

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi Held a Phone Call With His Emirati Counterpart Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Discussing Bilateral Relations and Regional Developments Including Yemen

# IRAN NEWS

Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi and His Saudi Arabian Counterpart, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, Held Telephone Talks to Discuss Bilateral Relations, as Well as Key Regional and International Developments.

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## Martyr Soleimani Transformed the Discourse of Resistance Beyond Rhetoric



### IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Highlighting the legacy of the late General Qasem Soleimani, Iran's Foreign Minister emphasized that Soleimani was the architect of the "Axis of Resistance" in the region, whose influence extended far beyond conventional foreign policy.

Speaking at the opening of the International Conference on "Martyr Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani: Diplomacy and Resistance," held in Tehran on Monday, the minister described Soleimani's thinking as the embodiment of the Islamic Revolution's ideals and the principles enshrined in Iran's Constitution. He referred to this approach as a "resistance-oriented diplomacy."

The minister explained that effective diplomacy requires both courage and prudence. While negotiation is the art of diplomacy, its success relies on a nation's underlying national power, including military, economic, cultural, and ideological components. He emphasized that "discourse power"—the ability to shape and communicate ideas—is a crucial but often overlooked element of national strength.

According to the minister, Iran's creation of the "discourse of the Islamic Revolution" and the "resistance discourse" has been a cornerstone of its influence at national, regional, and international levels. He noted that Soleimani embodied this resistance in action, establishing a resilient front against threats and conspiracies through his strategic presence on the battlefield.

## "Weak Iran" Narrative Is Enemy's Cognitive Warfare



### IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has warned that the enemy's new focus is a psychological and cognitive campaign aimed at undermining Iran's national morale and political identity.

Speaking at a press briefing in Rasht, IRGC spokesman Brigadier General Ali-Mohammad Naeini described the narrative of a "weak Iran" as the latest instrument in a long-running strategy by foreign adversaries. He emphasized that past events, such as the 2009 unrest and the 12-day war, had been foreign-engineered attempts to destabilize the Islamic Republic but failed due to national unity and strong leadership.

Naeini highlighted the significance of 9 Dey (December 30), marking the Iranian public's decisive response to the 2009 sedition. "9 Dey is the Day of Insight and the Nation's Covenant with the Leadership, a historical and inspirational event," he said. "It transformed a complex threat into an opportunity and continues to serve as a model for confronting new challenges."

Drawing parallels between the 2009 unrest and the 12-day war, Naeini said both were part of U.S.-Israeli projects aimed at regime change, orchestrated through intelligence agencies, media, and Western governments. "A single such incident could have destabilized a political system, yet the Islamic Republic not only survived but demonstrated its resilience to the world," he asserted.



### IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran has launched three domestically built remote sensing satellites using a Russian launcher.

Iranian officials said the three satellites were launched into orbit from Russia's Vostochny Cosmodrome as part of a multi-payload mission, marking the seventh time the country has used Russian rockets for satellite deployment.

The Soyuz satellite carrier lifted off on Sunday at 16:48 Tehran time, carrying multiple payloads, including Iran's Zafar 2, Paya, and Kowsar satellites.

Iran's Space Agency chief, Hassan Salarieh, said the launch heralded a bright future for the country's space sector.

"The successful launch of these satellites, achieved through the participation of various actors in the space industry, reflects the expanding scope of Iran's space program and the rapid growth of new players in this field," he said.

Salarieh said Iran has long been among the world's top 10 to 11 countries with full space technology, from building satellites and launch vehicles to having its own systems for launching, controlling, and receiving data.

In remarks ahead of the launch, Iran's Ambassador to Moscow, Kazem Jalali, described the mission as a major step forward for Iran's space program.

In a series of posts on the social platform X, Jalali emphasized that the satellites were designed and built entirely with indigenous Iranian technology, the result of collaboration between government agencies, universities, and private knowledge-based companies.

The ambassador explained that while all stages of design and construction were completed in Iran, the launch itself is being carried out in cooperation with Russia.

"Two of the satellites belong to the government, and one belongs to the private sector, and our knowledge-based companies and universities are active in this field."

Paya (Tolou-3), weighing in at 150 kilograms, is Iran's heaviest satellite to date. It delivers imagery with a resolution of about five meters in black and white and 10 meters in color.

Zafar-2, developed by the Iran University of Science and Technology, is designed to monitor natural resources, assess environmental conditions, and provide data for disaster response and mapping.

Kowsar-1.5, an upgraded version of earlier Kowsar and Hodhod satellites, integrates Internet of Things (IoT) capability, enabling real-time data transmission for smart monitoring systems.

Iran first entered the space arena in 2009 with the launch of the Omid satellite. Despite Western sanctions, Tehran has steadily expanded its civilian space program.

Meanwhile the Minister of Information and Communications Technology announced that the first signals from all three indigenous satellites—Zafar-2, Paya, and Kowsar—which were launched into space this afternoon, have been successfully received. He said this confirms their technical health and proper performance after being placed into orbit.

The simultaneous reception of signals at multiple control centers indicates stable communications and the correct functioning of the satellites' telecommunications systems.

Emphasizing that signal reception is considered the first key step after a satellite launch, he stated that success at this stage provides the necessary groundwork for continued technical monitoring, orbital stabilization, and the start of the next phases of the planned missions.

## Iran Plans New Satellite Missions in February

### IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Hassan Salarieh, head of Iran's Space Agency, announced that additional satellites will be launched into orbit in the upcoming month of Bahman (January-February), with key satellites in the "Martyr Soleimani" series set to be launched using domestic launch vehicles.

Speaking to reporters after the launch of three Iranian satellites aboard a Russian launch vehicle, Salarieh highlighted the country's active satellite program over the past year. "Several launches this year were experimental, aimed at stabilizing satellite technology," he said, noting that the year has already seen three domestic and two foreign launches.

He added that upcoming launches will focus on both the launchers and the satellites themselves, with a particular emphasis on preparing Iran's Chabahar Space Base for operational launches. "The first phase of the Chabahar base has been completed, with only minor construction work remaining. We are planning to conduct the first satellite launch from this site soon," he said.

