

Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei Described the Late Grand Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Hadi Milani as a Truly Multifaceted Figure in Spiritual, Moral, Scholarly, and Socio-Political Terms, Stressing That he "Really Was the Reviver of the Mashhad Seminary"

IRAN NEWS

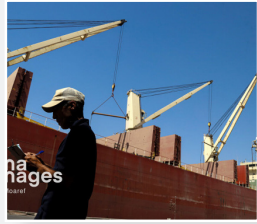
Iran's Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) Confiscated a Tanker Carrying a Large Cargo of Smuggled Fuel in the Persian Gulf Inside Iran's Territorial Waters as 16 Crew Members Aboard the Ship, All Non-Iranian Nationals, Were Detained

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Israel Targeted Radiopharmaceutical Facility in First Missile Strike on Isfahan



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Israel's first missile strike on the city of Isfahan during the 12-day war targeted the city's fuel plate production facility for manufacturing radiopharmaceuticals, says Iran's nuclear chief.

"The first site in Isfahan that the Zionist regime targeted with missile strikes was the plant [producing] fuel for the manufacture of radiopharmaceuticals, which means the very things that were essential for the people and the country's progress were attacked at the very first stage," Mohammad Eslami, head of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, said on Thursday.

He added that the 12 days of the Israeli-US war in mid-June and the ensuing events showed that Iran's nuclear industry is merely a pretext as they oppose the Islamic Republic's advancement.

He emphasized that the statements of officials from the three European countries - Britain, France and Germany - during the Tuesday session of the UN Security Council clearly showed that the true aim is to halt Iran's progress.

At a UNSC meeting on Tuesday, the European parties to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal - the UK, France, and Germany - insisted that Resolution 2231, which endorsed the deal, remains in force although its legal lifespan has already expired.

Nuclear Issue Was Just an Excuse



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - A senior Iranian diplomat says the enemy attacks that struck civilians and residential areas during the illegal and unprovoked Israeli-American war on the Islamic Republic in June, demonstrated that the nuclear issue was merely a pretext for targeting the country.

Deputy Foreign Minister for Legal and International Affairs, Kazem Gharibabadi made the remarks on Thursday, saying enmity towards Iran did not stem from its nuclear program, but from the Islamic nature of its ruling establishment, the country's independence, and its progress.

He stressed that hostility towards the Islamic Republic was rooted in opposition to these fundamentals rather than any technical or diplomatic dispute over the nuclear file.

Gharibabadi noted that the indirect negotiations with the new American administration that preceded the war, were being conducted with complete mistrust of Washington and alongside full preparedness to confront any potential military action.

He noted that, given the state of wariness, diplomacy and defensive preparedness proceeded in parallel and in coordination throughout the negotiation period.

Reiterating absence of any link between the war and the nuclear issue, the official said Iran's enemies had been preparing for the aggression for many years.

He reminded that in addition to targeting innocent civilians and residential areas, the war took aim at parts of Iran's infrastructure.

Iran's 2026 Budget Focuses on Real Revenues, Streamlined Spending

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Vice President and Head of the Planning and Budget Organization (PBO), Seyed Hamid Pourmohammadi, stated that the 2026 national budget does not rely on "illusory revenues" and is designed to place the main burden of economic pressures on the government rather than households. The proposed budget shows only a 2 percent overall increase, reflecting the government's attempt to support vulnerable groups while avoiding inflationary pressures.

Pourmohammadi explained that the budget was drafted amid multiple challenges, including global oil market fluctuations, recent droughts, and an ongoing economic struggle with foreign entities. Despite these difficulties, the government has maintained regular payments and presented the budget to parliament on time.

The 2026 budget introduces significant structural changes. It follows the new "Attachment 3" law and implements the planned removal of four zeros from the national currency, affecting how tables and financial statements are presented. Pourmohammadi emphasized that these reforms aim to improve clarity, efficiency, and alignment with legal requirements.

Pourmohammadi stressed that the government intentionally absorbed the main economic pressures, limiting the impact on citizens. While salaries for civil servants and retirees will increase by 20 percent, this rise is partially mitigated through expanded tax exemptions—from 24 million tomans in 2025 to 40 million tomans in 2026—ensuring lower-income employees and teachers benefit fully from tax relief.

The PBO aims to protect households from inflationary effects while supporting essential public services and social programs, particularly in education, healthcare, and infrastructure development.

A key reform is eliminating intermediaries in budget payments. Previously, government funds often passed through multiple layers before reaching the final service providers, reducing efficiency. The new approach ensures that payments go directly to the "end beneficiary"—such as a public servant, teacher, or service provider—thereby increasing transparency and accountability. Pourmohammadi explained that this method applies to cultural projects, education, healthcare,

Iran's Enemies Seeking to Make Up for Military Losses With Economic Warfare

TEHRAN (PressTV) - Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi says Iran's enemies have shifted their pressure tactics towards economic warfare after failing to achieve their objectives through military means, targeting the livelihoods of ordinary Iranians.

Speaking at a ceremony in the central Iranian city of Isfahan on Thursday, the top diplomat said the adversaries turned to sanctions and economic pressure once they realized the Iranian people were standing firm.

"In my view, once the enemies realized that the Iranian people are standing firm, they have now targeted the people's livelihoods," Araqchi said. "They want to obtain through economic warfare and sanctions what they failed to achieve through military war."

