

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi During a Phone Conversation With His British Counterpart, Yvette Cooper, Said Iran Has Never Rejected Negotiations Grounded in Respect for the Country's Legal Rights and the Legitimate Interests of Its People

IRAN NEWS

Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi in a Telephone Conversation With his Cypriot Counterpart, Constantinos Kombos, Has Discussed Bilateral Ties and Regional Developments' and Pointed to Iran's Principled Approach to Respecting the National Sovereignty of All Countries

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Economy Still a Priority, Says Minister



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance said the government has not abandoned economic management despite recent turbulence, announcing a coordinated 17-point plan aimed at controlling inflation, stabilizing the foreign exchange market, boosting production, and supporting the capital market.

Speaking at the Tehran Stock Exchange during the ringing of the opening bell for trading, Economy Minister Seyyed Ali Madani-Zadeh addressed recent economic tensions and exchange-rate volatility, describing the period as his first public engagement following the latest market fluctuations.

"There has been some turbulence in the economic environment," Madani-Zadeh said, adding that "under no circumstances has the government neglected the economy." He stressed that economic officials are working around the clock to address challenges and restore stability.

The minister warned against what he described as negative and unrealistic media narratives, noting that heightened uncertainty can lead to the spread of inaccurate information. He urged the public to exercise caution and avoid making decisions based on misinformation, saying such reports could worsen market anxiety.

Madani-Zadeh said serious decisions have already been taken and that strong coordination has been established among three key economic bodies. As a result, a comprehensive 17-point plan has been finalized and signed to guide the government's economic response.

Capital Market Reflects Public Trust, Gov't Pledges Support



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref said on Saturday that supporting the capital market is a top priority for the country's 14th administration, stressing that the stock market is a clear mirror of public trust in the national economy and that no market can remain sustainable without people's confidence.

Speaking at a meeting of deputy heads of the Securities and Exchange Organization on December 20, Aref described the capital market as a key and influential institution in Iran's economic development. He praised economic experts and market leaders, thanking officials and professionals working across the stock market for their efforts.

Aref said one of the main challenges of the upcoming development plan is securing financial resources for its implementation. "The necessary resources exist," he noted, "but the key issue is how to activate this potential." He pointed to idle domestic capital held in households or unused sectors, as well as the significant financial assets of Iranians living abroad, saying these resources could be mobilized through logical and transparent mechanisms, including attracting capital from outside the country.

Iran's Right to Enrichment Non-Negotiable

IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Behrouz Kamalvandi, spokesman and deputy head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI), has reaffirmed Iran's right to uranium enrichment while recounting what he described as 12 days of sustained military attacks on the country's nuclear facilities. He said Iran remains open to cooperation with Europe and the United States if their concerns are legitimate, but stressed that demands such as "zero enrichment" are neither realistic nor achievable.

In an interview with ISNA, Kamalvandi said the crisis began in the early hours of 23 Khordad, when the sound of explosions signaled the start of a coordinated assault. Within minutes, emergency communications were activated, senior officials assembled at the AEOL, and pre-planned crisis-management protocols were put into effect. He described the period as one of the most complex and difficult episodes in the history of Iran's nuclear industry.

Despite damage to several sites, Kamalvandi said no radioactive contamination spread beyond facility boundaries. Radiation monitoring teams operated around the clock throughout the attacks to ensure public safety and nuclear security. Drawing on past experiences of sabotage and military strikes, he said Iran's nuclear sector has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to recover and rebuild with greater resilience and higher technical standards.

"Anger and grief over the destruction are natural," he said, "but experience shows that Iran's nuclear program has never been halted by pressure or attack. Each time, it has returned stronger and more advanced."

Kamalvandi argued that nuclear capability—particularly enrichment—is a core component of national power and independence. He said some Iranian elites and academics still underestimate its importance, a view he himself once held before gaining direct experience in the nuclear sector. "In today's world, nuclear capability remains central to national security," he said, citing continued emphasis on nuclear deterrence in major powers' strategic doctrines. "A country that seeks independence cannot rely on others for critical technologies. Indigenous capability is essential, and in the nuclear field Iran has reached a point where there are no remaining technical unknowns."

He emphasized that uranium enrichment is a legal right under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and an inseparable part of Iran's peaceful nuclear program. According to Kamalvandi, insisting on "zero enrichment" ignores both international law and political reality. "This demand has been tested for years and has failed," he said. "It is simply not workable."

Kamalvandi rejected narratives portraying Iran's nuclear program as disconnected from public welfare. He said the Iranian people largely support the nuclear industry, despite attempts to frame it as a burden on the economy. He highlighted Iran's achievements in radio-pharmaceuticals, medical isotopes, agriculture, industrial measurement systems, and laser technologies, noting that



Iran ranks among the world's leading producers of radio-medicines.

"If these achievements were insignificant," he asked, "why would advanced fighter jets spend hours targeting Iran's nuclear facilities?"

He added that Iran's nuclear industry cannot be dismantled by attacking infrastructure alone. "Facilities can be damaged, but knowledge, experience, and human capital cannot be bombed out of existence," he said, pointing to repeated attacks on Iranian scientists as evidence that adversaries recognize this reality.

Kamalvandi said crisis teams were deployed with minimal personnel and maximum concentration to reduce risks while maintaining control. Communication systems were adapted to wartime conditions, and prepared public statements were released to counter misinformation, including rumors of radioactive leaks.

He confirmed that although limited contamination occurred inside certain facilities, it was continuously monitored and fully contained. "There was no active radioactive contamination outside nuclear sites, and the situation was managed entirely by Iranian experts," he said, adding that no foreign assistance was required.

Kamalvandi criticized the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) for failing to promptly condemn threats and attacks against Iran's nuclear facilities. He said Iran had repeatedly warned the agency in advance and during the attacks, arguing that the lack of a clear response effectively emboldened the attackers.

He noted that Iran's safeguards agreement with the IAEA was drafted for normal, peacetime conditions—not for situations involving direct military assault. In response, Iran's parliament passed legislation suspending certain forms of cooperation, which Kamalvandi described as a "natural and predictable reaction."