Salarieh also confirmed that additional launches are scheduled for February, with precise dates to be announced. Meanwhile, the Salmas launch base is complete and undergoing "hot tests," with an official inauguration anticipated in the near future with the presence of the Minister of Communications.

Regarding the Nahid-3 satellite, Salarieh said it is currently in the research and development phase. "The initial design phase is complete, and once detailed design and construction are finished, it will be ready for prototype production and launch," he explained.

The Space Agency chief also detailed plans to utilize Iranian launch vehicles, including Simorgh, Qaem 110, and Ghased, for domestic satellite deployments. "We hope to use these launchers before the end of the year, with exact schedules to be announced," he added.

Several other satellites, including Nahid-2 (second unit) and the Research series (Research 1, 2, and 4), are nearing completion and will soon be ready for launch aboard Iranian vehicles.



Salarieh emphasized that Iran is pursuing both domestic and international launch programs. "While domestic launches focus on stabilizing satellite and launcher technology, international launches help accelerate satellite development. We plan to conduct foreign launches next year as well."

Addressing criticism over the use of foreign launch vehicles, he noted, "Many satellites have been built domestically, and it is essential to accelerate the process of internal satellite deployment. Our domestic launch capacity is strong, and this year alone we conducted three experimental launches. Overall, we expect five to six domestic and international launches annually due to the growing number of satellites ready for deployment."

He highlighted the diversity of Iran's satellite developers, including government, private, and academic institutions. Satellites such as Research 1, 2, 4, Nahid-2 second unit, and Saman-1 orbital transfer block are either ready for launch or nearing completion.

Looking ahead, Salarieh confirmed that the important Martyr Soleimani satellite series will be launched next year using Iranian launch vehicles. "We anticipate completing all launches in this series within the next year," he said, adding that internal launch traffic will increase alongside rising satellite production.

The Space Agency chief also noted that orbital testing is critical for stabilizing satellite technology and achieving eventual commercialization of Iran's space industry.

Regarding bio-capsules, Salarieh stated that the one-ton capsule design phase is complete, with launch expected by September next year. While some subsystems are still under construction and testing, the project is on track for next-year deployment, though minor technical adjustments may slightly shift the timeline.

This announcement underscores Iran's commitment to expanding its domestic space capabilities and establishing an independent satellite launch infrastructure, positioning the country for a more active year in space technology.

## Khartoum and Washington: Worlds Apart

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian



The Donald Trump administration is apparently trying to stop the internal clashes and humanitarian crisis in Sudan. While there are other reports, such as new travel restrictions for South Sudan, Trump, through his special envoy for Africa, Musad Boulos, is seeking to achieve a ceasefire of at least three months in Sudan. These measures are progressing in cooperation with partners such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt (the Quadrilateral Committee or "Quartet").

According to media reports, the goal of this ceasefire is to create space for sending humanitarian aid and to begin sustainable peace negotiations based on a roadmap prepared by the Quadrilateral Committee. Trump personally committed to intervening in this crisis after meeting with the Saudi Crown Prince and described it as "the most violent place on Earth."

Alongside these diplomatic efforts, the Trump administration expanded travel restrictions to the United States in December 2025. This national security decision is not directly related to the peace objectives in Sudan. According to this order, Sudan remains on the list of countries whose citizens face complete entry restrictions to the U.S.

South Sudan has been added to the list of countries under "full restrictions." The stated reasons include a high rate of visa violations (e.g., 26.09% for student visas) and the government's lack of cooperation in repatriating deportable citizens from the U.S.

These restrictions are generally imposed due to security concerns about the ability to "screen" travelers from countries with low stability or unreliable identification documents. To understand the necessity of these peace efforts, it is useful to look at the depth of the disaster:

This civil war has been ongoing since April 2023 between the Sudanese army, led by Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo ("Hemedti"). International organizations consider Sudan the largest displacement and humanitarian crisis in the world.

Millions of people have been displaced, and the hunger crisis is spreading catastrophically. Despite these efforts, experts see major obstacles to sustainable peace. Reports indicate Israeli regime support for the RSF, led by the UAE, and support for the Sudanese army by Egypt and Turkey. The success of the U.S. plan may require pressure on the UAE to stop its support, which is extremely complex behind the scenes due to political reasons and the demands of the Israeli regime.

Historical patterns of Sudanese leaders show that they often seek a ceasefire after defeat and think about continuing the war to consolidate their vision in society after victory. According to reports of the dire conditions of the people, even if a ceasefire is established, there is a serious lack of funding to save lives and stabilize the situation.

Overall, it seems that the Trump administration, by leveraging its diplomatic influence and cooperating with Arab allies, is apparently seeking to play an effective role in stopping the war in Sudan, accessing potential economic resources, and preventing Sudan from joining the "Axis of Resistance." However, the success of these efforts depends on many complex internal and regional factors.

## Armed Forces Will Not Allow Any Harm to Public Security



### IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Armed Forces General Staff has reaffirmed its commitment to safeguarding national security, stating that the country's armed forces will not allow any harm to be inflicted on the nation or its people.

In a statement issued on the occasion of 9 Dey (December 30), the General Staff honored the memory of Iran's fallen soldiers and veterans, describing 9 Dey as a historic popular uprising rooted in the will and vigilance of the Iranian nation. The statement emphasized that the armed forces, with full readiness and authority, remain prepared to confront any threat to public security.



# IRAN NEWS



## Iran, Turkey Underline Expanding Parliamentary Relations

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Iran's Ambassador in Ankara Mohammad Hassan Habibollahzadeh and Abdurrahim Dusak, the chairperson of the Turkish PUIC Group in the Subcommittee on Muslim Communities and Minorities, have stressed developing parliamentary relations.

The two sides discussed the importance of Tehran-Ankara cooperation and the need for greater convergence among Islamic countries to address regional challenges.

They expressed satisfaction with the level of bilateral relations, stressed exchanging parliamentary delegations, and maintaining cooperation between the two countries' parliamentary friendship groups.

