

An Iranian Lawmaker Says Parliament Is Investigating Why Some \$6.7 Billion in Revenues From the Country's Oil Exports Have Not Been Repatriated

# IRAN NEWS

Pakistan Is Pursuing a Good Course in Its Relations With Tehran, Foreign Minister Mohammad Ishaq Dar Said, Citing Steady Engagement and Close Contacts With Senior Iranian Officials Over the Past Year

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2 DOMESTIC



## National Push to Revive Iran's Handwoven Carpet Exports

> SEE PAGE 2

3 INTERNATIONAL

## EU, NATO Leaders Agree on Concrete and Reliable Security Guarantees for Ukraine



> SEE PAGE 3

## Six-Month Growth Rate Turns Negative in 1404



### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The latest figures released by the Central Bank indicate that Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) growth in the first six months of the current year (1404) has once again slipped into negative territory. Economic growth including oil was recorded at -0.6 percent, while growth excluding oil stood at -0.8 percent.

According to Tasnim, the Central Bank's most recent official data on GDP growth at constant 1400 prices show that Iran's economy experienced another decline in overall economic activity during the first half of 1404.

Based on this report, GDP growth including oil reached -0.6 percent, while non-oil economic growth was estimated at -0.8 percent. These figures point to the continued weakness of effective demand, a decline in investment, and heightened uncertainty across the real sectors of the economy.

Among the main economic sectors, agriculture performed worse than the overall economy, posting a -2.9 percent growth rate. This decline may be attributed to climatic factors, reduced productivity, and constraints in the supply of production inputs.

The industries and mining sector—traditionally a key driver of economic growth—also recorded a -3.4 percent contraction during this period. The data suggest a prolonged industrial slowdown, driven by energy constraints, reduced investment, and rising production costs.

## U.S. Uses Iraqi Airspace to Spy on Iran



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's Ambassador to Baghdad Mohammad Kazem Ale-Sadeq says the Islamic Republic has identified American reconnaissance flights using Iraqi airspace to spy on Iranian territory.

Ale-Sadeq made the remarks while speaking to Iraqi media on Saturday, warning that the United States supports Israeli flights in Iraqi airspace, which poses a threat.

He further emphasized Iran's readiness to respond to any hostile actions while respecting Iraq's sovereignty and the decisions of its government.

The Iranian ambassador also stressed the importance of regional cooperation to safeguard airspace and territorial integrity, referring to US spying flights over Iraq.

Ale-Sadeq further highlighted the need for indigenous management of security in the Persian Gulf region, cautioning against reliance on external military forces.

"Security is a completely internal and regional issue. We hope that countries in the region, including Iraq, will prioritize regional dialogue rather than allowing foreign surveillance and intervention," he said.

The Iranian diplomat also advocated for prioritizing regional dialogue over foreign surveillance and intervention, promoting Iran's "6+2" plan as a model for maintaining security without external interference.

Elsewhere in his remarks, Ale-Sadeq underscored Tehran's ability to defend itself and deter threats without relying on nuclear weapons.

## Iran Facing All-Out War, Stronger Than Before June War

### IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian says the United States, Israel, and Europe are waging an "all-out war" against Iran, adding that the country is now stronger, in both military capability and manpower, than it was before the June military aggression.

Pezeshkian made the remarks in an interview with the website of Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, which was published on Saturday.

He warned Israel and the US against any fresh military attack, saying, "If they choose to confront us, they will naturally face a more decisive response."

The United States joined the Israeli regime in its military aggression against the Islamic Republic in June and bombed three nuclear sites in violation of international law, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), and the UN Charter.

In response, the Iranian Armed Forces targeted strategic sites across the occupied territories as well as the al-Udeid air base in Qatar, the largest American military base in West Asia, forcing a ceasefire on the aggressors.

After the war, Britain, France, and Germany moved to invoke a snapback mechanism embedded in the now-defunct 2015 nuclear deal to restore United Nations sanctions against Iran.

Pezeshkian said that Iran is currently in a state of "all-out war" with the US, Israel, and Europe, as they do not want the country to stand on its feet.

This war is "worse, much more complex and difficult" than the Iraqi-imposed war in the 1980s, the president noted.

Pezeshkian emphasized that the US and Israel are exerting pressure on Iran and creating

economic, cultural, political, and security problems for the country.

He cautioned that the enemies themselves have openly declared their intention to exploit potential domestic developments in Iran.

The president pointed out that the aggressors had believed that a military assault would lead to the collapse of the Islamic establishment. "Their entire calculation was that if they launched an attack, people would pour into the streets, problems would arise, and the livelihood of the people would be disrupted."

Pezeshkian stressed the importance of reinforcing national unity so that the enemies will completely lose hope of ever wanting to attack Iran and interfere in its internal affairs.

Pezeshkian said Iran has greatly improved its relations with neighboring countries and the Persian Gulf littoral states in several areas, including cultural, scientific, and economic fields.

He also praised enhanced ties with China, Russia, and the Caspian Sea states and said, "Despite all problems, the path of our international relations is developing."

The Iranian president further said that corridors are now a priority for his administration.

"We have allocated the necessary resources for the North-South and East-West routes, and next year we will move forward at a much faster pace — both in terms of building roads, trains, and railways, and in terms of wagons, diesel engines, and the equipment that must be available," Pezeshkian explained.

He emphasized that his administration is taking all those measures to resolve the country's problems.

## Gov't Seeks a Deficit-Free Budget as Inflation Control, Transparency and Equity Take Priority

### IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - President Masoud Pezeshkian said on Sunday that the government is striving to present a deficit-free budget, calling on parliament to support the administration's goals during the review and approval of the proposed budget bill for the next fiscal year.

Speaking at an open session of parliament while defending the government's proposed 1405 (2026/27) national budget, Pezeshkian said this year's budget drafting process differed significantly from previous years due to extraordinary circumstances. He cited the most severe drought in half a century, a sharp drop in global oil prices, reduced oil export revenues, and intensified sanctions that increased economic pressures on the country.