Given continued security threats and concerns over sensitive information, he said Iran is exploring alternative methods for nuclear material accountability that would not require inspectors' physical access to vulnerable sites.

Kamalvandi said Iran would restore full cooperation with the IAEA once two conditions are met: the end of military threats against its nuclear facilities, and respect for Iran's nuclear rights, particularly enrichment. "As long as enrichment is treated as a crime rather than a right, cooperation will remain limited," he said.

He stressed that the nuclear dispute is ultimately political, not technical. "Technical issues can always be resolved when there is genuine political will," he said, adding that Iran remains open to dialogue if its legitimate concerns are recognized.

Reflecting on the 12-day conflict, Kamalvandi praised public unity, saying social cohesion played a key role in frustrating the attackers' objectives. He concluded that while lessons are still being assessed, Iran's nuclear industry will emerge stronger. "We will address our weaknesses, build on our strengths, and defend our rights," he said. "Enrichment is one of those rights—and it is here to stay."

Gov't Determined to Develop the Country's Transportation Network

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian says the government is firmly committed to reforming and expanding Iran's transportation network in line with international standards, stressing that high casualty rates in road and air transport are unacceptable and demand urgent action.

Speaking on Saturday at a ceremony marking Transportation Week, Pezeshkian described transportation routes and access corridors as the country's "vital arteries," underscoring their central role in economic activity, public safety, and national development. "We are determined to reform and develop the main transportation network of the country by applying the latest international standards and upgrading infrastructure," he said.

The president noted that effective reform requires balance between needs and capacity, warning that both shortages and excesses can create structural problems. He emphasized the importance of integrated management and said the government is prepared to delegate responsibilities in a targeted and systematic way to professional associations and non-governmental organizations.

Using a medical analogy, Pezeshkian compared transportation networks to the human body's circulatory system. "In the human body, everything revolves around the heart," he said. "All vital flows pass through it. Roads, cities, highways, air and land routes play the same role in the country." He added that the concept of a "single window" in governance functions like a heart, ensuring smooth circulation and coordination across systems.

He warned that disruptions in these pathways lead to dysfunction, just as blocked arteries impair the human body. "Wherever communication routes are weak or missing, work slows down and problems emerge," he said.

Pezeshkian reiterated that the government intends to upgrade main, secondary, and downstream transportation networks to global standards, stressing that development must prioritize quality and modern technology rather than short-term or poorly planned projects.

Highlighting the need to expand major highways, he said current traffic congestion is the result



of weak planning and overreliance on secondary routes. "If primary arteries are not properly built and we focus only on side roads, congestion is inevitable," he said, adding that overloaded secondary routes contribute to traffic jams, air pollution, and other urban challenges.

He criticized short-sighted infrastructure planning, noting that some international transport corridors are designed with widths of up to one kilometer. "We build a one-way road today, add a lane a year or two later, and then seek further expansion years after that," he said. "Why don't we plan ahead from the beginning?"

The president stressed that transportation corridors should be clearly defined and protected as national assets. He also called for granting

greater authority to relevant institutions, arguing that flexible, self-regulating systems are better able to respond to real-world conditions.

Pezeshkian described the continued use of outdated heavy vehicles—some more than 60 years old—as unacceptable, pointing to high fuel consumption and safety risks. He said management of the transportation sector should be entrusted to professionals, operating under clear frameworks of self-regulation and accountability.

Reaffirming support for private sector participation, he said development decisions must be comprehensive and balanced. He also voiced concern over air pollution and road fatalities, noting that the annual death toll of 17,000 to 20,000 people is "as if a passenger plane crashes every day."

The president called for strict enforcement of traffic laws and firm action against violators, saying public safety must come first. He added that the government is moving toward unified management of the entire transportation sector and stressed the need to benefit from international experience. "Waiting 10 years to implement these programs is not acceptable," he said.

In closing, Pezeshkian thanked transportation workers for their efforts, particularly during the recent 12-day conflict, saying national unity in difficult times had frustrated the country's adversaries.

Iran Had Complete Intelligence Database on Israel During 12-Day War



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The spokesman of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) said Iran possessed a comprehensive intelligence database on the Israeli regime during the recent 12-day war, a factor he said enabled the precise targeting of Iranian missile strikes.

Brigadier General Ali Mohammad Naeini made the remarks on Wednesday evening while addressing a gathering of Basij officials from across the country in Mashhad. He stated that Iran's intelligence superiority played a decisive role in the outcome of the conflict.

Naeini said that nearly 80 percent of Iran's operational actions during the 12-day war were based on intelligence gathered in previous years. "Without this long-term accumulation of intelligence, such successes would not have been possible," he emphasized.



U.S. Sanctions on ICC Enable War Criminals to Act With Impunity

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmael Baqaei has stressed that U.S. imposition of sanctions on the judges of International Criminal Court is a blatant and brutal act of impunity for war criminals.

“While genocidal war criminals remain at large and continue to commit egregious atrocities and crimes against humanity, the US State Department intensifies pressure and imposes sanctions on those seeking to hold these wanted criminals accountable,” Baqaei wrote on his X account on Friday.

“This represents impunity in its most blatant and brutal form—a profound moral aberration,” he added.

Iran’s Exports to India Increase

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran’s exports to India reached \$844 million in the first eight months of the Iranian year 1404, according to the Director General of the Office for East Asia, Oceania, and the Indian Subcontinent.

Speaking at the Second Conference on Understanding the Market and Trade Opportunities with India, Abdolsadeh Nissi referred to the current state of international trade, noting that imports into major economies such as China and India mainly include fuel, machinery, chemical products, plastics, and iron and steel. He added that fuels, machinery, pharmaceutical products, chemicals, and iron and steel account for a significant share of the global trade basket.

Nissi reiterated that in the first eight months of 1404, Iran’s exports to India amounted to \$844 million.

Referring to trade relations with India, he stated that India’s exports to the world are expected to reach approximately \$442 billion in 2024. He also pointed to various challenges along the Chabahar route, ranging from exhibition-related issues to matters linked to trade diplomacy, which are being pursued with the support of the country’s diplomatic apparatus. According to him, the marketing and commercial aspects of this corridor have become active, and cooperation from economic operators is essential.

