under a parliamentary resolution, direct and mandatory price-setting in this sector had effectively been brought to an end. However, developments in other areas of the economy had prompted the Market Regulation Headquarters to intervene in transport tariff pricing as well.

"The ministry made every effort to remove transport pricing from the purview of the Market Regulation Headquarters," she said. "We have consistently emphasized that the private sector must be able to determine how it will secure returns on its investments in transport."

She added that at the most recent meeting of the Market Regulation Headquarters, it was approved that all matters related to transport services pricing would once again fall under the authority of the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development and the Supreme Transport Council, with the participation and input of the private sector.

Sadegh also pointed to reforms underway in the regulation of ports and maritime transport, an area traditionally characterized by complete state dominance. "We have begun making changes in this field as well," she said, acknowledging that there is resistance along the way. "With the support of the private sector, we will overcome these challenges too."



economic diplomacy and plays a central role in strengthening regional and international economic ties.

She announced that the government plans to complete the Chabahar-Zahedan railway line by the end of the current year. According to the minister, the project is not only vital for Iran but also holds significant importance for neighboring countries. "Through synergy and cooperation in this area, we can bring about a major transformation," she said.

Sadegh further revealed that during negotiations with Turkmenistan and Russia, both countries agreed to route their transit cargo destined for open waters through Iran. She also said that a single-window customs system linking Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia has entered the operational phase, a development expected to streamline transit procedures and enhance regional trade.

In another part of her speech, the minister stressed that Iran still enjoys a considerable level of social capital. Referring to the 12-day imposed war that occurred recently, she recalled that during this critical period, cooperation and synergy in transport and cargo transit exceeded even what was witnessed during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war.

"Despite the pressure and extraordinary circumstances, the transport and transit sectors demonstrated a remarkable level of coordination and resilience," she said, underscoring the capacity of the country's institutions and private actors to work together effectively in times of crisis.

In her concluding remarks, Sadegh said the government must listen carefully to existing obstacles, challenges, and proposed solutions—and act on them. "Government intervention in the economy must be minimized," she said, adding that this approach is being pursued in earnest within the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development.

She reiterated that reducing state interference and empowering the private sector are not merely policy choices but necessities dictated by current economic realities. According to the minister, the success of Iran's transport sector—and by extension its broader economic development—depends on building trust with private investors, ensuring regulatory stability, and adopting a governance model based on partnership rather than control.

# Iran's PMI Falls to 46.6 Last Month, Extending Economic Contraction to 20 Months

### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), known locally as Shamakh, declined to 46.6 in Aban (October-November), signaling that the country's economy remained in contraction for the 20th consecutive month, according to the latest report by the Research Center of the Iran Chamber of Commerce.

The seasonally adjusted index fell from the previous month, reflecting continued weakness across key areas of business activity. The PMI for the industrial sector, which had shown relative stability over the past two months, also returned to a downward trend.

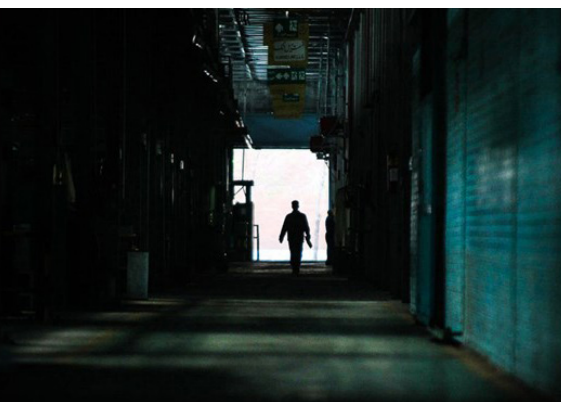
The PMI is a composite indicator that measures overall business conditions, capturing the perceptions and expectations of economic actors regarding output, demand, employment, inventories, and prices. Readings below the neutral level of 50 indicate contraction.

According to the Chamber's field survey, the decline in Aban confirms the persistence of recessionary conditions across the economy. During the month, several major components of the PMI moved further into contraction, including output levels, new customer orders, sales of goods and services, inventories of raw materials, and employment.