He cited the early days of the unprovoked and illegal Israeli-American war on the Islamic Republic in June, noting that, as the Iranian people stood steadfast, messages were sent at the very outset urging negotiations in order to bring the war to an end.

"In the early days of the 12-day war, they were sending messages saying, 'Let's negotiate so we can end the war,'" the official stated.

Araqchi said the course of the aggression led to a change in tone by the United States, including on social media.

"During the 12-day war, the US president's posts on X (former Twitter) shifted from demanding unconditional surrender to calling for a ceasefire," he said.



The foreign minister added that Iran, guided by the country's leadership, chose the path of resistance throughout the aggression.

"With the wisdom of Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, we chose resistance," Araqchi said. "Matters reached a point where, on the twelfth day, the Americans sent a message saying that the Zionist regime would stop operations from four o'clock in the morning, and asked that we stop [retaliating] too."

Elsewhere in his remarks, Araqchi described resistance as the central pillar of Iran's Islamic Revolution.

"The most important line of thought featured in the Islamic Revolution is the discourse of resistance," he said, adding that this approach was learned from the teachings of the late founder of Ayatollah Khamenei.

Araqchi identified resistance as the key to Iran's successes in the face of pressures and crises. "The secret of the Revolution's victory and the secret of the Iranian people's victories has always been, and remains, resistance," he noted. "In the harshest conditions and crises, the nation that prevails is the one that resists and does not abandon its principles and dignity."

The spirit of resistance has long defined the Iranian people and continues to do so today, Araqchi remarked.

Freedom Movement, Aligned with America

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

The Freedom Movement is one of Iran's old political parties, founded in 1961, and it has been present during various periods of Iran's contemporary history. In evaluating the positions of this party and its divergence from the official viewpoints of the Islamic Republic, a number of critical stances are (raised).

The official view of the Islamic Republic toward the performance and positions of this party indicates that their fundamental deviations from the system's ideological outlook are completely Western-oriented, and that their mode of struggle has been parliamentary.

In this regard, sources close to principlist currents and supporters of the system have raised serious criticisms against the Freedom Movement and consider it a current deviating from the main line of the Revolution. From the perspective of these sources, the main deviations of this party include the following:

First, the intellectual foundations of the Freedom Movement are not compatible with Pure Muhammadan Islam and the official interpretation of Imam Khomeini (may he rest in peace) and the Islamic Republic system, and it adopts a completely extreme nationalist approach in opposition to Islamism.

Second, this party has been accused of lack of commitment to Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist), attempts to establish relations with the United States in the early days of the Revolution, obstruction of the revolutionary path, and misleading the youth.

The main reference for this viewpoint is Imam Khomeini's letter in 1987, in which he explicitly speaks of the "deviations of the Freedom Movement" and even considers its harm greater than that of other groups.

Statements have also been (quoted) from the Supreme Leader emphasizing the betrayal and attachment of some elements of the Provisional Government to America.

On the other hand, the Freedom Movement presents itself as a "national-religious" party and a supporter of Islamic democracy.

In the official charter of this party, emphasis is placed on being Muslim, being Iranian, supporting constitutionalism, and remaining loyal to Mossadegh's legacy.

Its bylaws also explicitly stress defending the foundations of the Revolution and the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran and striving to realize the principal ideals of the Revolution.

This party played a historical role in the struggle against the Pahlavi regime as well as in forming the Provisional Government after the Revolution, and it counts founders such as Mehdi Bazargan and Ayatollah Seyyed Mahmoud Taleghani among its record.

However, at present this party is not recognized by the Islamic Republic, and its activities in the country have been declared illegal.

The main (axis) of tension between the Freedom Movement and the official reading of the Islamic Republic system lies here: one side emphasizes nationalism and democracy with an ostensibly religious flavor, while the other insists on Pure Islam, Velayat-e Faqih, and anti-arrogance (anti-imperialism) as the foundations of the Revolution. Thus, from the perspective of official institutions, the conflict has largely taken shape based on this theoretical disagreement as well as the performance of the Provisional Government led by Engineer Mehdi Bazargan—especially regarding the issue of bypassing Imam Khomeini (may he rest in peace) and establishing relations with the United States in the meeting with Brzezinski in Algiers.

Attention to the fact that their way of thinking led to the separation of the Mojahedin-e Khalq, with their pendulum-like stance, raises doubts about the consistency between words and actions.

If we consider the criterion for struggle against the monarchical regime to be both anti-despotism and anti-imperialism, then this party has certainly lacked an anti-colonial outlook.

And without concern, and with clarity, the angle of their divergence is understandable and even measurable.

Iran to Host Trilateral Naval Exercise in Oceanic Region



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Commander of the Iranian Army Navy announced that a trilateral naval exercise will be held in an oceanic region, hosted by Iran, with broader international participation planned in the near future.

Rear Admiral Shahram Irani told reporters on the sidelines of the Navy Research Conference in Nowshahr that the Iranian Navy has played an active role in 12 different international events so far in the year 1404 (Iranian calendar). These events have included scientific, professional, and sporting activities, as well as participation in regional and extra-regional military exercises.

IRAN NEWS



Armenia Calls for Strategic Partnership Agreement With Iran

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The prime minister of Armenia has announced his country's willingness to sign a strategic partnership agreement with Iran, emphasizing the strong relations between the two neighboring nations.