He noted that Iran also faced a major conflict imposed by "the most hostile regime and global arrogance," adding that the country overcame these challenges through public unity, the sacrifices of the armed forces, and the leadership of the Supreme Leader.

The president said the upcoming budget reflects major legal and structural changes, including amendments to parliament's internal regulations, the shift to a single-stage budget process, new requirements under recently passed legislation, changes in the timing of budget submission, and adjustments related to the redenomination of the national currency. These factors, he said, made drafting the budget more difficult than in previous years.

Despite these challenges, Pezeshkian stressed that the government complied with all new legal requirements and submitted the budget on time to avoid disruptions to state affairs. He expressed hope that lawmakers would approve the bill promptly.

Pezeshkian identified inflation control as a central priority of the budget, arguing that inflation in Iran stems primarily from government budget deficits and disorder in the banking system. He said the administration is working to impose discipline on banks while also seeking to avoid any budget deficit in the coming year.

Despite high inflation, the president said the government increased total spending by only 2 percent, cutting many agency expenditures and eliminating non-essential budget lines. Future allocations, he said, will be based on performance-based budgeting, requiring agencies to clearly define the services they provide.

A disciplined, deficit-free budget, he added, would help curb inflationary pressures and reduce the burden on households, with the government bearing most of the adjustment costs itself.

Equity is another major priority of the proposed budget, Pezeshkian said. While the overall budget grows by just 2 percent, the government plans to increase public sector wages by 20 percent.



Although this rise does not fully offset inflation, he said tax exemptions would help compensate. Salaries of up to 40 million rials will be exempt from income tax, while those coming between 40 and 93 million rials will pay only 10 percent.

For retirees, the third phase of pension adjustment will be implemented next year, raising average pension growth to 36 percent.

The president questioned the sustainability of spending billions of dollars on gasoline imports and subsidized goods, arguing that such resources would be better transferred directly to households. He said the government plans to continue the electronic food voucher program to stabilize prices of essential goods and protect household consumption from currency fluctuations.

In addition, about 170 trillion rials from value-added tax revenues will be redirected to support household livelihoods. Pezeshkian emphasized that many basic food items are already exempt from VAT, while higher-income groups with greater consumption would contribute more, making taxation a key tool for social justice.

Under the proposed budget, funding for the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee will rise by 33 percent, welfare support by 39 percent, and healthcare spending by 46 percent. Monthly cash support of 20 million rials will be provided to mothers who give birth next year, while funding for child nutrition, education in deprived provinces, student milk programs, and school transportation will see significant increases.

The president also announced that the country's development budget would grow by more than 80 percent, supported by new mechanisms such as asset swaps to complete unfinished projects and greater use of agencies' dedicated revenues for infrastructure.

Special allocations have been made for road, rail, and urban transport projects, including major transit corridors, alongside expanded investment in upstream oil and gas projects to ensure stable energy supplies. The government also plans to accelerate the development of solar energy and improve energy efficiency through institutional reforms.

Pezeshkian said the government has prioritized transparency by avoiding unrealistic revenue projections from oil exports, privatization, or asset sales. He reiterated plans to convert indirect subsidies, such as those for bread and fuel, into direct payments to citizens, reducing waste and intermediaries.

Concluding his remarks, the president said addressing people's livelihoods is the foremost duty of all officials. He called for unity and cooperation between the government and parliament, warning that without shared understanding and collective action, Iran's economic challenges cannot be resolved.

## The New Currency Unit Is an Amusement

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian



The new national currency unit will still be the "rial," and the "geran" has been designated as its subsidiary unit (equivalent to 0.1 of the new rial). Accordingly, the major figures of the 1405 budget have been calculated using the new unit, and the total size of the 1405 budget—taking into account the general government budget, state-owned companies, and collective expenditure budgets—has been estimated at approximately 14,441 billion new rials. For better understanding, the table below shows the main components of the government's general budget:

General government budget

General resources: 5,220 billion new rials

Dedicated revenues of ministries: 734 billion new rials. Of course, the above figures pertain only to the general government budget and do not include the budgets of state-owned companies or the collective expenditure section.

Key and analytical points about the budget

Drafting the budget on the basis of the new currency unit is accompanied by significant policy changes:

Contractionary policy: Analyses show that this budget has a contractionary nature, such that the growth of its expenditures relative to high inflation is estimated to be very low (around 5 percent).

Impact on livelihoods: It is predicted that the 20 percent increase in the salaries of employees and retirees will not be in line with current and forecast inflation (above 50 percent) and will undoubtedly lead to a reduction in their purchasing power.

Tax changes: A significant increase in tax revenues (around 63 percent) and an increase in the value-added tax rate to 12 percent could have an inflationary effect on the prices of goods and services.

Removal of the preferential exchange rate: In the new budget, the preferential exchange rate of 28,500 toman has been removed, and the exchange rate used for customs calculations has been increased (for example, each euro has been calculated as equivalent to 103 new rials).

Public reaction and security concerns: Many people and experts consider the removal of zeros from the currency, without fundamentally controlling inflation, to be a superficial measure and a kind of amusement meant to occupy people's minds, and they are concerned that without essential economic reforms, this action will be repeated again and again in the future.

Now, with the government's decision, it is expected that next year monetary and financial markets will enter a new space, and newly printed banknotes will gradually be introduced into the market so that, over a five-year process, the new currency unit becomes dominant in the country's economy.

People's engagement with inflation, contractionary policy, zero percent growth, and the appearance of the new currency can, to some extent, cause the core issue—namely, the direction in which the economy is moving—to be reviewed in hidden and unspoken layers of the public mind. Woe to behavior in which there is no reflection.