### First Phase of Chabahar Spaceport to Be Completed by Next Year



#### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Minister of Information and Communications Technology announced that the first phase of the Chabahar Spaceport is expected to be completed by next year, adding that the launch of new and more advanced communications satellites, including upgraded versions of Nahid-2, is high on the ministry's agenda.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of the simultaneous launch of three Iranian satellites, Seyed Sattar Hashemi described the mission as a major achievement for the country's space sector. He said all three satellites are equipped with Earth observation and imaging capabilities, and their successful launch signals promising developments for the future of Iran's space industry.

Hashemi stressed that the space sector is a fully strategic domain with wide-ranging applications in everyday life. He explained that Earth observation satellites play a vital role in water resource management, smart agriculture, estimating irrigation needs, monitoring land subsidence, and geological mapping. These capabilities, he noted, are increasingly essential for sustainable development and national planning.

Referring to the government's broader space policy, the minister highlighted communications satellites as one of the key priorities. In response to a question about the launch timeline for Nahid-2, Hashemi said the satellite and its associated systems feature high-precision communications and sensing functions, and their launch is planned as part of upcoming missions.

He emphasized that expanding satellite communications is particularly important given the ministry's responsibility to provide reliable connectivity for rural and hard-to-reach areas across the country. Due to limitations in terrestrial infrastructure, Hashemi said, high-quality satellite services are critical to ensuring equitable access to communications and accelerating digital development nationwide.

Addressing investment in the satellite sector, the minister said the Ministry of Communications has already invested—and will continue to invest—in both sensing and communications satellite services. According to Hashemi, these investments are aligned with long-term planning to strengthen national space capabilities and enhance service delivery.

### Iran to Host First Green Investment Opportunities Exhibition in Tourism



#### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran will host its first Exhibition of Green Investment Opportunities in Tourism on January 10–11 (20–21 Dey), aiming to guide and facilitate sustainable, environmentally friendly investment in the country's tourism sector. The event will be held at the Iran Chamber of Commerce in Tehran, alongside a meeting of the Chamber's Board of Representatives.

The exhibition is being organized by the Tourism Commission of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture. It seeks to establish a coordinated national framework for green investments in tourism while supporting innovation, green technology, and sustainable entrepreneurship across the sector. The event will bring together leading companies, government bodies, non-governmental organizations, universities, investment funds, and private-sector stakeholders.

Seyed Mostafa Mousavi, head of the Tourism Commission of the Iran Chamber, said the exhibition is designed to form a strategic and network-based alliance to channel green investments toward the sustainable development of Iran's tourism industry. He noted that the initiative is not merely a showcase, but a platform for aligning capital, knowledge, technology, and policymaking to accelerate responsible and sustainable tourism projects.

## Iran's Private Sector Ready to Take Part in Indonesia's Engineering Projects

#### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The head of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture has announced that Iran's private sector is fully prepared to participate in large-scale technical and engineering projects in Indonesia, stressing that closer cooperation between the chambers of commerce of the two countries could significantly expand bilateral economic ties and facilitate joint initiatives.

Samad Hassanzadeh, president of the Iran Chamber, said Iranian private companies possess strong technical expertise and industrial capacity, enabling them to contribute effectively to major engineering and infrastructure projects in Indonesia. He emphasized that enhanced institutional coordination between the Iran Chamber and the Indonesia Chamber of Commerce and Industry would help remove existing barriers and create a smoother pathway for cooperation between businesses on both sides.

Hassanzadeh made the remarks during a meeting with Rollyan Shah Soemirat, Indonesia's ambassador to Iran, where discussions focused on expanding trade, investment, and private-sector collaboration. He said the Iran Chamber is firmly committed to strengthening economic relations with Indonesia and has prioritized the exchange of trade delegations, business information, and market intelligence between the private sectors of the two countries.

Highlighting the strategic importance of Iran–Indonesia relations, Hassanzadeh pointed to the large populations of the two countries, which together approach nearly 300 million people and share strong cultural and religious ties as predominantly Muslim nations. He noted that these shared characteristics provide a solid foundation for cooperation across multiple economic sectors, particularly in the halal industry, which continues to experience strong global growth. In this context, he said Iran is eager to host Indonesian trade delegations at specialized exhibitions and trade fairs, while also sending Iranian business delegations to Indonesia to explore new commercial and investment opportunities.

Hassanzadeh also referred to Iran's unilateral decision to lift visa requirements for Indonesian citizens, describing it as an important step toward closer people-to-people and business ties. He added that further facilitation of visa issuance—especially business visas for Iranian traders—would significantly support the expansion of bilateral trade, tourism, and health tourism, helping diversify economic cooperation beyond traditional sectors.

Addressing the broader economic environment, Hassanzadeh said that despite ongoing international sanctions, Iran continues to seek wider engagement with global partners, particularly in the economic and trade spheres. He explained that restrictions on the import of machinery and certain goods have driven Iran to develop strong domestic capabilities in advanced technologies that comply with international standards. These capabilities, he noted, are particularly evident in petrochemicals, food processing, agriculture, and emerging fields such as artificial intelligence.

He also emphasized the importance of multilateral economic platforms, noting that Iran and Indonesia are both members of shared organizations such as the Developing Eight (D8). Hassanzadeh said these frameworks offer valuable opportunities to enhance cooperation, especially in areas where Iran has established strengths, including the export of technical and engineering services and the execution of refinery, oil, and petrochemical projects. Such expertise, he added, could be effectively utilized in



Indonesia and other Islamic countries pursuing industrial and infrastructure development.

Reiterating the readiness of Iran's private sector, Hassanzadeh said Iranian companies are well positioned to take part in Indonesia's large-scale engineering and technical service projects. He stressed that chambers of commerce in both countries have a critical role to play in facilitating contacts, addressing regulatory issues, and encouraging partnerships. While acknowledging challenges related to financial transfers and banking restrictions, he said there remains

significant potential for cooperation in non-sanctioned sectors.