"Our relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran are at a very high level, and we are willing to sign a strategic partnership document with Tehran as well," Nikol Pashinyan told reporters on Thursday, responding to a question from Armenpress about expected developments in 2026 and the possibility of such an agreement.

Islamic Nations Call for Stronger Cooperation in Livestock Development



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Deputy Director General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in the field of food has emphasized the need to integrate scientific approaches with practical implementation in agriculture and livestock farming, calling for the expansion of organized cooperation among Islamic countries to share expertise in the livestock sector.

According to a report published by IRNA citing the Ministry of Agriculture Jihad, Khosrow Nazeri made the remarks at a specialized roundtable titled "Climate-Resilient Smart Livestock Farming," hosted by the Agricultural Research, Education and Extension Organization (AREEO), also known as TAT.

Nazeri stressed that progress in livestock farming is not limited to genetic improvement alone. "The issue is not just genetic reform," he said, adding that effective coordination among researchers, policymakers, and livestock producers is an undeniable necessity. He underlined that the achievements and knowledge of each country should be made available to other members of the Islamic world to ensure collective advancement.

Referring to the wide yet fragmented distribution of valuable expertise among OIC member states, Nazeri noted that some countries possess strong capabilities in specific areas of livestock production and animal health, but these strengths remain scattered. "Through balance and organized cooperation, we must place these capabilities at one another's disposal and benefit from them jointly," he said.

He also highlighted Iran's strategic role in the livestock and veterinary industries, stating that Tehran, as Iran's capital, holds a significant and central position in the region's livestock and veterinary sectors and benefits from strong infrastructure in these fields. According to Nazeri, this position represents a valuable asset not only for Iran but for all Islamic countries sharing this geographical and economic space.

Nazeri further referred to the mission of the TAT organization, emphasizing the importance of knowledge-sharing to strengthen food security across the Islamic world. He said that with its scientific and research capacities, TAT can serve as an ideal platform for defining and implementing joint projects among Islamic countries.

Production Growth Key to Overcoming Economic Challenges



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade has emphasized that increasing production is the only viable way to overcome economic constraints and achieve sustainable industrial development in the country.

Seyed Mohammad Atabak, speaking as the chair of the 189th meeting of the National Headquarters for Facilitating Production and Removing Obstacles, said that the emphases of the Leader of the Islamic Revolution and the special directive of the President in support of production represent a shared priority between the state and the people. He described production growth as the sole route leading to economic and industrial development.

The meeting, hosted by the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade and attended by all members of the headquarters, focused on reviewing challenges facing producers and revising the internal regulations of the facilitation body. Atabak recalled the consistent support of the Leader and the President for domestic production, noting that all pillars of governance agree that there is a direct relationship between production flows and economic dynamism. "To overcome economic challenges, obstacles in the path of producers must be removed," he said.

Referring to the first agenda item of the meeting, which involved amendments to the internal bylaws of the headquarters, the minister identified restrictions caused by gas and electricity outages as among the most serious challenges confronting producers. He stressed that the Ministry of Industry, Mine and Trade is making every effort, in coordination with the government, parliament, and the judiciary, to reduce production limitations and take advantage of every opportunity to ease pressures on manufacturers.

Iran's Exports to Eurasia Rise 16% in First Seven Months of the Year



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Acting Head of the Secretariat of the Iran-Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) Free Trade Agreement has announced a 16 percent increase in Iran's exports to the Eurasian region during the first seven months of the current Iranian year, reaching a total value of \$1.261 billion.

According to a report from the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran, Elham Haji-Karimi said the growth highlights the positive impact of the free trade agreement on sustaining Iran's export performance. She added that the fourth Eurasia International Exhibition will be held in Tehran with the participation of senior officials and trade delegations from member and influential countries in the region.

Haji-Karimi noted that the highest export growth was recorded with Belarus (50 percent) and Armenia (35 percent). She emphasized that Iran's exports to other global markets did not grow during the same period, underscoring the agreement's effectiveness in maintaining and expanding trade with Eurasian partners.

Referring to import statistics, she explained that data are categorized based on both "trading partner country" and "country of origin." Based on trading partners, Iran's imports declined by about 19 percent, amounting to \$885 million. However, imports from the Eurasian region based on country of origin rose by 27 percent, largely consisting of essential goods such as sunflower oil, wheat, and animal feed corn, which continued to be supplied even during the 12-day conflict period.

Comparing the composition of exports before and after the implementation of the provisional and permanent agreements, Haji-Karimi said that prior to the provisional agreement in 2019, Iran's top ten exports to Eurasia were entirely agricultural products. She added that industrial goods such as containers, white

cement, iron bars, oil, bitumen, and synthetic fibers have now been added to the list of major export items.

She stressed that Iran has significant trade potential in the Eurasian market, particularly in sectors such as automobiles and spare parts, textiles and apparel, pharmaceuticals and medical equipment, and food industries, noting that Eurasian countries import large volumes of these products globally and Iran is well positioned to supply them.

Haji-Karimi also referred to the formation of specialized working groups prepared under the agreement, stating that expert meetings in customs, standards, rules of origin, and transportation were held via videoconference in September and October. Their findings were later presented to the Joint Working Group, the main body overseeing the agreement.

She added that during the Joint Working Group meeting on September 24, 2025, attended by Iran's Minister of Industry, Mine and Trade and the Eurasian trade minister, implementation challenges were reviewed and a three-year economic and trade cooperation roadmap was signed. The roadmap outlines future actions under the agreement and defines the responsibilities of executive bodies on both sides.