## Major Earthquake in Tehran Could Trigger an Unprecedented Global Disaster



### IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Vice Chairman of Tehran City Council has warned that a major earthquake in Tehran, given its millions-strong population, dense urban development, and extensive worn-out urban fabric, could result in a disaster that would be rare or even unprecedented in world history. He stressed the urgent need for preventive measures and stronger urban crisis management.

Speaking at the 383rd open session of Tehran City Council, Parviz Sarvari referred to the anniversary of the Bam earthquake and said: "The Bam earthquake taught us that neglecting prevention comes at a cost as heavy as human lives. Today, this warning applies to Tehran more than ever."





## Oil Revenues Repatriated Under Central Bank Oversight

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Oil Minister said the foreign currency generated from oil sales is repatriated to the country under a clear and lawful mechanism overseen by the Central Bank of Iran, stressing that the ultimate goal of oil sales is to support people's livelihoods. Mohsen Paknejad said on Saturday that oil sales involve two main stages. The first covers marketing, negotiations, and the execution of sales, which fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Oil and are handled through specialized measures. The second stage concerns the return of oil revenues, which, in line with laws and regulations, must be deposited into accounts approved by the Central Bank.

## Iran's Population Could Fall Below 40m by 2101 if Current Trends Continue



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Interior Minister has warned that if current demographic trends persist, the country's population could decline to below 40 million by the year 1480 in the Iranian calendar (2101-2102), describing population decline as the most serious long-term threat facing the nation.

Speaking on the sidelines of a ceremony marking the appointment of the new head of the National Organization for Civil Registration, Eskandar Momeni said the continued reduction in population growth poses a major national challenge and requires urgent intervention.

"Population decline is the biggest crisis that could threaten Iran," Momeni said. "If the current trend continues, the country will face a severe demographic crisis. Intervention is necessary, and the downward trajectory must be changed."

According to IRNA, the minister emphasized that population decline is emerging as one of Iran's most significant future crises. He called on the Civil Registration Organization, in cooperation with universities and academic centers, to provide accurate analyses of demographic data and to prioritize practical solutions for managing what he described as a very serious national challenge.

Momeni also addressed administrative issues within the Civil Registration Organization, particularly delays in issuing national identification cards. He said there is currently a backlog of more than six million national ID cards, noting that the problem is not limited to the current year but has accumulated over several years.

Resolving this backlog, he said, should be considered a short-term priority for the newly appointed head of the organization.

The interior minister also commented on the issuance of inheritance certificates, explaining that responsibility for issuing certificates of exclusive inheritance was transferred from the judiciary to the Civil Registration Organization about two months ago. He said the organization has now begun providing this service to the public.

## Desert Locusts Headed Toward Iran, Chemical Control Unavoidable



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran must remain on constant alert for a potential invasion of desert locusts due to its geopolitical location along the pest's historical migration routes, the head of the Plant Protection Organization of Iran said, warning that chemical control measures may be unavoidable to protect agriculture and food security.

According to ILNA, quoting the Plant Protection Organization, Maryam Jalili-Moghaddam made the remarks during a national preparedness drill held in the southern province of Bushehr to confront the threat posed by desert locusts. She stressed that Iran lies directly along the traditional pathways of desert locust migration and is therefore exposed to recurring risks each year.

"The desert locust enters Iran through routes originating in the Red Sea region, the Horn of Africa and, most notably, Pakistan," Jalili-Moghaddam said. "For this reason, preparedness must be maintained annually, whether an invasion occurs or not."

She pointed to increased rainfall and improved vegetation cover as major factors contributing to the growth and spread of locust populations. While emphasizing the organization's preference for minimizing pesticide use, she acknowledged that chemical control becomes inevitable during large-scale locust invasions.

"In conditions of mass locust attacks, we have no choice but to resort to chemical control in order to prevent the destruction of agricultural products and avert serious threats to national food security," she said.

Jalili-Moghaddam described the desert locust as one of the most dangerous agricultural pests in the world, warning that even a single swarm can cause devastating damage. "Each square kilometer of a locust swarm can contain up to 80 million locusts," she said, adding that such concentrations can lead to irreparable losses in a very short period of time.

## National Push to Revive Iran's Handwoven Carpet Exports

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's handwoven carpet industry is witnessing a renewed national effort aimed at restoring its position in global markets, according to the head of the National Iranian Carpet Center.

Speaking at a meeting of the Central Province Carpet Working Group, Zahra Kamani said a new wave of specialized activities has emerged across the country, driven by committed stakeholders with a development-oriented vision and effective institutional support. She described the movement as a coordinated national push to revive the prestige of Iranian carpets worldwide.

Kamani noted that one of the most encouraging signs is the growing number of well-organized, consecutive carpet exhibitions and specialized events being held in various provinces. Supported by provincial governors and executive bodies, these events have helped lay the foundation for a strong, unified national movement in the sector.

She highlighted Central Province as a historical leader in economically driven carpet production, emphasizing its centuries-old role in carpet trade and diplomacy. "When we speak of Sultanabad and Arak, we are referring to generations of export-oriented knowledge and commercial intelligence," Kamani said, adding that this legacy can once again become a driving force behind Iran's carpet exports.

According to Kamani, order-based production, the identification of new domestic and international partners, and adapting producers' artistic skills to the evolving demands of global markets have created a new and serious competitive environment within the industry.

She added that Arak carpets, known for their authenticity and quality, are displayed not only in museums around the world but also in the homes of people across many countries, reflecting the cultural and artistic reach of Iranian carpets.

Kamani said the carpet value chain is gradually being completed, with modern, well-equipped factories moving toward renovation and demand creation. These efforts, she noted, are aimed at enabling Iran to capture a larger share of regional markets.

Referring to developments over the past ten months, she said a strategic approach has taken shape at the National Iranian Carpet Center with strong managerial backing. The formation of the Supreme Carpet Council and the activation of specialized committees—through cooperation with the Iran Chamber of Commerce's Art, Handicrafts and Carpet Commission, carpet producers and exporters' unions, and other associations—have created what she described as a powerful triangle of collaboration.