The Assistant to the Head of the Iran Trade Promotion Organization noted that Iran’s exports remain limited to a number of traditional goods, adding that under current conditions, exports are largely confined to these products, while insufficient attention has been paid to the agricultural sector, particularly food products.

Referring to the Global Village Trade Exhibition of India, scheduled to be held from 4 to 6 Bahman 1404, Nissi stressed that participation in exhibitions can help identify pathways for attracting investors.



He added that available statistics and reports show significant potential in the agricultural sector, which has not been adequately utilized. He emphasized that appropriate regulations and infrastructure could contribute to the development of this sector and support the national economy.

Highlighting the mining capacities of both Iran and India, Nissi said both countries are strong in the mining sector and that India has a serious need for Iran’s mineral resources. However, he noted that trade has largely been limited to raw material sales and exports of a narrow range of items, stressing the need to move toward producing and exporting higher value-added

products.

He further pointed out that there are considerable opportunities in the Indian market for cement, stone, and construction materials, but these opportunities have not been fully exploited. According to last year’s reports, many companies and exhibitions that were expected to have a presence in India did not participate actively.

Discussing the value of exports and imports, Nissi said the average value of Iran’s exports is around \$300 to \$350, while the figure for imports from China is about \$3,345, and more than \$1,700 in trade with India. He emphasized that traders active in the Indian market can play an important role in improving this situation.

He concluded by noting that Iran has achieved relatively acceptable performance in certain areas, including the petrochemical industry, but the main focus remains on exporting raw materials. He stressed the importance of examining how these raw materials are processed into finished products in India and exploring ways to transfer the relevant technologies into Iran.

Iran’s 0.37% Share of the Global Market

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The first specialized and strategic meeting of the “Iran Trade Atlas” was held at the Iran Chamber of Commerce, organized by the Smart Governance Think Tank in cooperation with the National Entrepreneurship Organization of Iran, with the participation of experts in trade, transit, and insurance.

At the first specialized meeting of the Iran Trade Atlas, held on the occasion of Research Week at the Iran Chamber of Commerce, experts in trade, transit, and insurance pointed to Iran’s very small share of global trade and the many missed opportunities in regional markets. They emphasized the urgent need for a comprehensive roadmap, the removal of logistical and insurance-related obstacles, and the strengthening of economic diplomacy to overcome the current situation.

Seyed Taha Hossein Madani, Head of the Smart Governance Think Tank, said that despite Iran’s vast potential, its share of global trade is only about 0.37 percent, whereas it should reach at least 1 percent.

Referring to trade with neighboring countries, he noted that the total trade volume of Iran’s 15 neighboring countries is around \$1.2 trillion, yet Iran’s exports to these countries amount to only about \$15 billion. This is despite the fact that Iran faces fewer currency, sanctions, and logistical challenges in neighboring markets.

Citing international statistics, Madani said Iraq’s merchandise trade volume is about \$162 billion, Kuwait’s \$114 billion, and Oman’s more than \$106 billion. Turkey, despite a trade deficit of \$82 billion, earned over \$61 billion in foreign currency revenue in 2024 through services exports—especially tourism—thus compensating for its trade deficit.

He added that Russia, with a trade volume of \$612 billion and a surplus of over \$100 billion, as well as Africa, with more than \$1.2 trillion in merchandise trade, are examples of markets in which Iran could have played a much more significant role but has largely neglected.

Regarding Iran–China trade, Madani said Iran’s exports to China amount to about \$14.8 billion, while imports exceed \$19.3 billion, resulting in a \$4.5 billion trade deficit. More importantly, Iran’s exports to China are mainly raw materials with low value added, whereas developed countries import raw materials and re-export them after adding high value.

He added that even in trade with countries such as Spain, the dollar value of many Iranian export items is less than \$1 per kilogram, indicating that Iran’s export structure remains heavily



raw-material-based.

Madani stressed the need to change attitudes toward imports, saying that imports have unfortunately become a negative concept in Iran’s economic discourse, despite having three vital functions: importing goods that cannot be produced domestically; importing inputs for production and re-export with value added; and re-exporting goods—a model successfully used by the UAE to generate significant foreign currency income from large financial flows with small margins.

He emphasized that without resolving challenges in

transportation, transit, and insurance coverage, Iran cannot increase its share of regional and global trade. He described the design of the Iran Trade Atlas as an essential step toward improving the current situation and restoring Iran’s rightful place in global trade.

Sadina Abaei, a board member of the National Entrepreneurship Organization, said that Iran needs a solution to rescue its trade sector from its current condition. She questioned why, despite recognizing the importance of transit, data, and other factors, the situation remains unchanged. She criticized the lack of accountability and solutions from the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development.

Masoud Barahman, Head of the Iran–Africa Joint Chamber of Commerce, said that the Export Guarantee Fund supports about \$3 billion of Iranian investments in Africa, while the National Development Fund provides around €2 billion to support startup and entrepreneurial projects in trade development.

He noted that Africa, with its large population and vast market, offers significant opportunities in goods, technical and engineering services, and investment, but Iran needs infrastructure, policymaking, and government support to capitalize on them.

Barahman criticized the lack of a clear trade roadmap, stressing the need for systematic monitoring of export markets and partner countries. He called for stronger cooperation between the Trade Promotion Organization, the Economic Diplomacy Department, the Iran Chamber of Commerce, and the private sector to develop an actionable roadmap and avoid a fragmented economy.

He emphasized that Africa, with a population of about 1.45 billion, is a future market offering major opportunities, but Iran must adopt clear strategies and professional, long-term export planning rather than short-term, emotional approaches.

Iran Operates 209 Active Aircraft Despite Sanctions



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran currently has 209 active aircraft in operation despite long-standing sanctions imposed on its aviation industry, a senior official at the Civil Aviation Organization (CAO) said.