Hassanzadeh outlined Iran's diverse production base, noting that the country manufactures a wide range of high-quality products, including steel, bitumen, chemical products, power plant equipment, dried fruits and nuts, machine-made carpets, handicrafts, lead, medical equipment and pharmaceuticals, aluminum, building stones, tiles, ceramics, and glass. He emphasized that Iranian products are produced to high standards, are competitively priced, and can meet the needs of international markets. The Iran Chamber, he said, is keen to expand trade in these goods with Indonesian partners.

He also identified areas where Indonesia could supply Iran's market, including timber, motorcycles, fresh and frozen seafood, vegetable oils, machinery, and industrial equipment. Hassanzadeh said Iran is open to conducting trade with Indonesia through preferential trade arrangements or barter mechanisms, which could help mitigate financial and banking constraints.

For his part, Ambassador Rollyan Shah Soemirat said his mission aligns with directives from Indonesia's president to elevate relations with Iran, particularly in trade and economic cooperation. He said he is actively working to expand ties between the Iran Chamber and Indonesia's national and provincial chambers to identify new areas for collaboration between private enterprises.

Soemirat acknowledged that Iran and Indonesia are still far from achieving their ambitious bilateral trade target of \$20 billion and stressed the need to finalize the preferential trade agreement between the two countries as soon as possible. He said Indonesia is interested in importing a variety of Iranian products, including agricultural goods, chemicals, construction materials, medical equipment, and dairy products, adding that Indonesia's priorities in food and energy security create favorable conditions for expanded cooperation.

The ambassador also noted strong interest among Indonesian chambers of commerce and small and medium-sized enterprises in working with Iranian partners. However, he emphasized the importance of improving mutual understanding of trade regulations and financial transfer mechanisms to facilitate smoother business operations. He added that steps are underway to ease visa requirements and expand business visa issuance for Iranian nationals.

At the same meeting, Yadollah Tahermezhad, head of the Iran–Indonesia Joint Committee, called for greater cooperation to establish a direct Tehran–Jakarta flight, saying such a connection would significantly boost trade, business exchanges, and overall economic relations between the two countries.

## Iran–Afghanistan Engineering Cooperation Under Review

#### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The opportunities and challenges surrounding the expansion of technical and engineering cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan were examined at a recent meeting of the Technical, Engineering, and Construction Commission of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture.

Ali Naqvi, head of the commission, described Afghanistan as a strategically important market for Iran's export of technical and engineering services. He noted that the country's extensive need for infrastructure reconstruction, combined with cultural and geographical proximity and the competitive advantages of Iranian firms, makes Afghanistan one of Iran's closest and highest-priority destinations for overseas engineering activities.

Naqvi emphasized that memoranda of understanding signed between private-sector actors in Iran and Afghanistan represent only an initial step. Transforming these agreements into executable contracts, he said, requires careful risk assessment, the design of appropriate financial and guarantee mechanisms, and coordinated action within the framework of economic diplomacy.

He also highlighted the necessity of adhering to international tender regulations and applying FIDIC contractual standards in cross-border projects. Observance of these rules, Naqvi said, can improve transparency, reduce contractual disputes, and enhance the credibility and competitiveness of Iranian engineering companies in international markets.

Issa Mansouri, head of the Iran Chamber Research Center, stressed the importance of problem-oriented research in supporting private-sector decision-making. He announced the center's readiness to cooperate with the commission in defining and implementing joint research initiatives, describing such collaboration as a step toward better use of expert capacity within the private sector.

Alireza Moghaddas-Zadeh Ardabili, head of the National Coordination Council of Engineering Associations and president of the Iranian Syndicate of Construction and Road-Building Companies, underlined the need for stronger institutional coordination in developing overseas engineering activities. He pointed to the role of



specialized associations in drafting standardized contracts, noting that their practical experience can help reduce risks and improve project efficiency, especially in markets like Afghanistan.

Mohammad Halvaei, vice chairman of the commission and head of the Association of Engineering, Procurement and Construction Companies, emphasized the importance of professionalizing contract processes in international projects. He highlighted the need to update and refine annexes to standardized contracts with a technical and quality-focused approach to minimize legal, operational, and financial challenges.

The meeting also reviewed a report on the Iran Chamber delegation's recent visit to Kabul and participation in the Fourth National and International Imam Abu Hanifa Exhibition. According to Saeid Noshad Soheili, Iran had the largest presence at the event, with nearly 40 booths and around 100 economic participants, resulting in memoranda of understanding worth about \$262 million between Iranian and Afghan private-sector representatives.

Energy cooperation emerged as a central theme, with discussions highlighting Afghanistan's reliance on electricity imports and a power deficit of approximately 6,000 megawatts. Iranian representatives presented capabilities in electricity exports, transmission networks, power equipment manufacturing, renewable energy development, and workforce training. Afghan officials proposed long-term build–operate–transfer models and barter arrangements involving natural resources as potential project frameworks.

In meetings with Afghan government officials and the Afghan Chamber of Commerce, Afghan representatives expressed interest in joint projects, technology transfer, and training Afghan engineers in cooperation with Iranian firms. The revival of the Chabahar–Zahedan–Milak–Kandahar transit corridor was also cited as a key factor in facilitating trade and engineering cooperation.

Concluding the session, Naqvi called for a specialized follow-up meeting focused on Afghanistan to closely examine project risks, security conditions, and financial mechanisms, stressing that turning agreements into executable contracts requires careful planning and sustained institutional coordination.

### Over 60% of Iran's Clothing Market Dominated by Smuggled Goods



#### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - More than 60 percent of Iran's clothing market is reportedly supplied by smuggled products, mostly low-quality stock, according to Majid Eftekhari, a board member of the Iran Clothing Producers and Exporters Union. Speaking at a press briefing ahead of the 13th Iran Mod International Clothing Exhibition, Eftekhari warned that these illegal imports severely undermine domestic producers' competitiveness.

“These smuggled goods bypass legal regulations and oversight and enter the market without bearing production costs such as taxes, insurance, or quality standards,” Eftekhari explained. “As a result, local manufacturers face a highly uneven playing field, often forced to either tolerate ongoing losses or shut down operations to preserve remaining capital.”