The report aligns with recent data from the Statistical Center of Iran on economic performance in the first half of the current year. Those figures show that GDP at constant prices, including oil, grew by only about 0.1% year-on-year. In contrast, GDP excluding oil contracted by 0.5%, highlighting continued weakness in sectors that are central to employment and non-oil value creation. This gap suggests that productive activities remain under pressure, while economic incentives continue to favor non-productive sectors.

The output index for production and service provision stood at 48.4 in Aban. Although the pace of decline eased slightly compared with the previous month, the index remained below 50 for the 20th consecutive month. Businesses cited rising exchange rates, higher raw material costs, limited access to financial resources, and subdued demand as the main factors restraining activity.

New customer orders registered a reading of 43.5, marking the 21st



straight month of contraction. The sharper decline compared with the previous month points to a significant weakening of demand. Economic uncertainty, exchange rate volatility, and growing inflationary pressures have continued to erode purchasing power, particularly among middle- and lower-income households, making consumers more cautious.

Exports of goods and services, which influence new orders, also declined during the month. Businesses reported that foreign exchange repatriation requirements, trade restrictions, and geopolitical risks continued to hinder non-oil exports. Concerns over the potential

tightening of sanctions have further raised risks for exporters, limiting foreign exchange earnings and weakening competitiveness. As a result, sales of goods and services fell for the second consecutive month in Aban.

Inventories of raw materials and purchased inputs declined more sharply than in the previous month, reaching their lowest level in nearly five years. The sharp rise in exchange rates and input prices, coupled with restrictions on foreign currency allocation and limited liquidity, has led to severe shortages of inputs. Inefficiencies in supply channels, including the commodity exchange system, have added to supply chain pressures.

Rising costs forced firms to increase selling prices, pushing the index for prices of produced goods and services to its highest level in 31 months.

Employment conditions also remained weak. The hiring index stayed below the neutral level for the sixth consecutive month, reflecting financial constraints on firms, declining real wages, and a growing shortage of skilled labor. The gradual reduction in formal employment has raised concerns about higher unemployment and potential strain on social security funds.

Despite the overall downturn, expectations for economic activity in the coming month improved for the second consecutive month, reaching a 14-month high. However, the report cautioned that this optimism remains fragile, largely driven by eased energy constraints. Businesses continue to identify stagflation, exchange rate volatility, weak demand, financial and currency restrictions, and political risks as the main threats to economic recovery.

## Iran and India to Form Joint Cultural Heritage Task Force



### IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

Tehran – IRNA – A joint task force between Iran and India will be established to expand cooperation in the field of cultural heritage and to organize specialized workshops for the transfer of expertise, particularly in the restoration and conservation of historical monuments.

During the continuation of the Iranian delegation's visit to New Delhi, the Acting Minister and Deputy for Cultural Heritage of Iran met with India's Deputy Minister of Culture and emphasized strengthening joint cooperation in the cultural heritage sector.

During the meeting, Ali Darabi and Vivek Agarwal agreed on the formation of a joint Iran-India task force to develop cultural heritage cooperation, as well as on holding specialized workshops focused on sharing experiences, especially in the areas of restoration and preservation of historical sites.

The two sides also reviewed plans to organize joint museum exhibitions, including an "Iran Museum Exhibition in India" and an "India Museum Exhibition in Iran."

Another topic discussed during the meeting was the follow-up on registering joint transnational heritage dossiers on UNESCO's World Heritage List.

The meeting was described by both parties as positive and constructive, and it was decided that a joint task force would be established to enhance coordination and implement practical measures.

## \$461m in Foreign Investment Attracted to Iran's FTZs



### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Secretariat of the Supreme Council of Free Trade-Industrial and Special Economic Zones announced that \$461 million in foreign investment was attracted to these zones during the first eight months of the current year, marking a 695% increase compared with the same period last year.

According to the Secretariat, a performance report on key economic indicators for Iran's free zones over the first eight months of the year—compared with last year's figures—shows that the economic engine of the free zones has gained momentum and entered a phase of rapid growth.

Based on the report, domestic investment attracted during the period exceeded \$461 billion rials, representing a 30% increase year-on-year and achieving 78% of the targeted plan. By comparison, domestic investment attracted in the free zones during the first eight months of 1403 stood at 3,106 billion rials.