This round-the-clock cooperation has produced significant results in documenting Iran's handwoven carpet heritage. Kamani cited the establishment of the Iranian Carpet Documentation Center, the compilation of an encyclopedia of handwoven carpets, and efforts to strengthen the sector's digital reference authority. These measures aim to prevent cultural distortion and the misappropriation of Iranian designs.

She added that recording the oral history of carpet weaving and collecting the



generational knowledge of master artisans are also key priorities.

In the field of foreign trade, Kamani said specialized negotiations are underway to remove export barriers. She emphasized the importance of resolving foreign exchange repatriation requirements, describing the issue as one of the main concerns of carpet exporters. The matter, she said, has been pursued in multiple meetings with the government and is now ready to be raised at the Cabinet level.

Kamani also stressed the need for active participation in economic and trade events, noting that such platforms could mark a turning point in the expansion of Iran's non-oil exports and further showcase the

international potential of handwoven carpets.

She said several regional carpet designs have the capacity for national and global registration. Preparatory mapping for these designs should be completed quickly, she added, with national registration possible by the end of the year and global registration to follow next year.

Referring to the 2017 Law on Supporting Artists, Kamani said the legislation offers valuable opportunities to support research projects and academic theses related to carpets. The National Iranian Carpet Center, she said, is ready to use this capacity to strengthen the cultural and artistic dimensions of the sector, despite the lack of funding allocated when the law was first adopted.

Kamani acknowledged challenges related to Social Security regulations, noting that while some private-sector demands face legal limitations, the center's goal is to ensure that the voices of carpet producers and industry veterans are heard. She expressed hope that cooperation with relevant institutions would lead to brighter days for Iran's handwoven carpets.

Meanwhile, Mohammad Baharvand, CEO of the Central Union of Rural Handwoven Carpets of Iran, highlighted persistent structural challenges in the industry. He said organizing insurance for carpet weavers, clarifying value-added tax regulations, and supporting access to raw materials are unavoidable priorities.

Baharvand called for reforms to the weavers' insurance system and greater transparency in tax regulations, noting that inconsistencies across provinces have caused confusion among industry players. He suggested Central Province could serve as a pilot region for the transparent implementation of relevant laws.

He also pointed to problems caused by the past issuance of non-specialized carpet-weaving cards to individuals in unrelated professions, which placed a heavy financial burden on the government and the Social Security Organization.

Regarding raw materials, Baharvand said repeated requests for foreign currency allocations to import silk and wool have gone unanswered. He stressed that carpet exporters already contribute significantly to the country's exports and that proper banking support and production facilities could enable further growth across Iran's provinces.

## Leisure Falls Victim to Inflation as Iran's Amusement Park Industry Faces Crisis

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's leisure and amusement park industry is facing a deep recession as inflation and mounting living costs push recreation out of household priorities, leading to widespread financial distress and the bankruptcy of many open-air amusement parks, industry officials warned.

Speaking to ILNA on the sidelines of the 14th International Exhibition of Iran's Leisure, Entertainment and Amusement Park Industry, Reza Mardani, head of the Employers' Association of Iranian Amusement Park Operators, said the sector is experiencing unprecedented challenges and urgently needs targeted government support.

Mardani pointed to the sharp decline in consumer spending on leisure, noting that recreation has effectively been removed from the household consumption basket. "In many countries, leisure is a basic family need, but in Iran, economic pressures have pushed it to the very end of priorities," he said. "Whenever the economy is under stress, the first industry to suffer is leisure."

According to Mardani, rising inflation, sanctions and reduced purchasing power have significantly lowered visitor numbers, leaving operators unable to cover costs or invest in upgrades. He warned that many open-air amusement parks are now effectively bankrupt, while indoor parks remain active largely because they are located in shopping malls.

He added that changes in lifestyle, declining child population growth and sustained economic pressure have further destabilized the industry. "The entire amusement park sector is now on the brink of collapse," he said.

Mardani said Iran's amusement park equipment fleet has become outdated due to the lack of investment and innovation. While domestic manufacturers once exported equipment to more than 30 countries, including several in Europe, current restrictions and weak domestic demand have severely limited production and exports.

"When operators have no customers, they lose the ability to renovate or modernize," he said. "Even the most advanced equipment becomes useless if it cannot be installed and operated."

Despite these challenges, Mardani highlighted the growth of domestic manufacturing capacity. He said about 90 percent of



amusement park equipment displayed at this year's exhibition is produced locally, reflecting a 30 percent increase compared to last year. The exhibition hosts around 110 exhibitors and nearly 500 types of equipment.

Mardani also addressed the long-running effort to upgrade the association into a formal union. He said that although the organization has functioned at a union level for years, it has remained legally classified as an association. After nearly 15 years of effort, the process is now close to completion and awaiting approval at the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Finance.

"Once the inaugural general assembly is held, the industry will finally gain its rightful position," he said.

The association head stressed the need for low-interest loans to help operators renovate aging parks, describing the potential benefits as far-reaching. He said Iran has around 4,800 active leisure complexes, each employing an average of 30 workers, in addition to extensive supply chains involving metalworkers, electronics technicians, painters and parts manufacturers.

Mardani also criticized short-term contracts with municipalities, saying one- to three-year agreements discourage investment. "Today, the minimum investment for an amusement park exceeds 50 trillion rials. No investor can recover costs under short contracts," he said, urging municipalities to adopt a service-oriented rather than revenue-driven approach.

Mardani raised serious concerns about inspection practices by companies affiliated with Iran's National Standards Organization, saying frequent inspections impose heavy financial burdens on operators. He criticized what he described as a revenue-focused approach rather than one aimed at safety improvement.

He added that inspection firms often require annual non-destructive testing, despite designers recommending intervals of two to three years. These tests, he said, require full dismantling of equipment and significantly increase costs.