Eftekhari stressed that addressing smuggling falls under the authority of the Anti-Smuggling Task Force. However, he pointed out that confiscated goods often reappear in the market, demonstrating that traffickers have learned to circumvent existing regulations. He also noted the disruptive impact of informal imports, including shipments via traditional trading vessels (tehl-anji), which can threaten employment in the domestic clothing sector.

Highlighting public health concerns, Eftekhari said many smuggled items originate from Pakistan and Bangladesh and fail to meet safety and quality standards, potentially endangering consumers. He also criticized the lack of targeted government support, noting that no effective incentive packages have been provided to help local manufacturers cope with economic shocks, currency fluctuations, or market instability.

### Gov't Focuses on Countering Western 'Iranophobia'



#### IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's government is actively working to neutralize negative propaganda and “Iranophobia” promoted by Western countries while restoring the nation's tourism sector to pre-crisis levels, officials said at a recent meeting with hotel operators.

Anoushiravan Mohseni Bandpei, Deputy Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts for Tourism, spoke at a gathering of provincial hotel association heads, free-zone investors, and managers of hotel chains at the Homay Hotel in Tehran. He highlighted the government's efforts to stabilize energy tariffs for tourism facilities, noting that rates are calculated in line with industrial standards and remain affordable. “While tourism stakeholders have expressed concerns over potential hikes in energy costs, no significant changes have been implemented so far,” he said.

Mohseni Bandpei added that over 2,747 tourism projects are currently under construction across Iran. Hotels with more than 50 percent completion, and other facilities exceeding 70 percent completion, are eligible for preferential loans through the Central Bank's microfinance fund.

The deputy minister emphasized that government efforts to counter negative campaigns and Western Iranophobia include fostering dialogue with countries across the Nowruz cultural region, the Gulf neighbors, the Caucasus, Russia, and China. “Through these measures, we aim to return the tourism sector to the status it held before regional crises,” he said.

Highlighting domestic tourism trends, Mohseni Bandpei noted that diversification of travel destinations has been a key objective. During Nowruz 1404, travel to lesser-known provinces increased by 7–8 percent, while visits to traditional hotspots fell by 6–7 percent. To further promote emerging destinations, the ministry is planning exhibitions and negotiating with railway companies, including Raja Rail, to launch dedicated tourist trains.



## Serbia's Students Gather Signatures for Early Elections Goal

**BELGRADE (Dispatches)** - Protesting students in Serbia on Sunday swapped massive street demonstrations for a push to collect citizens' signatures, to gauge whether they had support to demand snap parliamentary elections.

A wave of large-scale student-led protests has gripped Serbia since November 2024, after the collapse of a railway station roof killed 16 people in Novi Sad, the country's second-largest city.

The tragedy at the newly renovated station became a symbol of entrenched corruption, with demands for a transparent investigation escalating into calls for early elections -- which have so far been rejected by authorities.

"We are counting to get a rough idea of how many people support us," Jana, a first-year philosophy student, told AFP in Belgrade, while staffing one of nearly 500 stands nationwide. She declined to give her last name.



## Somaliland Recognition Prompts Celebrations, Condemnation



**MOGADISHU (Dispatches)** - People gathered in several towns in the breakaway region of Somaliland on Sunday to celebrate its recognition by Israel -- a decision condemned by the Somali president as a "threat" to stability in the Horn of Africa.

Israel announced on Friday it was officially recognising Somaliland, a first for the self-proclaimed republic that in 1991 declared it had unilaterally separated from Somalia.

On Sunday, the leader of the Houthis warned that any Israeli presence in Somaliland would be considered a "military target".

Somaliland, which has for decades pushed for international recognition, enjoys a strategic position on the Gulf of Aden and has its own money, passport and army.

Thousands of people thronged a stadium in the capital Hargeisa, where many dressed in the green, white and red colours of Somaliland's flag.

"Victory for Somaliland!" they chanted.

The flag was hoisted alongside that of Israel in a ceremony broadcast live by Somaliland television stations.

"Mass celebrations are taking place in Hargeisa and across cities of the Republic of Somaliland, as citizens proudly gather to commemorate the historic decision by the Government of Israel," Somaliland's foreign ministry said on X.

"We welcome every country that recognises our existence," Jama Suleyman, a resident of Hargeisa, told AFP.

# U.S. and Ukraine a Lot Closer on Peace Deal

**PALM BEACH (Dispatches)** - U.S. President Donald Trump said that he and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy were "getting a lot closer, maybe very close" to an agreement to end the war in Ukraine, while acknowledging that the fate of the disputed Donbas region remains a key unresolved issue.

The two leaders spoke at a joint news conference after meeting at Trump's Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida on Sunday afternoon. Both leaders reported progress on two of the most contentious issues in peace talks - security guarantees for Ukraine and the division of eastern Ukraine's Donbas region that Russia has sought to capture.

Both Trump and Zelenskyy offered few details and did not provide a deadline for completing a peace deal, although Trump said it will be clear "in a few weeks" whether negotiations to end the war will succeed. He said a few "thorny issues" around territory must be resolved.

Zelenskyy said an agreement on security guarantees for Ukraine has been reached. Trump was slightly more cautious, saying that they were 95% of the way to such an agreement, and that he expected European countries to "take over a big part" of that effort with U.S. backing.

French President Emmanuel Macron, in an X post published after Trump met with Zelenskyy, said progress was made on security guarantees. Macron said countries in the so-called "Coalition of the Willing" would meet in Paris in early January to finalise their "concrete contributions."

Zelenskyy has said previously that he hopes to soften a U.S. proposal for Ukrainian forces to withdraw completely from Donbas, a Russian demand that would mean ceding some territory held by Ukrainian forces. While Moscow insists on getting all of Donbas, Kyiv wants the map frozen at current battle lines.

Both Trump and Zelenskyy said on Sunday the future of the Donbas had not been settled, though the U.S. president said discussions are "moving in the right direction." The United States, seeking a compromise, has proposed a free economic zone if Ukraine leaves the area, although it remains unclear how that zone would function in practical terms.

"It's unresolved, but it's getting a lot closer. That's a very tough issue," Trump said.