Hamidreza Sanei, Deputy Head for Aviation and International Affairs at the CAO, said during an Economy Desk television program that the country’s air transport fleet continues to face serious challenges due to what he described as unjust U.S. sanctions imposed since the early years of the Islamic Revolution. Nevertheless, he noted, Iran’s aviation sector remains operational with a total of 209 active aircraft.

He added that new seating capacity has recently been introduced into the flight network, and despite existing difficulties, flight safety remains at an acceptable and operational level, with no serious concerns in this regard.

Sanei pointed out that fleet renewal and investment in the aviation sector have been significantly affected by sanctions and financial constraints. He explained that while airlines in many countries operate as multinational companies with access to extensive financial resources, Iranian carriers lack such access, which has reduced their competitiveness.

Highlighting one of the main advantages of air transport, Sanei said it significantly reduces travel time, particularly in cargo transportation. Although air travel costs are high, he noted that time savings can partially offset these expenses. However, due to expensive ticket prices, air travel is less attractive for passengers.

The CAO deputy also said that future growth is expected to be strongest in the cargo and freight sector, with airline policies increasingly focused on greater investment in this area. Despite this trend, financial challenges and investment limitations continue to hinder rapid growth.

On service quality, Sanei said it remains a major concern for passengers, many of whom believe that ticket prices do not correspond to the quality of services provided. In response, the Ministry of Roads and Urban Development has launched an airline ranking program under the Seventh National Development Plan. The initiative will allow passengers to choose flights based on service levels and pay fares accordingly.

Mazandaran Agriculture Seen as Strategic Capacity for Expanding Iran–Uzbekistan Cooperation



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - A member of the Board of Directors of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture said that Mazandaran Province, with its extensive agricultural capacities, can play an effective role in expanding economic and trade cooperation between Iran and Uzbekistan.

Speaking at the Iran–Uzbekistan Trade Conference held in Tashkent, Abdullah Mohajer Darabi referred to the country’s and Mazandaran Province’s untapped potential, noting that Mazandaran, as one of Iran’s main hubs of agricultural production, possesses significant capabilities in production, processing, and export that could help meet part of the Uzbek market’s demand.

Emphasizing the need for the targeted use of these capacities, he said that expanding private-sector interactions, facilitating trade procedures, strengthening export infrastructure, and making use of logistical capabilities are among the most effective ways to increase the level of economic exchanges between the two countries.

Referring to the importance of holding joint trade events, the member of the Iran Chamber’s board stated that such conferences provide a valuable opportunity to introduce provincial capabilities and establish direct links between Iranian and Uzbek economic actors, potentially leading to the signing of memorandums of understanding and practical contracts.

Iran \$21b Behind Non-Oil Export Targets



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The deputy head of the Petrochemical Employers’ Association says Iran is currently lagging \$21 billion behind its non-oil export targets, citing energy supply disruptions and structural weaknesses in economic governance as key obstacles to achieving planned goals.

Speaking at a press conference, Firouz Karimaei referred to the targets outlined in Iran’s Seventh Development Plan, which calls for a 23 percent increase in non-oil exports and annual economic growth of 8 percent. He said that based on the plan, non-oil exports valued at \$50 billion in the base year (1402 in the Iranian calendar) should rise to \$141 billion by 1407. “This means that over a five-year period, the country must generate an additional \$91 billion in new exports,” he said.

Karimaei added that the plan also defines annual economic growth of 8 percent. According to World Bank data, Iran’s gross domestic product stood at \$405 billion in 1402. With sustained 8 percent growth, GDP should reach \$595 billion by 1407, requiring the creation of approximately \$190 billion in new economic output.

He emphasized that achieving an additional \$91 billion in non-oil exports requires a clear export development strategy. “In 1402, Iran’s GDP was \$405 billion, of which only 12 percent was derived from non-oil exports. By 1407, this share must increase to 24 percent, which demands special attention and structural reforms,” he noted.

Karimaei said that if the country had moved in line with the development plan over the past two years, non-oil exports should have reached \$75 billion by now. “However, the current figure is only \$32 billion. Even under optimistic conditions—assuming electricity and gas supplies are not disrupted—exports would at best reach \$54 billion. This shows we are \$21 billion behind the target,” he warned.

Iran–Africa Health Cooperation Gains Momentum



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran’s expanding engagement with African countries in scientific and health-related fields is shaping a new chapter in health diplomacy, as both sides move toward more structured, project-based cooperation. Initiatives such as the planned establishment of a nursing school in Ghana, collaboration in pharmaceutical production, and the development of medical tourism are opening new avenues for sustainable and strategic partnerships between Iran and Africa.

A recent joint meeting between Iranian officials and ambassadors from 19 African countries in Tehran underscored the breadth of opportunities for cooperation in education, research, and healthcare. The gathering provided a platform for discussions on creating a long-term, strategic framework that aligns academic collaboration with practical health needs across the African continent.

In recent years, scientific and health diplomacy has emerged as a key pillar of Iran–Africa relations. Beyond strengthening university ties, this approach is seen as a means to support the development of healthcare infrastructure and human resources in African countries. The meeting, held at Tehran’s Razi International Conference Center, reflected Iran’s stated commitment to advancing these partnerships and transforming them into durable, results-oriented collaborations.

Built on earlier expert consultations and field-based needs assessments, the talks highlighted a shared determination to move beyond symbolic dialogue toward concrete implementation. Iran University of Medical Sciences, drawing on its international standing and experience in education, treatment, and public health, presented specific proposals. These included establishing joint educational institutions, cooperating in the production and supply of pharmaceuticals, sharing expertise in health systems, and expanding medical tourism. Officials described the initiative as a practical step toward strengthening South–South cooperation and creating a tangible model of scientific and technological convergence between Iran and African nations.

UN Demands Rwanda Leave Congo

UNITED NATIONS (Dispatches) - The U. N. Security Council on Friday condemned an offensive by M23 in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, demanded Rwanda stop supporting the rebels and withdraw its troops, and renewed the mandate for U.N. peacekeepers.

The 15-member council, in a unanimously-adopted resolution, also demanded that Congolese troops stop supporting groups such as the FDLR and that DRC fulfil its commitment to “neutralize the group.”