Meanwhile, realized domestic investment during the first eight months of 1403 amounted to around 974 billion rials. This figure rose by 18% this year to more than 1,147 billion rials, indicating that 71% of performance targets in this area have been achieved.

Foreign investment attracted over the same eight-month period reached \$461 million, reflecting a 695% increase compared with the corresponding period last year, when only \$58 million in foreign investment was recorded in the free zones.

The strong performance of free zones in 1404 pushed the ratio of realized performance to target in this area to 227%.

Realized foreign investment also showed an upward trend, posting a 261% increase compared with the same period in 1403, which lifted the achievement of targets in this sector to 242%. The original target of \$151 million was exceeded, reaching \$372 million, as a result of what the report described as the round-the-clock efforts of free zone managers.

## German Police Arrest Five Over Suspected Plot to Attack Christmas Market

BERLIN (Dispatches) - German authorities said Saturday they had arrested five men on suspicion of involvement in an Islamist plot to plough a vehicle into people at a Christmas market.

Officials have been on high alert during the festive season, after a deadly car-ramming attack at a market in the city of Magdeburg last Christmas shocked the nation.

Police and prosecutors said they had detained an Egyptian, three Moroccans and a Syrian on Friday over the plan to carry out the attack in southern Bavaria state.



## Six UN Peacekeepers Killed in Drone Attack in Sudan's South Kordofan



KHARTOUM (Dispatches) - Six United Nations peacekeepers from Bangladesh were killed and several others wounded on Saturday when a drone struck their camp in Sudan's South Kordofan region, the UN mission said. The attack was strongly condemned by the UN chief and Bangladeshi authorities, as Khartoum accused the paramilitary RSF of being behind the strike.

The United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) said "six troops were killed and six injured", including four seriously, when a drone hit their camp in Kadugli, the capital of South Kordofan state.

All of the victims are from Bangladesh, it said.

UN chief Antonio Guterres condemned the "horrific" attack, saying it "may constitute war crimes under international law".

"Attacks as the one today in South Kordofan against peacekeepers are unjustifiable. There will need to be accountability," he said in a statement.

Bangladesh's interim leader Muhammad Yunus in a statement said he was "deeply saddened" by the attack, and put the toll at six dead and eight wounded. He asked the UN to ensure that his country's personnel were offered "any necessary emergency support".

"The government of Bangladesh will stand by the families in this difficult moment," Yunus added.

Dhaka's foreign ministry said it "strongly condemned" the attack.

## Hungarian Protesters Demand Orban Quits Over Abuse Cases



BUDAPEST (Dispatches) - A demonstration in the Hungarian capital Budapest Saturday drew tens of thousands of protesters demanding that Prime Minister Viktor Orban resign due to perceived inaction over allegations of child abuse in state-run institutions.

Since returning to power in 2010, the nationalist premier has vowed to prioritise protection of children but multiple high-profile child abuse scandals have rocked his government in recent times.

Saturday's protest was called by opposition leader Peter Magyar, whose TISZA party is leading opinion polls ahead of parliamentary elections in spring, after fresh allegations surfaced at a juvenile detention centre in the capital.

"Normally a government would be toppled after a case like this," 16-year-old David Kozak told AFP.

"For them the problem is not that the abuses happened, but that they were revealed."

At least 50,000 demonstrators hit the streets, some of them brandishing cuddly children's toys, according to AFP journalists.

Magyar led the crowd, holding a banner that read "Let's protect children".

The latest scandal erupted when CCTV footage emerged showing the then director of the Szolo Street juvenile detention centre kicking a boy in the head.

# Two U.S. Troops and an American Civilian Killed in Syria

DAMASCUS (Dispatches) - Two U.S. troops and an American civilian were killed in central Syria on Saturday after an alleged member of the Islamic State group opened fire on a joint U.S.-Syrian patrol, officials said.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) announced the deaths on X after Syria's state media earlier reported that an attack in the city of Palmyra had wounded American and Syrian troops.

"An ambush by a lone ISIS gunman" resulted in the deaths and injuries to three additional troops, said CENTCOM, which oversees the US military in the Middle East.