Nor did the leaders offer much insight into what agreements they had reached on providing security for Ukraine after the war ends, something Zelenskyy described Sunday as "the key milestone in achieving a lasting peace."

Zelenskyy said any peace agreement would have to be approved by Ukraine's parliament, or by a referendum. Trump said he would be willing to speak to parliament if that would secure the deal.

Shortly before Zelenskyy and his delegation arrived at Trump's Florida residence, Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke in a call described as "productive" by the U.S. president and "friendly" by Kremlin foreign policy aide Yuri Ushakov.

Ushakov, in Moscow, said Putin told Trump a 60-day ceasefire proposed by the European Union and Ukraine would prolong



the war. The Kremlin aide also said Ukraine needs to make a decision regarding the Donbas "without further delay."

Trump said he and Putin spoke for more than two hours. He said the Russian president pledged to help rebuild Ukraine, including by supplying cheap energy. "Russia wants to see Ukraine succeed," Trump said. "It sounds a little strange."

As Trump praised Putin, Zelenskyy tilted his head and smiled.

Trump said he would call Putin again following the meeting with Zelenskyy.

The Kremlin expressed support for Trump's negotiations. "The whole world appreciates President Trump and his team's peace efforts," Kirill Dmitriev, Putin's special envoy, posted on X early on Monday after Trump's talks with Zelenskyy.

U.S. negotiators have also proposed shared control over the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant. Power line repairs have begun there after another local ceasefire brokered by the International Atomic Energy Agency, the agency said on Sunday.

Negotiators, Trump said, have made progress on deciding the fate of the plant, which can "start up almost immediately." The U.S. president said "it's a big step" that Russia had not bombed the facility.

Russia controls all of Crimea, which it annexed in 2014, and since its invasion of Ukraine nearly four years ago has taken control of about 12% of its territory, including about 90% of the Donbas, 75% of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, and slivers of the Kharkiv, Sumy, Mykolaiv and Dnipropetrovsk regions, according to Russian estimates.

The day before Zelenskyy arrived in Florida to meet with Trump, Russian forces attacked Kyiv and other parts of Ukraine with hundreds of missiles and drones, knocking out power and heat in parts of the Ukrainian capital. Zelenskyy has described the weekend attacks as Russia's response to the U.S.-brokered peace efforts, but Trump on Sunday said he believes Putin and Zelenskyy are serious about peace.

After Saturday's air attacks, Putin said Moscow would continue waging its war if Kyiv did not seek a quick peace. Russia has steadily advanced on the battlefield in recent months, claiming control over several more settlements on Sunday.

European heads of state joined at least part of Sunday's meeting by phone. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said on social media site X that "Europe is ready to keep working with Ukraine and our US partners," and added that having ironclad security guarantees will be of "paramount" importance.

A spokesman for U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer said European leaders "underlined the importance of robust security guarantees and reaffirmed the urgency of ending this barbaric war as soon as possible."

# China Launches War Games Around Taiwan as Island Vows to Defend Democracy

**BEIJING (Dispatches)** - China's military moved army, naval, air force and artillery units around Taiwan on Monday for its "Justice Mission 2025" drills, as the island vowed to defend democracy and mobilised troops to rehearse repelling a potential Chinese attack.

The Eastern Theatre Command announced the drills will involve live-fire exercises on Tuesday, in a statement containing a graphic demarcating five zones surrounding the island that will be under sea and air space restrictions for 10 hours from 8 a.m. (0000 GMT).

This marks China's sixth major round of war games since 2022 after then-U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited the democratically governed island, and follows a rise in Chinese rhetoric over Beijing's territorial claims after Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi suggested a hypothetical Chinese attack on Taiwan could trigger a military response from Tokyo.

The exercises began 11 days after the U.S. announced \$11.1 billion in arms sales to Taiwan, the largest ever weapons package for the island, drawing a protest from China's defence ministry and warnings the military would "take forceful measures" in response.

Analysts say Beijing's drills increasingly blur the line between routine military training exercises and what could be stage-setting for an attack, a strategy intended to give the U.S. and its allies minimal warning of an assault.

China's military said it had deployed fighter jets, bombers, unmanned aerial vehicles, and long-range rockets, and would practice striking mobile land-based targets while simulating a coordinated attack on the island from multiple directions.

"This (the drills) serves as a serious warning to 'Taiwan Independence' separatist forces and external interference forces," said Shi Yi, a spokesperson for the Eastern Theatre Command.

Taiwan's government condemned the drills. A presidential office spokesperson urged China not to misjudge the situation and undermine regional peace, and called on Beijing to immediately halt what they described as irresponsible provocations.

The island's defence ministry said two Chinese military aircraft and 11 ships had been operating around the island over the last 24 hours, and that Taiwan's military was on high alert and poised to carry out "rapid response exercises."

That particular drill is designed to move troops swiftly in case China suddenly turns one of its drills around the island into an attack.



"All members of our armed forces will remain highly vigilant and fully on guard, taking concrete action to defend the values of democracy and freedom," the defence ministry said.

Dozens of Chinese military boats and planes were operating near Taiwan on Monday, and some of them "deliberately closing in" to Taiwan's contiguous zone, defined as being 24 nautical miles from its coast, a senior Taiwan security official told Reuters.

Taiwan's coast guard said it had dispatched large ships in reaction to Chinese coast guard activity near the island's waters and that it was working with the island's military to minimise the drills' impact on maritime routes and fishing areas.

Taiwan stock markets were unaffected by the drills, up 0.6% to a record high in morning trading.

"I think these drills are just meant to scare us," said Lin Wei-ming, a 31-year-

old teacher based in the capital, Taipei. "Similar drills have happened before... the political side of things can only be handled by Taiwan's current government and how they choose to respond."

Taiwan rejects China's claimed sovereignty, maintaining that only its people can decide the island's future.

The Chinese military released two posters titled "Shields of Justice: Smashing Illusions," and "Arrows of Justice: Control and Denial", along with a third graphic depicting four locations across the island with targets locking on, following the drill announcement.