Mardani warned that without coordinated government support, regulatory reform and financial assistance, the amusement park industry—an important source of employment and social well-being—will face further decline. "Leisure depends on innovation," he said. "Without it, bankruptcy is inevitable."

## Iran's Annual Inflation Rate Reaches 42.2% in Month of Azar



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's annual inflation rate rose to 42.2 percent in the month of Azar (late November–late December), marking an increase of 1.8 percentage points compared with the previous month, according to the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI).

In a report released on Saturday, the SCI said the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for Iranian households reached 435.1 in Azar 1404 (Iranian calendar). This represents a 4.2 percent increase compared with the previous month, a 52.6 percent rise year-on-year, and a 42.2 percent increase over the 12-month period ending in Azar compared with the same period a year earlier.

Point-to-point inflation, which measures the percentage change in the CPI compared with the same month in the previous year, stood at 52.6 percent in Azar. This means Iranian households paid, on average, 52.6 percent more for the same basket of goods and services than they did in Azar 1403.

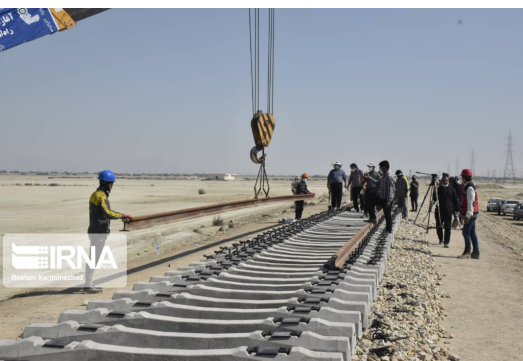
The SCI said point-to-point inflation increased by 3.2 percentage points compared with the previous month, reflecting continued upward pressure on prices across the economy.

Monthly inflation, defined as the percentage change in the CPI compared with the previous month, reached 4.2 percent in Azar.

According to the report, prices in the major category of "food, beverages and tobacco" rose by 5.5 percent during the month, while the "non-food goods and services" group recorded a 3.4 percent increase.

The annual inflation rate, which measures the change in the average CPI over a 12-month period compared with the same period a year earlier, reached 42.2 percent for Iranian households in Azar. This figure shows a rise of 1.8 percentage points compared with the previous month's report, indicating a sustained inflationary trend.

## Iran Focuses on Rail Connectivity With Neighboring Countries



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Minister of Roads and Urban Development outlined the latest developments in the country's rail corridors, saying progress has accelerated significantly compared with previous years and is expected to position Iran as a major rail hub linking Asian and regional countries to open waters and Europe.

Farzaneh Sadegh said the government's transport diplomacy and regional cooperation policies under the 14th administration have led to notable advances in national rail projects.

Providing an update on key corridors, Sadegh said only the 120-kilometer rail-laying section between Iranshahr and Nikshahr remains unfinished on the Khash–Chabahar route, and that it will be completed by the end of the current year. She noted that this route is part of a strategic corridor sought by India, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Russia and China for connection to Iran's national rail network.

The minister also said the long-delayed Mianeh–Ardabil railway project, which began more than two decades ago, is scheduled to become operational by the end of the year. Final inspections are currently underway, she added, after which the line will be fully ready for use.

Regarding the priority Kermanshah–Khosravi corridor, Sadegh explained that due to the large volume of remaining work, the Islam Abad–Khosravi section will not be completed by the end of the year. However, she stressed that the project remains a top priority for the ministry and is expected to be operational within the next one to one-and-a-half years.



## Strong Earthquake Rocks Taiwan Again

TAIPEI (Dispatches) - A 6.6-magnitude earthquake struck off Taiwan's northeastern coast on Saturday, the US Geological Survey (USGS) said, the second major tremor to hit the island within days.

Taiwan's weather agency, which put the magnitude at 7.0, said the quake hit at 11.05 pm at a depth of 73 kilometres in the sea off Yilan county, southwest of Taipei.

The Yilan County Fire Bureau told AFP there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage.

The quake caused buildings in the capital Taipei to sway, and local media said it was felt across Taiwan. It also temporarily disrupted electricity supply in a Yilan town, said the National Fire Agency, adding no major damage was reported.



## U.S.-Backed Airstrikes in Nigeria Hit Two ISIS-Linked Camps



LAGOS (Dispatches) - U.S.-backed air strikes in Nigeria hit two Islamic State-linked camps in the Bauni forest of Sokoto State, targeting foreign fighters infiltrating from the Sahel, the Nigerian government said.

The strikes carried out on Thursday were approved by President Bola Tinubu and launched from maritime platforms domiciled in the Gulf of Guinea, after extensive intelligence gathering, operational planning, and reconnaissance, the information ministry said in a statement on Friday.

U.S. President Donald Trump announced on Truth Social on Thursday that U.S. forces had launched a strike against Islamic State militants in northwest Nigeria at the request of Nigeria's government. He said the group had been targeting Christians in the region.

"A total of 16 GPS-guided precision munitions were deployed using MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aerial platforms, successfully neutralising the targeted ISIS elements attempting to penetrate Nigeria from the Sahel corridor," the Nigerian government statement said.

Intelligence indicated the camps were being used by foreign ISIS elements working with local affiliates to plan large-scale attacks inside Nigeria, it added. No civilian casualties were reported, although debris fell in two towns in Sokoto and Kwara states.

Trump described the operation as "numerous perfect strikes" and warned there would be "more to come."

## Central African Republic Votes, Russia Ally Touadera Seeks Third Term



BANGUI (Dispatches) - Central African Republic President Faustin-Archange Touadera was seeking a third term on Sunday as the chronically unstable country holds national elections, touting security gains made with the help of Russian mercenaries and Rwandan soldiers.

The 68-year-old mathematician oversaw a constitutional referendum in 2023 that scrapped the presidential term limit, drawing an outcry from his critics who accused him of seeking to rule for life.