"The gunman was engaged and killed," it said.

Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said the attack occurred as the soldiers "were conducting a key leader engagement" in support of counter-terrorism operations, while US envoy to Syria Tom Barrack said the ambush targeted "a joint US-Syrian government patrol."

"The savage who perpetrated this attack was killed by partner forces," US Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth wrote on X. Parnell said the identities of the deceased troops would be withheld until after their families were notified.

The incident is the first of its kind reported since Islamist-led forces overthrew longtime Syrian ruler Bashar al-Assad in December last year, and rekindled the country's ties with the United States.

A Pentagon official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said the attack "took place in an area where the Syrian President does not have control."

Syrian state news agency SANA, quoting a security source, earlier reported that several US troops and two Syrian service members had been wounded in the attack.

The soldiers were taking part in a "joint field tour" in Palmyra, which was once under the control of the Islamic State (IS) group, SANA reported.

A Syrian military official who requested anonymity said that the shots were fired "during a meeting between Syrian and American officers" at a Syrian base in Palmyra.

A witness, who asked to remain anonymous, said he heard the shots coming from inside the base.

According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor, which has a wide network of sources inside Syria, the meeting



came as part of an "American strategy to strengthen its presence and foothold in the Syrian desert".

Helicopters evacuated the wounded to the Al-Tanf base in southern Syria, where American troops are deployed, SANA said.

Last month, during Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa's visit to Washington, Damascus formally joined the US-led global coalition against the IS group.

US forces are deployed in Syria's Kurdish-controlled northeast as well as at Al-Tanf near the border with Jordan.

Syria's interior ministry said Saturday that it had warned the US-led coalition of a possible breach by Islamic State (IS) group fighters, following a deadly attack on American troops in Palmyra.

"There were prior warnings from the internal security command to allied forces in the desert region," ministry spokesman Anwar al-Baba said in an interview on state television.

"The international coalition forces did not take the Syrian warnings of a possible IS infiltration into consideration," he added.

Syria's foreign minister condemned the attack. Damascus "strongly condemns the terrorist attack that targeted a joint Syria-US counterterrorism patrol near Palmyra", said Asaad al-Shaibani in a post on X.

"We extend our condolences to the families of the victims, as well as to the American government and people, and wish the wounded a speedy recovery."

US President Donald Trump said that "there will be very serious retaliation" after two US service members and one American civilian were killed in an attack in Syria that the United States blames on the Islamic State group.

"This was an ISIS attack against the US, and Syria, in a very dangerous part of Syria, that is not fully controlled by them," he said in a social media post.

The American president told reporters at the White House that Syria's president, Ahmed al-Sharaa, was "devastated by what happened" and stressed that Syria was fighting alongside US troops. Trump, in his post, said al-Sharaa was "extremely angry and disturbed by this attack." Trump said the three "seem to be doing pretty well." The US military said the gunman was killed.

# Belarus Frees Opposition Figure Kolesnikova, Nobel Laureate Bialiatski

MINSK (Dispatches) - Belarus on Saturday released 123 political prisoners, including protest leader Maria Kolesnikova and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Ales Bialiatski, in a US-brokered deal involving a partial lifting of Western sanctions, according to rights groups and state media.

Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko has locked up thousands of his opponents, critics and protestors since an election in 2020 that rights groups widely said was rigged and triggered weeks of mass protests across the country.

The charismatic Kolesnikova was the star of the 2020 movement that presented the most serious challenge to Lukashenko in his 30-year rule. She famously ripped up her passport as the KGB tried to deport her from the country.

Bialiatski - a 63-year-old veteran rights defender and 2022 Nobel Prize winner - is considered by Lukashenko to be a personal enemy. He has documented rights abuses in the country, a close ally of Moscow, for decades.

Bialiatski stressed he would carry on fighting for civil rights and freedom for political prisoners after his surprise release, which he called a "huge emotional shock".

"Our fight continues, and the Nobel Prize was, I think, a certain acknowledgement of our activity, our aspirations that have not yet come to fruition," he told media in an interview from Vilnius. "Therefore the fight continues," he added.

He was awarded the prize in 2022 while already in jail.