Providing details about the upcoming Eurasia Exhibition, Haji-Karimi said trade delegations from Asian and regional countries will attend, alongside a high-level meeting of ministers and senior officials to discuss broader issues such as the performance of the free trade agreement since its entry into force on May 15, future cooperation prospects, joint investment projects, and emerging areas including e-commerce.

The Fourth Eurasia International Exhibition will be held in Tehran from February 1 to 4, offering Iranian and Eurasian businesses an opportunity to explore market capacities and further deepen trade and investment cooperation.

Iran-Kuwait Economic Cooperation Enters a New Phase

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The President of the Iran-Kuwait Joint Chamber of Commerce has described the reactivation of the Iran-Kuwait Joint Commission after a 12-year hiatus as the most significant recent development in economic relations between the two countries, signaling the start of a new phase of bilateral cooperation.

Ebrahim Gholamzadeh Zanganeh, President of the Iran-Kuwait Joint Chamber of Commerce, said that the 13th session of the Joint Commission of Commerce between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the State of Kuwait was held recently in Kuwait, hosted by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Commerce and Industry. He noted that convening the commission after such a long interruption reflects a clear and firm determination by both governments to strengthen the path of economic cooperation, sending a reliable and positive signal to the private sector.

Gholamzadeh Zanganeh described the meeting as a turning point in Iran-Kuwait economic relations, adding that it represents a major step toward reactivating formal mechanisms of cooperation and lays the groundwork for restructuring and expanding bilateral economic ties.

He explained that during the session, the final document of the Joint Commission was signed by the Kuwaiti Deputy Minister of Commerce and Industry and the Head of the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran. The signing of this document in the presence of senior officials from customs and port authorities of both countries demonstrates their shared intention to move from dialogue to the operational phase of cooperation.

According to Gholamzadeh Zanganeh, food security was the central focus of the commission's discussions. He emphasized that food security is a strategic priority for Kuwait and that Iran's strong capabilities in agricultural production, processing, and food exports position this sector as a potential cornerstone of bilateral economic cooperation. He added that the Kuwaiti side's emphasis on health standards, quality, and supply chain sustainability highlights the practical and implementation-oriented nature of these talks.



Beyond food security, Gholamzadeh Zanganeh noted that negotiations also addressed the development of new frameworks for cooperation. Comprehensive discussions were held on land, sea, and air transportation, investment cooperation, trade exchanges, industrial development, specialized training, and the exchange of professional expertise. He stressed that these areas have the potential to evolve into concrete joint programs and real projects.

He also highlighted the importance of side meetings between the Iranian delegation and heads of Kuwait's customs, ports, and chamber of commerce, describing them as essential for facilitating trade processes. "Any expansion of trade depends on customs and port coordination," he said, adding that such meetings help strengthen the operational foundations of private-sector cooperation.

The President of the Iran-Kuwait Joint Chamber identified the most important achievement of the session as the drafting of an "executive roadmap." He explained that the commission went beyond general agreements by designing a practical roadmap based on the real needs of bilateral trade. The Kuwaiti side's expressed commitment to implementing these agreements, he said, marks the beginning of a new era of structured and sustained cooperation.

Gholamzadeh Zanganeh assessed the outlook for cooperation with Kuwait as promising, urging Iranian economic actors to seize available opportunities. He noted that Kuwait's market has a strong demand for Iran's capacities in areas such as food security, technical and engineering services, minerals, construction materials, and agricultural products.

He concluded by emphasizing that the Iran-Kuwait Joint Chamber aims to increase bilateral trade to \$1 billion and to establish sustainable financial and transportation mechanisms. With the Joint Commission reactivated after 12 years, he said, Iran-Kuwait economic cooperation has entered a new stage, and the Joint Chamber will pursue this process with full commitment.

Iran-Japan Ties Highlighted Through Cultural and Economic Cooperation



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The President of the Iran-Japan Joint Chamber of Commerce has emphasized that the development of cultural relations alongside the expansion of economic exchanges can play a significant and constructive role in reducing tensions and strengthening cooperation among countries.

Speaking at a cordial meeting with the Japanese Ambassador to Tehran held on the occasion of commemorating the ancient Persian tradition of Yalda Night, Dr. Hossein Salahvarzi, President of the Iran-Japan Joint Chamber of Commerce, highlighted the importance of cultural diplomacy in today's complex global environment. The event brought together diplomatic, economic, and cultural figures from both countries to mark the centuries-old celebration symbolizing light, hope, and renewal.

During the meeting, Dr. Salahvarzi described Tsukada Tamaki, Japan's Ambassador to Iran, as a distinguished academic and cultural figure. He noted that in the current international climate—characterized by growing uncertainties and political tensions—strengthening cultural ties and broadening economic interactions can serve as effective tools for easing misunderstandings and fostering mutual trust among nations.

Referring to the peace-oriented approach traditionally adopted by Japanese policymakers and their interest in friendship and constructive engagement between nations, Salahvarzi stressed that Iran should make the most of the opportunities created by this outlook in bilateral relations. He underlined that closer cooperation between the chambers of commerce of the two countries, along with the development of institutional and economic linkages, could significantly contribute to expanding relations across various dimensions.

ICCIMA Chamber Seen as a Trusted and Influential Economic Hub



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - In a cordial meeting with deputies, managers, and staff of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA), the President of the Iran Chamber emphasized that the institution is now recognized as a trusted and influential economic center capable of contributing effectively to solving national issues.