A Touadera victory - the expected outcome - would likely further the interests of Russia, which has traded security assistance for access to resources including gold and diamonds. Touadera is also offering access to the country's lithium and uranium reserves to anyone interested.

The opposition field of six candidates is led by two former prime ministers, Anicet-Georges Dologuele and Henri-Marie Dondra, both of whom survived attempts by Touadera's supporters to have them disqualified for allegedly holding foreign citizenship.



## EU, NATO Leaders Agree on Concrete and Reliable Security Guarantees for Ukraine

BRUSSELS (Dispatches) - Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said Saturday that European and NATO leaders reached a consensus on the need for "concrete and reliable" security guarantees for Ukraine during peace talks held ahead of a key U.S.-Ukraine summit.

"All participants — including Scandinavian countries, Canada, the Netherlands, and NATO — agreed that solid security guarantees for Ukraine are crucial. Such guarantees also mean a safer Poland," Tusk wrote on social media platform X. "We will return to talks after tomorrow's meeting between the presidents of the U.S. and Ukraine."

The phone conference, which included leaders from Ukraine, Germany, France, the U.K., Italy, and EU institutions, focused on the path to ending the war in Ukraine — particularly on territorial disputes and long-term defense commitments. According to German news agency dpa, the call took place Saturday evening.

The talks preceded a scheduled Sunday meeting in Palm Beach, Florida, between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Donald Trump.

Despite recent diplomatic overtures from Kyiv, Russia launched another large-scale missile and drone assault on Kyiv early Saturday, targeting energy and civilian infrastructure. Zelenskyy said Russia fired nearly 500 drones and 40 missiles, striking residential buildings.

Territorial control remains a key point of contention in ongoing negotiations. Moscow is demanding Ukrainian troop withdrawals from parts of Donetsk not currently occupied by Russian forces, while Kyiv seeks to freeze the front line in its current position. The fate of the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant also remains unresolved.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said the negotiations had reached a "turning point," though Ukraine's proposed 20-point peace plan still diverges from versions discussed by U.S. and Russian delegations.

Zelenskyy held consultations with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and other EU leaders on Saturday, ahead of planned peace talks with US President Donald Trump in Florida on Sunday.

Following the video conference, von der Leyen said European leaders had "touched base" in advance of the meeting between Trump and Zelenskyy, welcoming diplomatic efforts while stressing the need for "a just and lasting peace that preserves Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

"The EU's support for Ukraine will not falter. In war, in peace, in reconstruction," European Council President António Costa wrote on social media.

Eleven leaders joined the call, including NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, French President Emmanuel Macron, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk. UK National Security Adviser Jonathan Powell, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, Dutch Prime Minister Dick Schoof, Finnish President Alexander Stubb and Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson also took part.

"Security must be ensured by the world's strongest powers, and we will be discussing this in particular today and tomorrow with European leaders, with the Prime Minister of Canada, and with the President of the United States," Zelenskyy wrote on X on Saturday morning.

Zelenskyy met Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney during a stopover in Canada en route to the US and held the call with EU leaders from there, AFP reported.

The consultations came after Kyiv this week unveiled a revised 20-point version of a 28-point peace plan floated by Trump last month. Drafted by Ukraine in consultation with US officials, the document opens the door to demilitarised zones in parts of eastern Ukraine — the most far-reaching compromise Kyiv has publicly contemplated since Russia's full-scale invasion in early 2022.

The Kremlin has described Ukraine's counterproposal as a starting point for further talks, Bloomberg reported. Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said on Friday that a final agreement would be impossible "without a proper solution to the problems that are the root cause of the crisis."

## Saudi Arabia Backs Yemen's Gov't

RIYADH (Dispatches) - Saudi Arabia on Saturday said it would back Sanaa's government in any military confrontation with separatist forces in a statement that came a day after reported Saudi air strikes in Yemen's Hadramawt province. The Southern Transition Council (STC) separatists backed by the United Arab Emirates have recently made territorial gains, embarrassing regional heavyweight Saudi Arabia.

The statements came a day after reported Saudi air strikes on separatist positions in Yemen's Hadramawt province — and after Washington called for restraint in the rapidly escalating conflict.

General Turki al-Malki, the spokesman for the Riyadh-led groups, said they would act "directly and at the appropriate moment ... to protect civilian life," according to Saudi news agency SPA.

Saudi Defence Minister Khalid bin Salman posted on X that troops from the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) should "peacefully hand over" two regional governorates to the government.

"It's time," he posted, "at this sensitive moment, to let reason prevail by withdrawing from the two provinces and doing so peacefully."

The STC had warned on Friday that they were undeterred after strikes blamed on Saudi Arabia hit their positions, in the latest escalation since they seized large swaths of territory in the Hadramawt and Mahrah provinces.

There were no immediate reports of casualties in the strikes.

In recent weeks, separatists backed by the United Arab Emirates and



seeking to revive the formerly independent state of South Yemen have made territorial gains.

Experts say their successes have embarrassed regional heavyweight Saudi Arabia, the main backer of the internationally recognised Yemeni government.

Fareh al-Muslimi, from the Chatham House think tank in London, said that the STC had crossed Riyadh's "red lines" and that the situation could quickly get worse.

"It is one bad thing to humiliate Saudi Arabia. And it is another much worse thing to humiliate Saudi Arabia publicly. And that's exactly what they did," he said.

In Washington, US Secretary of State Marco Rubio said: "We urge restraint and continued diplomacy, with a view to reaching a lasting solution."

Following Friday's raids, Yemen's government urged the Saudi-led coalition to support its forces in Hadramawt, after separatists seized most of the country's largest province.

The government asked the coalition to "take all necessary military measures to protect innocent Yemeni civilians in Hadramawt province and support the armed forces", the official Yemeni news agency said.

A Yemeni military official said on Friday that around 15,000 Saudi-backed fighters were amassed near the Saudi border but had not been given orders to advance on separatist-held territory.