China's state broadcaster said the drills would focus on sealing off Taiwan's vital deep-water Port of Keelung to the island's north and Kaohsiung to Taiwan's south, the island's largest port city.

While the PLA practiced port blockades around Taiwan during war games last year, this marks the first time it has publicly stated that drills around the island are aimed at "deterrence" of outside military intervention.

The Japanese prime minister's remarks triggered a surge in Chinese messaging stressing its sovereignty claims. Chinese leader Xi Jinping told U.S. President Donald Trump in November that Taiwan's "return to China" after World War Two was central to Beijing's vision of the global order.

The first poster appeared to show the armada of civilian ships China is mobilising to help in an attack on Taiwan. Vessels with ramps and open decks similar to military landing craft used in amphibious assaults were also shown.

"Any foreign interference that touches the shield (of justice) shall perish!" the poster read. "Any separatist scoundrels who encounter the shield shall be destroyed!"

The second poster shows flaming arrows raining down on Taiwan and spearing green cartoon bugs. Beijing regularly calls Taiwan's President Lai Ching-te a "parasite" and began using the cartoon green bug caricature to represent separatist forces during April's war games.

"I think their (China's) goal is, as they said, 'keep the island, not the people,'" said Stephanie Huang, a 56-year-old interior designer. "They just want to save face by claiming Taiwan as part of their own country, but Taiwanese people don't see it that way."

"We are who we are; they are who they are."

## Kosovo's PM Kurti Set for Second Term After Decisive Election Win



**PRISTINA (Dispatches)** - Kosovo's Prime Minister Albin Kurti looked poised to secure another term after his Self-Determination party won a snap parliamentary election by a wide margin, preliminary results showed, ending months of political deadlock in the Balkan country.

The Vetevendosje, or Self-Determination, party won nearly 50% of the ballots, far ahead of the opposition Democratic Party of Kosovo with 21%, and the Democratic League of Kosovo with nearly 14%, state election authorities said after nearly all the ballots were counted.

"Congratulations on the biggest victory in the history of the country," a cheerful Kurti said after results were announced. "Now we have a lot of work ahead of us."

The snap ballot on Sunday was scheduled after the Self-Determination party failed to form a government despite also winning the most votes in a February 9 election, which led to a months-long political deadlock.

It was not immediately clear whether the Self-Determination party had won 61 seats in the 120-member parliament to be able to rule alone. Kurti said a new parliament and a government would be formed as soon as possible.

**SEOUL (Dispatches)** - North Korea test-fired two strategic long-range cruise missiles, state media reported Monday, hailing the exercise as a show of "combat readiness" against foreign threats.

Leader Kim Jong Un oversaw the drill -- staged Sunday over the Yellow Sea to the west of the Korean peninsula -- and called for "unlimited and sustained" development of his nuclear weapons forces, the state-run Korean Central News Agency said.

The goal of the exercise was to review the "counter-offensive response posture and combat capability of long-range missile sub-units," KCNA said.

The missiles flew for more than two hours, state media said, sharing photos of the missiles being fired and hitting a target.

Seoul's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the missiles were fired Sunday at 8:00 am (2300 GMT Saturday) from the Sunan area near the capital Pyongyang.

Kim vowed Pyongyang "would as ever devote all their efforts to the unlimited and sustained development of the state nuclear combat force", KCNA said.

North Korea last staged a ballistic missile test in early November, around a week after US President Donald Trump -- on a tour of the region -- expressed



interest in meeting with Kim.

Pyongyang did not respond to the offer.

At that time, Trump had just approved South Korean plans to build a nuclear-powered submarine.

Last week Pyongyang showed off a nuclear submarine of its own.

Photos published by KCNA showed Kim walking alongside a purportedly 8,700-tonne submarine at an indoor assembly site, surrounded by officials and his daughter Kim Ju Ae.

Pyongyang viewed Seoul developing nuclear subs as "an offensive act severely violating its security and maritime sovereignty", Kim said, according to KCNA.

North Korean state media last week also published a defence ministry statement condemning the docking of the US Navy's nuclear-powered attack submarine USS Greenville in South Korea's Busan.

The cruise missile launch drill was aimed at countering these moves, said Yang Moo-jin, former president of the University of North Korean Studies in Seoul.

"The arrow-type cruise missiles, with a range of around 2,000 kilometres, are capable of striking not only the entire Korean peninsula but also rear bases of US forces stationed in Japan," Yang told AFP.

# North Korea Tests Cruise Missiles in Show of Combat Readiness





## Steelers, Panthers Lose to Set Up Showdowns for Playoff Berths

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The Pittsburgh Steelers and Carolina Panthers lost on Sunday to miss out on clinching NFL playoff berths, setting up a pair of showdowns next week for post-season spots.

Cleveland beat Pittsburgh 13-6 to snap the Steelers' three-game win streak.

The Baltimore Ravens (8-8) will visit Pittsburgh (9-7) next week in a winner-take-all game that will decide the AFC North division title and final AFC playoff spot.

The Browns (4-12) halted a four-game losing skid by snapping Pittsburgh's three-game win streak and imposing a fourth consecutive defeat on the Steelers in games at Cleveland.

Shedeur Sanders' 28-yard touchdown pass to Harold Fannin lifted host Cleveland to a 10-6 halftime lead and Andre Szmyt added a 33-yard field goal for the Browns with 1:40 remaining.

Aaron Rodgers drove Pittsburgh to the Cleveland 7-yard line but couldn't produce a touchdown. "We had been executing at a high level the entire game and the guys were intent on bending but not breaking," NFL sacks leader Myles Garrett of the Browns said.

"They can get all the yards they want but they can't get in our end zone and we showed that all day."

After Tampa Bay's 20-17 loss at Miami, the Carolina Panthers could have captured the NFC South crown with a home victory.

But Seattle's Sam Darnold threw for 147 yards and a touchdown and Zach Charbonnet ran for 110 yards and two touchdowns in the Seahawks' 27-10 rout at Charlotte.

The result set up a crucial matchup next week with Carolina (8-8) at Tampa Bay (7-9) and the winner likely taking the last NFC playoff spot.