After being taken out of prison, he said he was put on a bus and blindfolded until they reached the border with Lithuania.

The majority of those freed, including Kolesnikova, were unexpectedly



taken to Ukraine, surprising their allies who had been waiting for all of them in Lithuania.

Kolesnikova called for all political prisoners to be released.

"I'm thinking of those who are not yet free, and I'm very much looking forward to the moment when we can all embrace, when we can all see one another, and when we will all be free," she said in a video interview with a Ukrainian government agency.

Kolesnikova was part of a trio of women - including Svetlana Tikhonovskaya who stood against Lukashenko and now leads the opposition in exile - who led the 2020 street protests.

She was serving an 11-year sentence in a prison colony. Security services had in 2020 put a sack over her head and drove her to the Ukrainian border. But she ripped up her passport, foiling the forced deportation plan, and was placed under arrest.

Former prisoners from the Gomel prison where she was held have told AFP she was barred from talking to other political prisoners and regularly thrown into harsh punishment cells.

Hailing Bialiatski's release, the Nobel Committee told AFP there were still more than 1,200 political prisoners inside the country.

"Their continued detention starkly illustrates the ongoing, systemic repression in the country," said chairman Jorgen Watne Frydnes.

Jailed opponents of Lukashenko are often held incommunicado in a prison system notorious for its secrecy and harsh treatment.

There were fears for the health of both Bialiatski and Kolesnikova while they were behind bars, though they both said they felt okay in interviews on Saturday.

The deal was brokered by the United States, which has pushed for prisoners to be freed and offered some sanctions relief in return.

An envoy of US President Donald Trump, John Coale, was in Minsk this week for talks with Lukashenko.

He told reporters from state media that Washington would remove sanctions on the country's potash industry, without providing specific details.

A US official separately told AFP that one American citizen was among the 123 released.

# Two Dead, Several Injured in Mass Shooting at Brown University in U.S.

RHODE ISLAND (Dispatches) - Two people were killed on Saturday and eight were critically injured in a shooting at Brown University, the mayor of Providence, Rhode Island said. The suspect remains at large, according to police.

Police in Rhode Island were searching for a suspect in a shooting at Brown University in Providence in which two people died and eight were critically wounded at the Ivy League school, officials said.

Streets around campus remained blocked off hours after the shooting and law enforcement officials heightened security around the city as police continued their manhunt.

Providence officials told reporters at a news conference that police are looking for a male dressed in black and were scouring local video cameras in the area for footage to get a better description of the suspect. Officials said the gunman escaped after shooting people in Brown's Barus & Holley engineering building, where exams were taking place at the time.

"We are a week and a half away from Christmas. And two people died today and another eight are in the hospital," Mayor Brett Smiley said. "So please pray for



those families."

Officials could not yet disclose details about the victims, including whether they were students, Smiley said.

Brown is on College Hill in Providence, Rhode Island's state capital. The university has hundreds of buildings, including lecture halls, laboratories and dormitories.

As news of the shooting spread, the school told students to shelter in place.

Brown senior biochemistry student Alex Bruce was working on a final research project in his dorm directly across the street from the building when he heard sirens outside and received a text about an active shooter shortly after 4 pm.

"I'm just in here shaking," he said, watching through the window as a half-dozen armed officers in tactical gear surrounded his dorm. He said he feared for a friend who he thought was inside the engineering building at the time.

Students in a nearby lab hid under desks for about two hours and turned off the lights after receiving an alert about the shooting, said Chiangheng Chien, a doctoral student in engineering who was about a block away from the scene.

## Arsenal Get Lucky Break to Go Five Points Clear



LONDON (Dispatches) - Premier League leaders Arsenal needed two own goals, the second deep in stoppage time, to scrape a 2-1 home win over bottom club Wolverhampton Wanderers and open a five-point gap while earlier on Saturday Mohamed Salah put aside a tumultuous week to help Liverpool beat Brighton and Hove Albion 2-0.

The table will show that Wolves remain cast adrift with two points from their opening 16 games, but they played well above their lowly standing and when Tolu Arokodare headed them level in the 90th minute Arsenal were stunned.