The FDLR was founded by Hutus who fled Rwanda after participating in the 1994 genocide that killed close to one million Tutsis and moderate Hutus. M23 says it is fighting to protect ethnic Tutsi communities in eastern Congo.



French Gov't Warns Farmers Against Christmas Blockades Over Cattle Cull



PARIS (Dispatches) - The French government held talks with farmers' unions on Friday and warned against staging further blockades during the Christmas holiday season after days of angry protests over a mass cull of cows ordered in response to an outbreak of lumpy skin disease.

The French government on Friday warned protesting farmers against erecting blockades during the festive season, while unions were divided over further tactics in a standoff over a cow disease.

For more than a week, farmers in the southwest of the country have staged protests against a mass cull of cows to contain the spread of nodular dermatitis, widely known as lumpy skin disease.

They have blocked roads, sprayed manure and dumped garbage in front of government offices to force the authorities to review their mass slaughter policy.

The farmers have also been angered over a trade deal under negotiation between the European Union and South American bloc Mercosur, which was this week postponed to January.

On Friday, farmers staged a protest in the northern resort city of Le Touquet, placing a coffin outside the residence of French President Emmanuel Macron.

In the northern town of Alençon, a protester threw red paint in front of a public building.

China Threatens Forceful Measures Over \$11.1b U.S. Arms Sales Package to Taiwan



BEIJING (Dispatches) - China again lashed out at a planned U.S. arms sales package to Taiwan on Friday, with the Chinese defence ministry threatening to take “forceful measures” over the \$11 billion weapons package approved by US State Department and awaiting congressional approval.

China's military will step up training and “take forceful measures” to safeguard the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, the defence ministry said on Friday in response to a planned \$11.1b U.S. arms sales package to Taiwan.

The package, the largest ever by the United States to the island Beijing views as its own territory, comes as China has been stepping up its military and political pressure on Taiwan.

The ministry said it had lodged “stern representations” with the United States, and urged the country to immediately cease arms sales to Taiwan and abide by its commitment not to support “Taiwan independence forces”.

“The ‘Taiwan independence’ separatist forces, at the cost of the safety and well-being of Taiwan compatriots, use the hard-earned money of ordinary people to fatten US arms dealers in an attempt to ‘seek independence by relying on military force’,” the ministry statement said.

Trump Doesn't Rule Out War With Venezuela

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - U.S. President Donald Trump left open the possibility of war with Venezuela, as his top diplomat Marco Rubio vowed Friday to enforce a blockade on the country's oil wealth.

Asked in an interview with NBC News conducted Thursday about a war with Venezuela, Trump said, “I don't rule it out, no.”

Trump declined to say whether he wants to oust President Nicolas Maduro, after saying in an earlier interview that the leftist firebrand's “days are numbered.”

“He knows exactly what I want,” Trump replied. “He knows better than anybody.”

Rubio, who was repeatedly asked about Venezuela during a two-hour news conference at the State Department which he addressed both in English and Spanish, also declined to answer explicitly if the United States was aiming to overthrow Maduro, but he promised to press on.

“It is clear that the current status quo with the Venezuelan regime is intolerable for the United States,” Rubio said.

“So yes, our goal is to change that dynamic, and that's why the president is doing what he's doing,” he said of Trump.

Rubio, a Cuban American and vociferous critic of the communist government in Havana, has pressed for a hard line on Venezuela after Trump initially appeared open to a transactional relationship with Maduro. Rubio did not rule out talks with Maduro.

Trump earlier this week declared that Venezuela is “completely surrounded by the largest Armada ever assembled in the History of South America.”

Trump vowed that the United States would stop Venezuela's shipments of oil, in what he described as enforcement of sanctions imposed unilaterally by the United States.

“There's nothing that's going to impede our ability to enforce US law when it comes to sanctions,” Rubio said.

Hardline Trump aide Stephen Miller has accused Venezuela of “expropriation” as US companies were involved in early oil exploration on sovereign Venezuelan territory.

Venezuela, which has the world's largest proven oil reserves, has promised security to keep its ships sailing. The oil is critical to Venezuela's budget and offers a key lifeline for Cuba.

In its latest pressure, the Trump administration on Friday imposed sanctions on several more family members or associates of



told a news conference in Washington.

“This whole narrative that we're trying to force something on Ukraine is silly,” Rubio said.

“We can't force Ukraine to make a deal. We can't force Russia to make a deal. They have to want to make a deal.”

Rubio said he may join talks in Miami, his hometown, on Saturday.

Trump's global envoy Steve Witkoff and son-in-law Jared Kushner are leading the talks, which will include top Ukrainian negotiator Rustem Umerov as well as top officials from Britain, France and Germany.

Russian officials -- reportedly including Kremlin negotiator Kirill Dmitriev -- and US officials are expected to meet separately in Florida over the weekend.

Umerov said on social media that he had briefed President Volodymyr Zelensky after the Miami talks.

“We agreed with our American partners on further steps and the continuation of joint work in the near future,” he wrote.

“We are acting clearly in line with the priorities defined by the president: Ukraine's security must be guaranteed reliably and in the long term.”

Putin Says It Is Up to Ukraine and Its Allies to End Hostilities

MOSCOW (Dispatches) - At his annual press conference on Friday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that the ball was in Kyiv and its allies' court to end the war in Ukraine. The Kremlin chief also said he was certain that Moscow would take more cities and towns in eastern Ukraine before the end of the year.

Putin on Friday said the ball was in the court of the West and Kyiv in talks to end the war in Ukraine, while hailing Moscow's recent battlefield gains and threatening more.

Putin spoke during his annual end-of-year press conference -- a staple of his 25-year rule -- in which he told Russians Moscow was intent on pressing on in Ukraine, striking a confident tone.

The 73-year-old has repeatedly said in recent weeks that Moscow will seize the rest of Ukrainian land he has proclaimed as Russian by force if talks were to fail.

Putin also said he did not feel personally responsible for the tens of thousands of people killed since Moscow launched its 2022 offensive, which has become Europe's worst conflict since World War II.

“We did not start this war,” he said, repeating a frequent narrative pushed by Moscow throughout the conflict.