The areas where they were deployed are located at the edges of territory seized in recent weeks by the UAE-backed STC.

"We have not received military instructions to move towards the two provinces," the official said, requesting anonymity to discuss sensitive matters.

Separatist advances have added pressure on ties between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which support rival groups within Yemen's government.

## Myanmar Junta Presses Ahead With Tightly Controlled Election

YANGON (Dispatches) - Voting was held in Myanmar's heavily restricted polls, with the ruling junta touting the exercise as a return to democracy five years after it ousted the last elected government, triggering civil war.

Former civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi remains jailed, while her hugely popular party has been dissolved and was not taking part.

Campaigners, Western diplomats and the UN's rights chief have all condemned the phased month-long vote, citing a ballot stacked with military allies and a stark crackdown on dissent.

The pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party is widely expected to emerge as the largest one, in what critics say would be a rebranding of martial rule.

The Southeast Asian nation of around 50 million is riven by civil war and there will be no voting in rebel-held areas.

In junta-controlled territory, the first of three rounds started at 6:00 am, including in constituencies in the cities of Yangon, Mandalay and the capital Naypyidaw.

"The election is very important and will bring the best for the country," said Bo Saw, the first voter at a polling station in Yangon's Kamayut Township near Suu Kyi's vacant home.



"The first priority should be restoring a safe and peaceful situation," the 63-year-old told AFP.

Snaking queues of voters formed outside polling stations in the last election in 2020, which the military declared void when it ousted Suu Kyi and seized power in 2021.

But this time journalists and polling staff outnumbered early voters at a downtown station near the gleaming Sule Pagoda—the site of huge pro-democracy protests after the coup.

Among a trickle of early voters, 45-year-old Swe Maw dismissed international criticism.

"It's not an important matter," he said. "There are always people who like and dislike."

The run-up saw none of the feverish public rallies that Suu Kyi once commanded, and the junta has waged a withering pre-vote offensive to claw back territory.

"It is impossible for this election to be free and fair," said Moe Moe Myint, who has spent the past two months "on the run" from junta air strikes.

"How can we support a junta-run election when this military has destroyed our lives?" she told AFP from a village in the central Mandalay region.





## Texans Edge Chargers to Reach NFL Playoffs

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - C.J. Stroud threw two early touchdown passes and the Houston Texans advanced to the NFL playoffs with a 20-16 victory over the Los Angeles Chargers.

The Texans (11-5) stretched their win streak to eight games while the Chargers (11-5) lost for only the second time in nine contests.

Houston's victory eliminated the Indianapolis Colts from the playoff hunt while the Chargers' loss clinched the AFC West division title for the Denver Broncos, who own the NFL's best record at 13-3.

"They made some changes in the second half and made it a challenge but that's what you get in these type of games," Stroud said.

"They have a good defense but we weathered the storm and found a way to get a W."

Stroud completed 16-of-28 passes for 244 yards and Houston's top-ranked scoring defense made five sacks, forced two turnovers and silenced the Chargers for most of the contest.

"I'm so proud of those guys," Stroud said. "They've held it down all year."

"We're built tough. We practice hard."

Stroud connected with Jayden Higgins on a 75-yard touchdown pass and made a 43-yard touchdown toss to Jaylin Noel for a 14-0 Texans lead only 5:43 into the game.

No NFL quarterback had made two TD passes over 40 yards in a first quarter since Kansas City's Patrick Mahomes in 2020.

No two Chargers rookies had caught touchdown passes over 40 yards in the same game since 1974. Derwin James intercepted a Stroud pass to set up a 27-yard Cameron Dicker field goal that lifted

the Chargers within 14-3 at half-time.

Houston's Ka'imi Fairbairn kicked a 41-yard field goal but Los Angeles answered on Justin Herbert's one-yard touchdown pass to Oronde Gadsden, pulling the Chargers within 17-10 entering the fourth quarter.

Fairbairn added a 44-yard field goal for the Texans before Omarion Hampton's five-yard touchdown run pulled the Chargers within 20-16, but Dicker missed the conversion kick and Houston ran out the clock to seal victory.

Other AFC teams that have secured playoff berths are Denver, New England, Jacksonville, Buffalo and the Los Angeles Chargers.

NFC clubs to reach the post-season are Green Bay, Seattle, San Francisco, defending champion Philadelphia, Chicago and the Los Angeles Rams.

Carolina can clinch the NFC South title and last NFC playoff berth with a victory over Seattle and Tampa Bay loss at Miami on Sunday.

In a later game, the Baltimore Ravens visit Green Bay needing a victory to sustain their playoff hopes. Anything less gives the Pittsburgh Steelers the AFC North division title and a playoff spot.

A loss by the Packers, who made the playoffs when Detroit lost on Thursday, would hand the NFC North title to Chicago.

Green Bay starting quarterback Jordan Love and his Baltimore counterpart, Lamar Jackson, have both been ruled out because of injury.

## Arsenal Retake Premier League Top Spot

LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal responded to the pressure applied by Manchester City by beating Brighton 2-1 to retake top spot in the Premier League after Rayan Cherki inspired Pep Guardiola's side to victory at Nottingham Forest.

Aston Villa remain just three points behind the leaders ahead of their trip to Arsenal on Tuesday after substitute Ollie Watkins struck twice in a 2-1 win at Chelsea.

Florian Wirtz scored his first Liverpool goal as the Reds beat Wolves 2-1 on an emotional occasion at Anfield, where Diogo Jota's former clubs met for the first time since his death.

City's 2-1 win in the lunchtime kick-off at the City Ground took them top for a couple of hours.

However, Arsenal hit straight back despite making life difficult for themselves against inferior opposition once more.

"The margins should have been much bigger," said Arsenal boss Mikel Arteta. "With the amount of situations, chances, open chances that we generated through the game, it should never be 2-1."

Martin Odegaard's fine strike was all the home side had to show for their first-half domination at the Emirates.