After defeat by Aston Villa last weekend, failure to beat Wolves at home would have blown the title race wide open, but when Bukayo Saka swung in a cross towards substitute Gabriel Jesus in the fourth minute of stoppage time, it flew in off the head of the unfortunate Yerson Mosquera.

The final whistle was met with cheers and huge relief with Arsenal's players realising just how close they had come to handing away their advantage to Manchester City, who are in action at Crystal Palace.

Arsenal have 36 points from 16 games with City on 31 from 15. Aston Villa, who face third-from-bottom West Ham United on Sunday, have 30 from 15.

Chelsea moved up to fourth on 28 as they returned to winning ways with a 2-0 home win against Everton -- fit-again Cole Palmer scoring his first goal since September.

Fulham eased away from the relegation zone with a 3-2 victory at Burnley, their first win at Turf Moor in 35 attempts dating back to 1951. Burnley's defeat means they have lost seven successive top-flight games for the first time since 1895.

Arsenal may look back on this ugly win as a pivotal moment in their bid to win their first English title since 2003-04.

"We will take the points and move forward. We won't know (the significance) until May, but we can be happy tonight that we left with three points," Arsenal captain Saka said.

For Wolves it was a cruel blow as Rob Edwards's team showed great spirit to frustrate Arsenal and almost snatch a point.

Arsenal laboured and barely had a shot on target until they took the lead in bizarre fashion in the 70th minute.

Saka whipped in a wickedly curling corner to the back post and Wolves keeper Sam Johnstone pushed it against the woodwork, only for the ball to rebound back and go in off his shoulder.

But Wolves were not finished and in the final minutes they had Arsenal penned deep in their own half and hanging on.

After a long passing move, Mateus Mane's forward pass into the area was met by Arokodare, who directed the ball past David Raya to send Wolves fans into delirium.

Their joy was to be short-lived though as Arsenal got the luckiest of breaks to stay in control of their destiny, while Wolves' two-point haul after 16 games is a joint-record low in top-flight history.

"It's hurtful. It's been happening to us the whole season. We play very good for the whole 90 minutes and then at the end we always concede," Arokodare said.

Salah's outburst after being an unused substitute against Leeds United and his exclusion from Liverpool's squad for the midweek trip to Inter Milan led to days of speculation that the Egyptian's glittering Anfield career was coming to a bitter end.

But it was all smiles again as he returned to the squad and set up the second of Hugo Ekitike's goals after coming off the bench midway through the first half.

## Raphinha Shines for Barca, Griezmann Rescues Atletico



MADRID (Dispatches) - Raphinha hit a brace to give Barcelona a narrow 2-0 win over Osasuna on Saturday and take them seven points clear at the top of La Liga.

Atletico Madrid, fourth, returned to winning ways with a 2-1 victory over Valencia sealed by a fine Antoine Griezmann strike, while Espanyol, fifth, continued their strong start with a 1-0 win at Getafe.

Barcelona's Brazilian winger Raphinha broke the deadlock after 70 minutes with a fizzing strike from the edge of the box, and added a second late on to earn Barca their seventh-straight top flight win.

Barca lacked their usual sparkle but ground out their victory, keeping a first clean sheet in six matches across all competitions.

They also recorded a fifth victory in five games at their partially reopened Camp Nou home.

"Raphinha is very important. He scored two goals and is a key player. He defends and attacks—he's very important for us," said Flick.

"Maybe we didn't have many chances, but we scored two goals and got the three points."

Ferran Torres might have sent Barca ahead early on but hooked high over the bar from Lamine Yamal's dangerous cross.

Yamal had a couple of drives beaten away in a mostly frustrating first-half for both the teenager and for Barca.

Torres headed home from Marcus Rashford's cross but the goal was disallowed for an offside in the build-up.

The Spain international sent an acrobatic overhead effort inches wide, and Barca goalkeeper Joan Garcia denied Ante Budimir with a fine save before the break.

## Vonn Second Behind Aicher in World Cup Downhill at St Moritz



ST. MORITZ (Dispatches) - Lindsey Vonn narrowly missed out on a second straight World Cup downhill win at St Moritz on Saturday as the American was pipped to victory by Germany's Emma Aicher.