“We do not consider ourselves responsible for the loss of life,” he said.

Putin ordered the all-out assault in Ukraine in February 2022, sending troops and tanks towards Kyiv in a bid to topple Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky.

He also denied dragging out settlement talks and turning down proposals -- claiming Moscow had agreed to “some compromises” -- without going into detail.

“The ball is now fully and completely on the side of our Western opponents ... first of all the head of the Kyiv regime and their European sponsors,” Putin said.

He also warned of “severe” consequences if EU powers followed through on proposals to use Russian assets frozen in Europe to fund Ukraine's recovery and defence, after Brussels failed to approve a plan to tap the funds during late-night



talks.

Putin said that Russia's recent advances in Ukraine should force Kyiv to agree to a deal.

Listing a string of cities and towns in eastern Ukraine now eyed by the Russian army, the Kremlin chief said he was certain that Moscow will take more settlements before the end of the year.

“Our troops are advancing along the entire line of contact,” Putin said.

“I'm sure that before the end of this year we will still witness new success,” he added.

The Russian army made its biggest advance in Ukraine in a year in November, AFP analysis of data from the US-based Institute for the Study of War showed.

In a message to the West, Putin said that Russia would not attack other countries -- as long as it was treated “with respect” -- without clarifying what he meant.

As he spoke, Zelensky said on a visit to Warsaw that Russia would come for

Poland if Ukraine fell.

The hours-long televised event -- a mix of questions from the press and call-ins from Russia's 12 time zones -- is a fixture of the Russian political calendar, garnering frenzied media coverage in the weeks leading up to it.

The Kremlin said almost three million people had sent questions to Putin and security was heavy in Moscow during the event.

Putin mused on everything from geopolitics to regional development issues, pledging to intervene to fix the problems of citizens caught up in local bureaucracy.

Speaking on the economy, Putin downplayed the costs of the war for Moscow.

Russia has lived under massive Western sanctions for almost four years, while ramped up military spending had strained the public finances and price stability.

He admitted that the purchasing power of Russian families have taken a hit, promising to “do everything possible to ensure that the Russian economy, the macroeconomy, is healthy and strong, and that the country's economy has such a solid foundation”.

Russia's central bank on Friday said it was cutting its benchmark interest rate to 16 percent amid slowing growth.

Putin also claimed Russians were still lining up in droves to register to fight in Ukraine, with around 400,000 new sign-ups this year.

In 2022, hundreds of thousands of Russians fled the country as Putin had announced a mobilisation drive to prop up the Ukraine offensive.

Criticism of the Ukraine offensive is banned in Russia under wartime censorship, and Moscow has punished thousands of its citizens for speaking out against it -- either with fines or prison sentences in a crackdown unseen since Soviet times.

But Putin rejected the argument that voicing an alternative point of view to the Kremlin has become dangerous in Russia.

“We have no repression,” he said.

All of Putin's political opponents are in exile, prison or dead.

U.S. Strikes Islamic State Group Targets in Syria

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The U.S. military has carried out a wave of airstrikes against dozens of Islamic State targets across central Syria, U.S. officials said, in retaliation for a deadly attack on American personnel. The strikes follow President Donald Trump's pledge to respond after two US soldiers and a civilian interpreter were killed in an assault last weekend near Palmyra.

U.S. forces struck more than 70 Islamic State group targets in Syria on Friday in what President Donald Trump described as “very serious retaliation” for an attack that killed three Americans last weekend.

Washington said a lone gunman from the militant group carried out the December 13 attack in Palmyra -- home to UNESCO-listed ancient ruins and once controlled by jihadist fighters -- that left two US soldiers and a U.S. civilian dead.

In response, the United States “struck more than 70 targets at multiple locations across central Syria with fighter jets, attack helicopters, and artillery,” US Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a statement.

“The operation employed more than 100 precision munitions targeting known ISIS infrastructure and weapons sites,” CENTCOM said, using an acronym for the Islamic State group.

Trump said in a post on his Truth Social network that the United States is “inflicting very serious retaliation, just as I promised, on the murderous



terrorists responsible,” and that those who attack Americans “WILL BE HIT HARDER THAN YOU HAVE EVER BEEN HIT BEFORE.”

CENTCOM said that U.S. and allied forces have “conducted 10 operations in Syria and Iraq resulting in the deaths or detention of 23 terrorist operatives” following the Palmyra attack, without specifying which groups the militants belonged to.