Arteta's men had some fortune for the vital second goal when Georginio Rutter turned Declan Rice's corner into his own net.

But Arsenal nerves were frayed after Diego Gomez pulled a goal back.

David Raya produced a stunning save to deny Yankuba Minteh as Arsenal held on to win by a solitary goal for the seventh time in their



13 league victories this season.

City were also pushed all the way for an eighth consecutive win as Forest belied their position just above the relegation zone.

But the in-form Cherki produced two moments of magic to keep Guardiola's men right on Arsenal's tails.

The Frenchman teed up Tijjani Reijnders to open the scoring early in the second half.

Omari Hutchinson finished off a fine team move to bring Forest

level almost immediately.

Cherki, though, drilled in Josko Gvardiol's knock down on 83 minutes.

"I was overweight after Christmas and now I've lost all my kilos," said Guardiola, who had threatened his players with being dropped if they had over indulged this week. "A really, really, really important three points."

Villa have won 11 successive games to match their best run since 1914 and maintain a surprise title challenge.

Unai Emery's team were second best during a dominant first half from Chelsea, who led through Joao Pedro.

But the Spanish coach turned the game with a triple substitution on the hour mark as Watkins rediscovered his form in front of goal.

The England international had scored just three times all season prior to his double in 19 second-half minutes to keep Villa dreaming of a first league title since 1981.

Two of Jota's three children and other family members were mascots at Anfield as part of a series of tributes to the Portugal international, who was killed in a car crash in July.

On the field, both teams have suffered since but Liverpool continued their turnaround in fortunes to climb into the top four.

Ryan Gravenberch slammed home the opening goal before Wirtz finally struck for the first time since his £100 million (\$135 million) move from Bayer Leverkusen.

## Billie Jean King Plays Down Sabalenka-Kyrgios "Battle of the Sexes"



PARIS (Dispatches) - Aryna Sabalenka and Nick Kyrgios will meet in the "Battle of the Sexes", but the only similarity between the Dubai exhibition and the historic 1973 match is the name, says Billie Jean King.

Women's world number one Sabalenka, a four-time Grand Slam champion, takes on injury-prone Australian Kyrgios in a highly publicised showdown that has divided tennis fans.

The title "Battle of the Sexes" harks back to the meeting between King and Bobby Riggs in September 1973, in what was a game-changing moment for the sport.

Back then, there was far more at stake with the nascent women's professional tour, set up by King, fighting for its legitimacy and prize money for female players still far lower than for the men.

Beyond the tennis court, women struggled for equal rights in almost every aspect of life.

"It's not the same thing," King, now 82, told the BBC.

"Ours was about social change... This one is not.

"Mine was really political. It was rough, culturally, what was coming in with it.

"I knew I had to beat him for societal change. I had a lot of reasons to win."

King, one of the all-time greats of the women's game who was at the peak of her powers, saw off the 55-year-old Riggs, a top player in his day, 6-4, 6-3, 6-3 in Houston.

Few, though, believe Sabalenka can repeat that success even against Kyrgios, who once reached 13 in the world but has played just six main draw matches over the last three seasons and is now ranked 671 on the ATP Tour.

## Schwarz Records Maiden Super-G Success, Odermatt Fourth



ROME (Dispatches) - Austria's Marco Schwarz recorded his eighth career World Cup success but first ever in super-G when the veteran won in Livigno.

Overall World Cup leader Marco Odermatt failed to make the podium, but the Swiss star's fourth-placed finish allowed him to extend his lead in the super-G standings to 275 points -- 66 ahead of Vincent Kriechmayr.

His principal rival Kriechmayr failed to finish, the Austrian skiing out at the bottom of the course.

Austrian honour, though, was saved by Schwarz, who edged out Swiss pair Alexis Monney (0.20sec) and Franjo von Allmen (0.25).

The 30-year-old, whose best super-G performance this term prior to Saturday was 13th in Alta Badia last weekend, sits second in the overall standings on 451 points, 404 behind Odermatt.

Schwarz carved out his victory with an excellent middle of the race -- the same part where Odermatt made a mistake that cost him any chance of winning.

"It's been a while," said Schwarz, whose only previous podium finish in the discipline was second in the World Cup finals in Soldeu, Andorra, in March, 2023.

"Today I did a good job, I think I made a good run.

"On this kind of snow, you have to ski super clean."

Livigno hosted this leg of the World Cup which is traditionally held in fellow Italian resort Bormio.

However, Bormio is preparing to host the men's alpine ski events for the 2026 Milano-Cortina Winter Olympics in February.

Livigno for its part is hosting the snowboard and acrobatic ski competitions.

## Osimhen and Mane Strike as Nigeria Reach Afcon Last 16

RABAT (Dispatches) - Star strikers Victor Osimhen and Sadio Mane scored as Nigeria qualified for the knockout stage of the Africa Cup of Nations in Morocco, and Senegal edged closer to joining them.

Osimhen opened the scoring for the Super Eagles just before half-time, and they built a three-goal lead before surviving a late Tunisia rally to win 3-2 in Fes.

Victory ensured three-time champions Nigeria became the second nation after record seven-time winners Egypt to secure a last-16 place.

Mane struck as Senegal came from behind to draw 1-1 with the Democratic Republic in Tangiers, a result that kept both former African champions on course for the second round.



Osimhen was a constant menace to the Tunisians as he scored his second Afcon goal, and first since the opening round of the 2024 tournament.

Much improved after a scrappy opening win over Tanzania, Nigeria lost momentum in the closing stages and Tunisia twice came close to equalising in added time.

Captain Wilfred Ndidi, with his first goal for the national team, and Ademola Lookman were the other Nigerian scorers before Montassar Talbi and Ali Abdi netted to set up a tense climax.

Nigeria have six points in Group C, Tunisia three and Tanzania and Uganda one each going into the final round of games on Tuesday.