Vonn briefly looked on track for a second win in as many days after knocking Sofia Goggia off top spot, but Aicher powered down the sun-drenched Corviglia course to claim her third World Cup triumph.

Aicher beat Vonn by 0.24 seconds as Goggia, the 2018 Olympic champion from Italy, rounded out the podium.

The 41-year-old Vonn became the oldest skier to win a World Cup race in Friday's downhill at the Swiss resort, her first victory since 2018 -- and first in her comeback with titanium implants in her right knee.

Vonn produced another impressive run on Saturday in a remarkable return to skiing's top level but admitted she found it tougher lining up in the start gate again 24 hours after her 83rd career World Cup win.

"I'm not entirely happy. You know I think I skied pretty well but I was a little bit out of balance today," Vonn told TNT Sports.

"I felt good on the top part of the course but I think yesterday was so emotional it took a lot of energy and I didn't sleep that great. So hopefully tonight I can get a little bit recharged and ski better tomorrow."

Vonn recovered from an error halfway down the run to dislodge Goggia in the leader's seat, only for Aicher to come out next and outdo her.

"I fell on my hip in the middle of the course and then I was off track for the bottom part of the course where I skied so well yesterday. It happens, that's ski racing," said Vonn.

Vonn returned to the circuit last December after a five-year retirement with her main goal being the Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics in February. Her form suggests she will be a leading medal contender in the speed events.

## Knicks Reach NBA Cup Final as Brunson Sinks Magic

LAS VEGAS (Dispatches) - Jalen Brunson powered the New York Knicks to their first NBA Cup final with a 132-120 win over the Orlando Magic in Las Vegas Saturday.

Star point guard Brunson scored a game-high 40 points to book a showdown in the mid-season tournament against the San Antonio Spurs or the Oklahoma City Thunder.

The Knicks' in-form offense proved too hot for injury-hit Orlando, claiming a semi-final clash that extended New York's recent streak to nine wins from 10 games.

"We came out here and did exactly what we said we wanted to do, which was play Knicks basketball," said Karl-Anthony Towns, backed Brunson with 29 points.

The Magic had led 36-33 after making a rapid start to a breathless opening quarter -- earning the



Knicks players some harsh and fiery words from coach Mike Brown in an early timeout.

"The way they came out, physicality-wise, we weren't ready for it," said Brunson.

"We bounced back and responded to that, and the way we played the rest of the game is a testament that first timeout."

New York went on a tear at the start of the second quarter, capitalizing on a missed floating jump shot from Desmond Bane to take the lead through Josh Hart.

The Knicks briefly relinquished their advantage soon after half-time, when Bane put the Magic back ahead with a running layup.

But Orlando ultimately could not keep pace with Brunson, who late in the third quarter left opposing guard Anthony Black sat helplessly on the floor before executing a three-point step-back jumpshot.

## Meillard Leads Perfect Swiss Sweep in Val d'Isere Giant Slalom

VAL-D'ISERE (Dispatches) - Loic Meillard collected his first World Cup win of the season as he led home a Swiss clean sweep in the giant slalom at Val d'Isere.

Meillard, who was fifth after the first run, finished 0.18 seconds ahead of Luca Aerni with Marco Odermatt a further 0.15sec behind in third.

"It's amazing. Fourth place would have been pretty amazing today, a good step in the right direction," said Meillard.

"But to win directly, it's simply perfect," added the 29-year-old who also led a Swiss treble in the giant slalom in Hafjell in March ahead of Odermatt and Thomas Tumler.

"This isn't my first treble but it's always magical," he added. This was Meillard's eighth World Cup win, his fifth in giant



slalom, and marks a welcome return to form for the reigning slalom world champion, who has struggled this season.

After summer training hampered by a painful back, he had managed only one top-10 since the start of the season, with ninth place in the giant slalom at Beaver Creek.

"It shows the work we've been putting in the last two weeks with the team," he said.

"We've worked on a few small (things) in the end, nothing big -- but just finding the right movement again, the flow, and today it worked."

World No.1 Odermatt came into Val d'Isere on a run of four straight giant slalom victories and was running fourth after the first run.