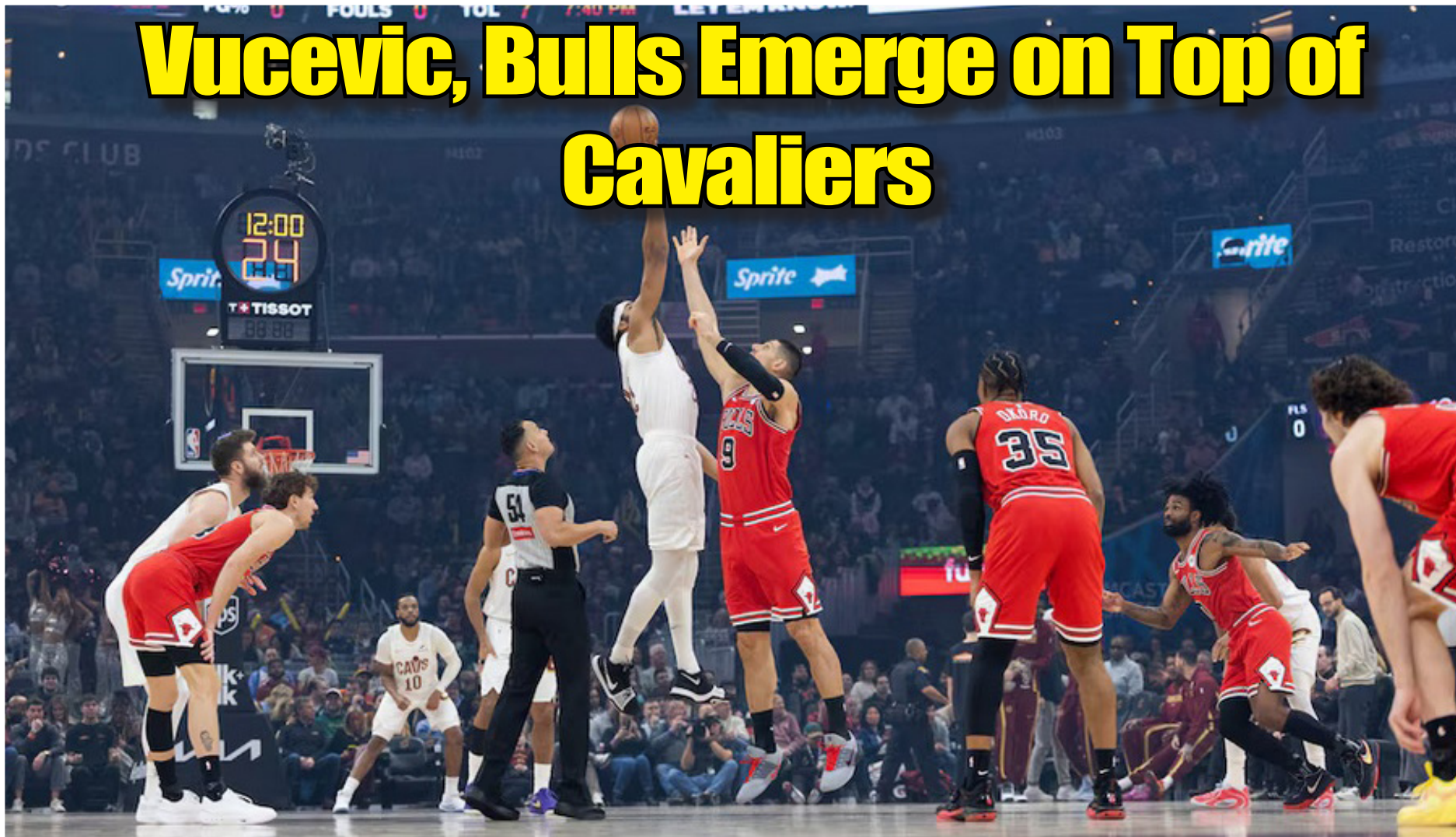
Syria's foreign ministry, while not directly commenting on the Friday strikes, said in a post on X that the country is committed to fighting the Islamic State (IS) group and “ensuring that it has no safe havens on Syrian territory, and will continue to intensify military operations against it wherever it poses a threat.”

The Americans killed in the Palmyra attack last weekend were Iowa National Guard sergeants William Howard and Edgar Torres Tovar, and Ayad Mansoor Sakat, a civilian from Michigan who worked as an interpreter.

Trump, Hegseth and top military officer General Dan Caine were among the US officials who attended a somber ceremony marking the return of the dead to the United States on Wednesday.

The attack was the first such incident since the overthrow of longtime ruler Bashar al-Assad in December last year, and Syrian interior ministry spokesman Nouredine al-Baba said the perpetrator was a security forces member who was due to be fired for his “extremist Islamist ideas.”

Vucevic, Bulls Emerge on Top of Cavaliers



CHICAGO (Dispatches) - Nikola Vucevic collected 24 points and 15 rebounds and Matas Buzelis scored 24 points as the Chicago Bulls pulled away down the stretch for a 136-125 victory over the host Cleveland Cavaliers on Friday.

Josh Giddey scored 17 points and Coby White had 13 points, six rebounds and a season-high nine assists for the Bulls, who swept their home-and-home set with the Cavaliers. Chicago won for the third time in its last 11 games.

Darius Garland paced Cleveland with a season-high 35 points and added eight assists, while Jarrett Allen had 14 points and 12 rebounds. The Cavaliers have dropped nine of their past 14 games and are 1-5 on their home court since Nov. 30.

Cleveland guard Donovan Mitchell, who is averaging a career-best 30.7 points with a league-high 105 3-pointers, and backup Craig Porter Jr. missed the game with illnesses. Reigning NBA Defensive Player of the Year Evan Mobley (strained left calf) remains sidelined.

A Garland 3-pointer pulled the Cavaliers even at 115-all midway through the fourth quarter, but Vucevic and Zach Collins answered with consecutive baskets to put Chicago ahead for good.

Garland later missed a 3-point attempt that could have knotted the score with 3:17 to go. He later walked off the court while the Bulls were running out the clock, reaching the tunnel when the buzzer sounded. He was still in the game at the time.

Chicago netted its largest victory margin of the season Wednesday in the opener of the back-to-back series, 127-111 behind a Giddey triple-double.

Referee crew chief Tre Maddox sustained a leg injury between the first and second quarters while running to the locker room. Ray Acosta and Phenizee Ransom worked the rest of the game as a two-man crew.

A wild third quarter saw the Bulls take their largest lead at 74-60, only to have the Cavaliers answer with a 27-11 run capped by a Nae'Qwan Tomlin 3-pointer that put them up 87-85. Allen scored 10 in the period, which ended with Chicago up 101-99.

Chicago carried a 66-55 lead into halftime as Buzelis scored 14 points and Giddey had 11 points and six rebounds. White added five points and five assists for the Bulls, while Garland had 16 points and four assists.

Garland scored 11 points and Buzelis and teammate Tre Jones had eight apiece in the first quarter, which ended in a 32-all tie. Cleveland jumped in front 11-0 with rookie Tyrese Proctor sinking two 3-pointers in his initial start, but the Bulls pulled even at 13.

Meanwhile VJ Edgecombe scored seven points down the stretch, guiding the visiting Philadelphia 76ers to a 116-107 victory over the New York Knicks on Friday.

Tyrese Maxey led Philadelphia with 30 points and nine assists, while Edgecombe supplied 23 points. Andre Drummond chipped in with 14 points and 13 rebounds for the Sixers, who were outrebounded 57-36 without Joel Embiid (illness). Philadelphia won for the fifth time in seven games.

Jalen Brunson and Karl-Anthony Towns provided 22 points apiece for the Knicks. New York had won its previous six games (in addition to the NBA Cup championship game, which doesn't count toward the regular-season standings) and had been 13-1 at home this season.