Speaking at the gathering, Samad Hassanzadeh, President of the Iran Chamber, described the Chamber's workforce as one family, each member bringing valuable experience. He stated that today the Iran Chamber is regarded as a major economic institution trusted by government officials and relied upon for addressing key challenges. He noted that this standing is the result of the dedication and efforts of the Chamber's professional staff over the years.

Hassanzadeh added that in many cases, national authorities seek the Iran Chamber's views when making decisions and formulating economic plans, calling this a significant achievement under difficult economic conditions. "Being able to help the nation in such circumstances is a valuable accomplishment," he said.

He welcomed the appointment of Abolfazl Roghani as Secretary General of the Iran Chamber, highlighting his academic background and experience in production and industry as a positive development that can advance the Chamber's objectives. Hassanzadeh also expressed appreciation for the efforts of Dr. Shahvisi, noting the constructive steps taken during his tenure. He concluded by urging continuous efforts to enhance the Chamber's credibility and standing, and to contribute to improving the country's economic, social, and cultural conditions.

Turkiye Detains 115 Suspected Islamic State Members

ISTANBUL (Dispatches) - Some 115 alleged members of the Islamic State group suspected of planning attacks during the end-of-year holidays have been arrested in Turkiye, Istanbul's prosecutor general said. His office said he had ordered the arrest of 137 people, of whom 115 so far have been detained, "following intelligence indicating that the IS terrorist organisation was planning attacks during Christmas and New Year celebrations". Turkiye shares a 900-kilometre border with Syria, where jihadist groups are still active. Washington recently blamed a lone IS gunman for an attack in Palmyra, Syria, on December 13 in which two US soldiers and an American civilian died.



Trump-Backed Asfura Wins Honduras Presidency After Disputed Election



TEGUCIGALPA (Dispatches) - Nasry Asfura, the conservative candidate for Honduran president backed by U.S. President Donald Trump, was declared the winner on Wednesday more than three weeks after the November 30 election, which was beset by delays, technical problems and allegations of fraud. The Honduras electoral authority, known as the CNE, said Asfura won 40.3% of the vote, edging out center-right Liberal Party candidate Salvador Nasralla who garnered 39.5%. The candidate of the ruling LIBRE party, Rixi Moncada, came in a distant third. Asfura ran on a broad pro-business platform saying private investment was necessary to move the country forward, while his political agenda focused on jobs, education and security. He has also signaled he may swap Honduras' allegiance to Taiwan, and away from Beijing. The results were so close and the ballot processing system so chaotic that around 15% of the tally sheets, comprising hundreds of thousands of ballots, had to be counted by hand to determine the winner. In the weeks following the vote, LIBRE repeatedly called for protests against what they denounced as an "electoral coup". The protests interrupted the manual count, blocking officials from accessing the building where tally sheets were being stored. The results were approved by two electoral council members and one deputy, as disputes continued over the razor-thin vote. The third council member, Marlon Ochoa, was not present in the video declaring the winner. "Honduras: I am ready to govern. I will not let you down," Asfura said in a post on X following the confirmation of the results.

Zelensky Holds Talks With U.S. Envoys



KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelensky said Thursday he held "very good" talks with US President Donald Trump's envoys on ending the war, as Russia also assured negotiations with Washington were making progress. "We discussed certain substantive details of the ongoing work," he said in a post on social media. "There are good ideas that can work toward a shared outcome and the lasting peace," he added. Zelensky thanked the two envoys for their "constructive approach, the intensive work, and the kind words". "We are truly working 24/7 to bring closer the end of this brutal Russian war against Ukraine and to ensure that all documents and steps are realistic, effective, and reliable," he added. They had also agreed during the conversation that Ukrainian negotiator Rustem Umerov would speak with the two envoys again Thursday. Zelensky's post came a day after having said that Ukraine had won some limited concessions in the latest version of a US-led draft plan to end the Russian invasion.

U.S. Launches Air Strikes Against Islamic State Militants in Nigeria



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Donald Trump said Thursday that the U.S. had launched "precision hits on terrorist targets in Nigeria by air strikes". The claim came in a Christmas night social media post that offered few details, though US Africa Command later confirmed the strikes were conducted at the request of Nigerian authorities that said it killed multiple Islamic State militants. The U.S. carried out a strike against Islamic State militants in northwest Nigeria at the request of Nigeria's government, U.S. President Trump and the U.S. military said on Thursday, claiming the group had been targeting Christians in the region. "Tonight, at my direction as Commander in Chief, the United States launched a powerful and deadly strike against ISIS Terrorist Scum in Northwest Nigeria, who have been targeting and viciously killing, primarily, innocent Christians, at levels not seen for many years, and even Centuries!" Trump said in a post on Truth Social. The U.S. military's Africa Command said the strike was carried out in Sokoto state at the request of the Nigerian authorities and killed multiple IS militants. Nigerian Foreign Minister Yusuf Maitama Tuggar told the BBC the strike was a "joint operation" targeting "terrorists", and it "has nothing to do with a particular religion". Without naming the IS specifically, Tuggar said the operation had been planned "for quite some time" and had used intelligence information provided by the Nigerian side. He did not rule out further strikes, adding that this depended on "decisions to be taken by the leadership of the two countries". The strike comes after Trump in late October began warning that Christianity faces an "existential threat" in Nigeria and threatened to militarily intervene in the West African country over what he says is its failure to stop violence targeting Christian communities. Nigeria's foreign ministry said the strikes were carried out as part of ongoing security cooperation with the United States, involving intelligence sharing and strategic coordination to target militant groups.