Mitchell Robinson set season highs with 21 points and 16 rebounds for New York, shooting 7-for-8 from the field and 7-for-8 from the foul line. He entered the game 6-for-27 (22.2%) from the free-throw line this season.

Pandya Blitz Powers India to T20 Series Win Over South Africa

AHMEDABAD (Dispatches) - Hardik Pandya led India's batting assault with his 16-ball 50 to set up a 30-run win over South Africa and clinch the series 3-1 in the fifth T20 on Friday.

A punishing 105-run fourth partnership between Pandya, who hammered 63 off 25 balls, and Tilak Varma (73) swept India to 231-5 at the world's biggest cricket stadium in Ahmedabad.

In reply, South Africa started strongly thanks to a 35-ball 65 by Quinton de Kock, who played his 100th T20 for the national team, but the opener's departure triggered a collapse and the Proteas ended on 201-8.

The win sealed India's eighth consecutive T20 series triumph, a streak that began in December 2023.

"From the start of the series, we wanted to stick to a particular brand of cricket and we did exactly that," said India skipper Suryakumar Yadav.



"We wanted to express ourselves in all departments and the results are right there in front of everyone."

South Africa began the tour with a stunning 2-0 triumph in the Test series but the white ball contests proved disappointing as they also lost the one-day series 2-1.

Pace bowler Jasprit Bumrah returned figures of 2-17 including the key wicket of De Kock who chipped a yorker straight back to him.

Spinner Varun Chakravarthy took four wickets, bowling Donovan Ferreira and George Linde. He returned with 10 wickets in four matches to be named player of the series.

The series was part of the build-up for the T20 World Cup which starts in February in India and Sri Lanka.

Put in to bat after the fourth match was abandoned due to fog in Lucknow, Indian openers Sanju Samson and Abhishek Sharma started briskly before Pandya tore into the opposition attack.

Wawrinka to Retire in 2026 After 24-Year Pro Career



LONDON (Dispatches) - Stanislas Wawrinka will hang up his racket at the end of 2026, the three-times Grand Slam champion announced on Friday, bringing down the curtain on a 24-year professional career that saw him gatecrash tennis's elite during the sport's golden era.

Switzerland's Wawrinka, who turned professional in 2002, will turn 41 in March, capping a journey that transformed him from perennial underdog to giant-killer.

Capable of playing ferocious tennis across all surfaces during his peak, the late bloomer's greatest triumphs came when it mattered most, stunning the tennis world by defeating the sport's biggest names on the grandest stages.

Nicknamed "Stanimal", Wawrinka conquered Rafa Nadal to claim the 2014 Australian Open before he toppled Novak Djokovic twice -- at the 2015 French Open and 2016 U.S. Open -- each time beating the world number one in the final.

"Every book needs an ending. It's time to write the final chapter of my career as a professional tennis player. 2026 will be my last year on tour," Wawrinka wrote on Instagram.

"I still want to push my limits and finish this journey on the best note possible. I still have dreams in this sport. I've enjoyed every part of what tennis has given me, especially the emotions I feel playing in front of you."

Wawrinka won 16 ATP titles and had a career-high world ranking of three. He also captured Olympic doubles gold alongside Roger Federer in 2008 and helped deliver Switzerland's maiden Davis Cup title in 2014.

Man Utd Can Fight for Premier League Title in Next Few Years



LONDON (Dispatches) - Ruben Amorim believes Manchester United can win the Premier League far sooner than the 10 or 11 years that Alex Ferguson fears it could take.

The Red Devils have failed to add to their 20 English league titles since the Scot bowed out as a champion in 2013.

Ferguson recently told Press Box PR that he felt United are "now in the same situation" as Liverpool were when they went 30 years without winning the title.

The club great said it "could be 10 years, 11 years" until the Premier League trophy returns to Old Trafford, but Amorim is confident it will not take that long.

"He understands football more than me, especially English football," the current United boss told reporters on Friday.

"I think we are not (going to take that) long to win a league. And I don't know which manager is going to be here.

"But I truly believe that we can fight for the title in the next (few) years. And I think it's not going to take so many years."

United are sixth in the Premier League table ahead of Sunday's match against third-placed Aston Villa after an inconsistent season so far.

Amorim was also asked at his pre-match press conference for his reaction to comments given by Bruno Fernandes to Portuguese media, in which the club captain said United had wanted to sell him in the summer transfer window.

Fernandes said Amorim still had him in his plans, which had convinced him to stay at Old Trafford, but he said he had been hurt by the stance of the club's hierarchy.

Amorim said his Portuguese compatriot, who joined United in 2020, had "said what he's feeling".

Zabystran Stuns Odermatt to Claim Czech Men's Maiden World Cup Win

PARIS (Dispatches) - Jan Zabystran stunned pre-race favourite Marco Odermatt in the Val Gardena super-G to become the first male skier representing the Czech Republic to win an Alpine skiing World Cup race on Friday.

Starting with bib 29, the 27-year-old took full advantage of improved light conditions and a slight tail wind on the Saslong course to clock a time of one minute 24.86 seconds, beating overall World Cup leader Odermatt of Switzerland by 0.22.

Czech-born Jan Hudec won two World Cup races, in 2008 and 2012, but was then competing for Canada.

"I was hoping that some day I could make it to a World Cup podium but before that I was just hoping to take part in a World Cup race. Now I'm in the leader's chair, it's just



incredible," said Zabystran, whose previous best result was eighth place in a super-G in Kvitfjell, Norway last season.

"It was a good run, I had good feelings but yesterday I also had a good feeling and I ended up 32nd (in the downhill). When I finished I thought I would be top 10 maybe but then I heard the fans and turned around and saw the green, it's crazy."

Italian Giovanni Franzoni took third place, 0.37 off the pace.

Odermatt, now on 685 points, extended his overall World Cup lead over Norway's Henrik Kristoffersen to 383 points and snatched the lead in the super-G standings from Austrian Vincent Kriechmayr with 225 points.

Kriechmayr is on 209 points after taking ninth place.