"This has led to precision hits on terrorist targets in Nigeria by air strikes in the North West," the ministry said in a post on X. A video posted by the Pentagon showed at least one projectile launched from a warship. A US defense official said the strike targeted multiple militants at known IS camps. U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on X thanked the Nigerian government for its support and cooperation and added: "More to come..." Nigeria's government has said armed groups target both Muslims and Christians, and US claims that Christians face persecution do not represent the complex security situation and ignore efforts to safeguard religious freedom. But it has agreed to work with the US to bolster its forces against militant groups. The country's population is split between Muslims living primarily in the north and Christians in the south. Police said earlier on Thursday a suspected suicide bomber killed at least five people and injured 35 others in Nigeria's northeast, another region troubled by Islamist insurgents. In a Christmas message posted on X earlier, Nigerian President Bola Ahmed Tinubu called for peace in his country, "especially between individuals of differing religious beliefs." He also said: "I stand committed to doing everything within my power to enshrine religious freedom in Nigeria and to protect Christians, Muslims, and all Nigerians from violence." Trump issued his statement on the strike on Christmas Day while he was at his Palm Beach, Florida, Mar-a-Lago Club, where he has been spending the holiday. He had no public events during the day and was last seen by the reporters traveling with him on Wednesday night. The U.S. military last week launched separate large-scale strikes against dozens of IS targets in Syria, after Trump vowed to hit back in the wake of a suspected IS attack on U.S. personnel in the country.

North Korea's Leader Says Missile Production of Paramount Importance

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korean leader Kim Jong Un ordered the "expansion" and modernization of the country's missile production next year and the construction of more factories to meet growing demand, state media said today. In a visit to munitions factories accompanied by top officials, the state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) said Kim had ordered the factories to meet "prospective requirements in the operation of the state missile and artillery forces". Kim said they would need "to further expand the overall production capacity" in order to keep pace with demand from Pyongyang's armed forces and ordered the building of new munitions plants, KCNA reported. "The missile and shell production sector is of paramount importance in bolstering up the war deterrent," the North Korean leader said. Pyongyang has significantly increased missile testing in



recent years. Analysts say this is aimed at improving precision strike capabilities, challenging the United States as well as South Korea, and testing weapons before potentially exporting them to Russia. Kim's visit was reported a day after state media said he had toured a nuclear submarine factory, where he vowed to counter the "threat" of South Korea producing its own such vessels. He also learned about research into "new underwater secret weapons", KCNA said. Kim was also reported to have overseen the test launch of new-type high-altitude long-range anti-air missiles over the Sea of Japan. North Korea's ruling Korean Workers Party is expected to hold its first congress in half a decade in early 2026, where policymakers will hash out economic and military development plans for the next five years.

Japan Gov't Approves Record 122 Trillion Yen Budget

TOKYO (Dispatches) - The Japanese government on Friday approved a record budget for the upcoming fiscal year, to pay for everything from bigger defence spending to ballooning social security costs as inflation persists. The 122.3-trillion-yen (\$782 billion) budget for the fiscal year from April 2026 will include some nine trillion yen for defence spending, as Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi aims to accelerate Tokyo's sweeping upgrade of its military in the face of worsening relations with China. The defence ministry said in a briefing document that "Japan faces the most severe and complex security environment since the end of the war," stressing the need to "fundamentally strengthen" its defence capabilities. At the core of its request is 100 billion yen for the so-called SHIELD coastal defence system, which would marshal drones to block any invasion by foreign troops. Japan is hoping that SHIELD -- Synchronised, Hybrid, Integrated and Enhanced Littoral Defence -- will be completed by March 2028, with no details yet on which part of Japan's coastline it will be linked to. The 122-trillion-yen figure compares with the 115 trillion yen sought for the current fiscal year to March, which was also a record. The expanding budget comes as the market worries about Takaichi's big spending policies adding to Japan's public debts. Japan already has the biggest ratio of debt to gross domestic product (GDP) among major economies, projected to reach 232.7 percent this year,



according to the International Monetary Fund. Earlier this month parliament approved a massive extra budget, to pay for a 21.3-trillion-yen stimulus announced a month earlier. The market has reacted by driving down the value of the yen while the benchmark yield rose for Japanese government bonds. Some observers have drawn comparisons to the UK's 2022 bond market turmoil under then-premier Liz Truss. Takaichi has advocated big government spending to spur economic growth. "What Japan needs right now is not the undermining of our strength as a nation through excessive austerity fiscal policies, but rather the bolstering of our national strength through proactive fiscal policies," she told a press conference last week. In an interview Tuesday with the influential Nikkei business daily, Takaichi stressed her commitment to Tokyo's fiscal health, rejecting any "irresponsible bond issuance or tax cuts." The current size of the budget is unlikely to shock the bond market, Takahide Kiuchi, executive economist at Nomura Research Institute, wrote in a note ahead of Friday. But an increase to around 125 trillion yen or more, he said, would cause the "turmoil in the bond market, already in crisis mode, to deepen further".



Packers Clinch NFL Playoff Spot as Lions Lose to Vikings

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The Green Bay Packers advanced to the NFL playoffs without stepping onto the field, clinching a post-season berth when the Detroit Lions lost 23-10 at Minnesota. Green Bay accepted the Christmas gift of a third consecutive playoff appearance and sixth in seven years. Minnesota's defenders forced six turnovers by Detroit that led to 16 points as the Lions fell to 8-8 and became unable to catch the Packers (9-5-1) for the last available NFC wildcard. "Can't turn the ball over six times and expect to win," Lions coach Dan Campbell said. "That's what got us. "The effort is there. We're just a little off and it's costing us." Lions defender Aidan Hutchinson called missing the playoffs "frustrating" and "disappointing". A one-yard touchdown run by Aaron Jones gave Minnesota the lead but Jared Goff's four-yard touchdown pass to Isaac TeSlaa made it 7-7 at half-time. Minnesota's Will Reichard kicked field goals from 52 and 56 yards and Detroit's Jake Bates responded with a 48-yard kick to make it 13-10. Jordan Addison answered with a 65-yard touchdown run to put the Vikings 20-10 ahead with 3:43 to play and Reichard added a final field goal. Other NFC clubs that have secured playoff berths are reigning champion Philadelphia, Seattle, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles Rams. AFC teams that have clinched post-season berths are Denver, New England, Denver, Buffalo, Jacksonville and Los Angeles Chargers. The Denver Broncos improved to an NFL-best 13-3 with a 20-13 victory at Kansas City, seizing a lead in the fight for a first-round AFC playoff bye before rivals play on Sunday.

The Chiefs, whose star quarterback Patrick Mahomes is out for the season with a knee injury, took a 7-6 half-time lead on Chris Oladokun's five-yard touchdown toss to Brashard Smith. Harrison Butker added a 53-yard field goal for the Chiefs in the third quarter. Bo Nix ran nine yards for a Denver touchdown but Butker's 47-yard field goal tied the game at 13-13. Nix flipped a one-yard touchdown toss to R.J. Harvey with 1:45 remaining to give Denver the final victory margin. The Broncos defensive unit stopped Kansas City at the Denver 26-yard line on downs to secure the triumph. It was Denver's 11th victory of the season by one score or less and snapped a nine-game losing streak at Kansas City. Singer Taylor Swift attended to watch her fiancée, Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce, who played what could be his final home game for Kansas City. In an earlier game between teams out of playoff contention, Dak Prescott threw for 307 yards and two touchdowns to spark Dallas in a 30-23 victory at Washington. The Cowboys' quarterback completed 19-of-37 passes without an interception while Malik Davis ran 20 times for 103 yards for Dallas (7-8-1). "I'm blessed doing what I love on such a great holiday," Prescott said. "We just want to finish off this season strong. It's about rolling over the good things and taking the momentum." Jacory Croskey-Merritt carried 11 times for 105 yards and two touchdowns for the Commanders (4-12).

Taylor Fritz, Coco Gauff Lead U.S.'s Defense of United Cup Title



SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Third-ranked Coco Gauff and sixth-ranked Taylor Fritz will team up again as the United States defends its championship at the United Cup next week in Australia. The only combined ATP and WTA team event will kick off the 2026 tennis season, beginning on Jan. 2 in Perth and Sydney. The tournament will give several of the world's top players preparation matches ahead of the first major of the year, the Australian Open, which gets underway on Jan. 18 in Melbourne. Eighteen teams, comprised of one ATP and one WTA player, will compete for the title. The teams are grouped in six three-team pools that will compete in round-robin play. The top team from each group along with the best runner-up will advance to the quarterfinals. The semifinals and finals will take place in Sydney on Jan. 10 and 11. All competition will take place on hard courts. The matches will consist of an ATP match, a WTA match and a mixed-doubles match. The U.S. squad, led by Gauff and Fritz, defeated Poland 2-0 in 2025 final. The United States also won the inaugural 2023 event, sweeping Italy 4-0 in a title match using a different format. Germany beat Poland 2-1 for the 2024 championship. Poland will be a strong competitor with No. 2 Iga Swiatek and No. 73 Hubert Hurkacz (a former top-10 player) featuring.

Spurs Smother Thunder for Third Time in 13 Days

NEW YORK (Dispatches) - De'Aaron Fox scored a game-high 29 points as the visiting San Antonio Spurs knocked off the Oklahoma City Thunder 117-102 to hand the Thunder their first back-to-back losses this season. The Spurs have won eight consecutive games -- which does not include the NBA Cup final loss to the New York Knicks on Dec. 16 -- to extend their longest winning streak since 2018-19. Three of the Thunder's five defeats this season, including both of their past two, have come against San Antonio. Spurs star Victor Wembanyama, who came off the bench for the sixth consecutive game since missing nearly a month due to a calf injury, finished with 19 points and 11 rebounds in nearly 26 minutes. Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led Oklahoma City with 22 points, but he shot just 7-for-19 from the field, including 1-for-6 from beyond the 3-point arc. Isaiah Hartenstein paired 13 points with 12 rebounds while no other Thunder player scored more than 12. Jalen Brunson hit the go-ahead 3-pointer with 1:05 left for host New York Knicks, which overcame a 17-point fourth-quarter deficit to beat Cleveland Cavaliers 126-124. Brunson scored 13 of his 34 points over the final 7:15 for the Knicks, who mounted their biggest comeback win of the season.



Reserves Jordan Clarkson (25 points) and Tyler Kolek (16 points, nine assists) had big games while Karl-Anthony Towns (11 points, 14 rebounds) posted a double-double. Donovan Mitchell scored 34 points for the Cavaliers, who blew a pair of double-digit leads and took their first loss this season when leading after three quarters. Darius Garland recorded 20 points and 10 assists. Stephen Curry lost a personal scoring duel with Cooper Flagg

in their first head-to-head matchup, but he teamed with Gary Payton II to stall a late rally as Golden State Warriors held off Dallas Mavericks 126-116 in San Francisco. Curry led the Warriors with 23 points in Golden State's 13th consecutive appearance on Christmas Day. After the Mavericks closed within 110-104 with 4:28 to play, Payton converted a Draymond Green pass into his momentum-swinging dunk and Curry bombed in a 26-footer on Golden State's next possession to reopen a double-digit lead with 3:45 left. Flagg went for a game-high 27 points and Brandon Williams added 26 for the Mavericks, who lost Anthony Davis for the night after he experienced right groin spasms in the fourth minute of the second quarter. Davis finished with three points, three rebounds and two blocks in 11 minutes. Amen Thompson scored a game-high 26 points and Kevin Durant added 25 as visiting Houston Rockets never trailed Los Angeles Lakers 119-96 to cap a 2-4 road trip on a good note. Jabari Smith Jr. notched 16 points while Alperen Sengun contributed 14 points and 12 rebounds as the Rockets transformed a 10-point halftime lead into an 81-58 advantage on Smith's tip-in with 5:52 left in the third quarter.

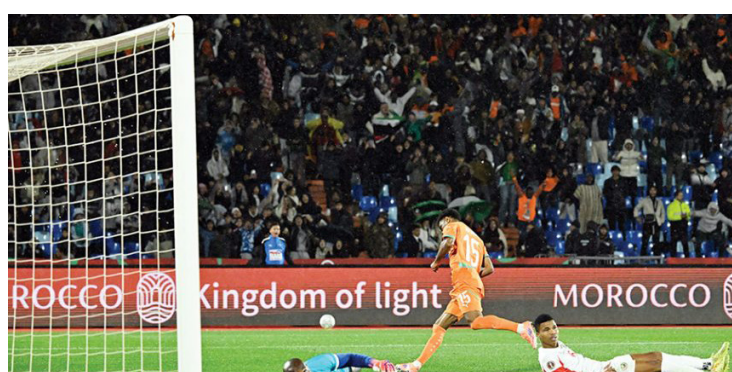
Twenty Wickets Fall on Day one as Australia Gain Edge in 4th Ashes Test



MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - An astounding 20 wickets fell on a frantic day one of the fourth Ashes Test with Australia all out for 152 before storming back to dismiss England for 110 and leave the clash on a knife-edge. England skipper Ben Stokes won a key toss on a green track and his quicks feasted after sending in the hosts under overcast skies with 94,199 fans at the Melbourne Cricket Ground watching. It was the biggest cricket crowd ever at the cavernous arena, exceeding the 93,013 who watched the 2015 World Cup final, and they witnessed the home side collapse with Josh Tongue grabbing 5-45. But England fared even worse, slumping to 16-4 and never recovering, leaving Australia to face one over before stumps, which nightwatchman Scott Boland safely negotiated with Travis Head at the other end. Australia were 4-0 at the close with Boland on four, 46 ahead, with Head yet to face a ball. Beleaguered England opener Ben Duckett's week went from bad to worse, out for two just days after unverified video surfaced showing him drunk during a mid-series beach break. It was another shocking dismissal for the 31-year-old, lobbing a simple catch to Michael Neser at mid-on off the irrepressible Mitchell Starc. Neser in the next over removed Jacob Bethell, playing in place of the under-performing Ollie Pope, when he edged to Alex Carey behind the stumps. Zak Crawley was taken in the slips by Steve Smith off Starc four balls later, then Joe Root edged Neser to Carey to put England into freefall. Harry Brook decided aggression was the best approach, smashing sixes off Starc and Neser, and with Stokes the pair temporarily halted the carnage. They put on 50 before Scott Boland trapped Brook lbw for 41.

Ivory Coast, Algeria Win in Cup of Nations

MARRAKECH (Dispatches) - Holders Ivory Coast squandered a number of chances but Amad Diallo's goal early in the second half was enough to beat Mozambique 1-0 and give them a winning start to their Africa Cup of Nations title defence. In the opening Group F game in Morocco, the Ivorians battled to break down their opponents in a competitive first half but took firm control after the break without converting the many chances they created. Diallo side-footed the ball into the net in the 49th minute to ensure the three-point haul in rainy conditions but the scoreline would have been a lot more emphatic had the Ivorians been sharper in front of goal.



Wilfried Zaha, playing his first international in more than two years after his surprise recall for the Cup of Nations finals, wasted several chances and Franck Kessie had two-point-blank efforts saved by Mozambique goalkeeper Ernan. Ivorian substitute Vakoum Bayo also had an opportunity with an easy header in front of goal but somehow put it wide and in the 89th minute Bayo had an effort cleared off the line with Ernan caught well out of his goal. Mozambique brought on winger Dominguez as a second-half substitute at the age of 42 years, one month and six days, becoming the oldest outfield player in tournament history, behind only former Egypt goalkeeper Essam El Hadary, who was 44 when he played in the 2017 final.