Should Atlanta (6-9) beat the Los Angeles Rams on Monday and New Orleans next week and Tampa Bay defeat Carolina to create a three-way tie at 8-9, Carolina would advance based on season results among the three clubs.

The Seahawks (13-3) were level 3-3 at halftime but broke open the game in the second half for their sixth consecutive triumph.

"You'd like to come out a little faster but our defense played well the entire game, kept us in it and we did enough in the second half to win," Darnold said.

With a victory next week at San Francisco, the Seahawks would clinch the NFC top seed and a first-round bye.

"We're really confident. We've been confident all year," Darnold said. "So we're just going to keep this thing rolling."

New England's Drake Maye threw a career-high five touchdown passes as the visiting Patriots routed the New York Jets 42-10 to match Denver at 13-3 in the fight for the AFC top seed and a first-round playoff bye.

The Patriots clinched the AFC East division crown when Buffalo lost a 13-12 thriller to defending champion Philadelphia.

Jalen Hurts threw a one-yard touchdown pass to Dallas Goedert and Jake Elliott kicked field goals of 28 and 47 yards to give the Eagles a 13-0 lead entering the fourth quarter.

Buffalo's Josh Allen answered on a two-yard touchdown run with 5:11 remaining but the conversion kick was blocked, leaving the Bills down 13-6.

Allen marched Buffalo 83 yards and scored on a one-yard plunge with five seconds remaining to lift the Bills within the final margin.

They went for a game-winning two-point conversion but Allen's pass was incomplete and the Eagles won, leaving both teams 11-5.

"Our defense never quits, no matter what the scoreboard says, no matter what the situation is," Eagles defender Zack Baun said.

## NBA-Best Thunder End Two-Game Skid as Raptors Win in OT



WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Chet Holmgren scored 29 points and grabbed nine rebounds to lead reigning champion Oklahoma City over Philadelphia 129-104 as the NBA's winningest team snapped a two-game losing streak.

Reigning NBA Most Valuable Player Shai Gilgeous-Alexander added 27 points, five assists, two steals and two rebounds as the Thunder improved to 27-5.

"We just did a good job getting back to our style of play and our standards," Thunder reserve Andrew Wiggins said. "We did a good job just course correcting."

Wiggins scored 15 points on 6-of-8 shooting for the Thunder, who had lost four of their prior six games, three of them to San Antonio.

"We had good recovery days and good practice and were just a little more disciplined within the way we want to play," said Wiggins. "Did a good job making the right plays and sticking to it the entire game."

"Third quarter we turned it up a little bit midway through and we were able to get going."

Tyrese Maxey scored 28 points to lead seven double-digit scorers for the 76ers (16-14).

Toronto's Scottie Barnes delivered a triple double with 23 points, 25 rebounds and 10 assists to lead the Raptors over visiting Golden State 141-127 in overtime.

Immanuel Quickley scored 27 points and Brandon Ingram added 26 to lead Toronto while Stephen Curry scored a game-high 39 points for the Warriors, whose three-game win streak was snapped.

## Spurs Win as Gray's Header Keeps Frank in a Job



LONDON (Dispatches) - Tottenham ground out a much-needed three points for the under-fire Thomas Frank with a 1-0 win at Crystal Palace, while high-flying Sunderland were held 1-1 by Leeds.

Archie Gray was Spurs' unlikely match winner at Selhurst Park with his first senior goal as Frank's men won for just the second time in nine league games.

Richarlison had two goals disallowed for offside but Gray's header was enough for Tottenham against a Palace side running out of steam after a gruelling schedule.

"In the end we got over the line," said Frank. "The team showed great resilience today and I think the desire beat the details in the game."

The Eagles are winless in five games as they have hit the wall from trying to stretch their limited resources across three competitions.

Oliver Glasner described his side's set-piece defending in a 4-1 defeat to Leeds last weekend as "embarrassing" and it was a dead ball that cost them once more against a Spurs team badly lacking in creativity.

An overdue victory will temporarily ease the scrutiny on Frank, but another performance devoid of flair going forward will do little to quieten his doubters in the Tottenham support.

The visitors did not have a shot on target from open play before half-time but were only denied by a VAR review for offside when Richarlison thought he had opened the scoring.

Instead the source of the only goal was an unexpected one as Gray headed in Richarlison's flick from a corner for his first goal in 112 appearances for Tottenham and Leeds.

Palace dominated territory and possession after the break but lacked the class needed in front of goal to make Spurs pay.

## Kyrgios Beats Sabalenka in "Battle of the Sexes"

DUBAI (Dispatches) - Nick Kyrgios beat women's world number one Aryna Sabalenka in the "Battle of the Sexes", in a highly-publicized showdown with modified rules that divided tennis fans.

Former Wimbledon finalist Kyrgios won 6-3, 6-3 in an exhibition match in Dubai bearing little resemblance to the era-defining 1973 encounter between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs.

Back then, there was 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.

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.

Each player received only one serve and the dimensions of Sabalenka's side of the court were nine percent smaller, in an attempt to restrict Kyrgios' power and speed advantage.

Critics questioned the motive behind the event, organised by the agency that manages the careers of both players, beyond the broadcast ratings and money generated.

The suitability of Kyrgios — who admitted assaulting an



ex-girlfriend in 2021 and has had to distance himself from misogynistic remarks in the past — for the men's role in the act also stirred debate.

Kyrgios, the 2022 Wimbledon runner-up, has dropped to 671 in the rankings after playing just six tour-level matches over the past three

seasons, but the 30-year-old Australian still had enough to see off four-time Grand Slam singles champion Sabalenka.

"Honestly, it was a really tough match. She is a hell of a player and such a great champion," said Kyrgios.

"She broke my serve numerous times, and I had to strap in.

"Honestly, I would love to play her again and showcase her talent and what I have left in the tank. Ultimately it was a really hard-fought battle."

Kyrgios admitted he dealt with nerves as Sabalenka strode into the arena to "Eye of the Tiger" in a sparkling jacket.

"Of course I was nervous. Not many people would have put their hand up to be in this position," said Kyrgios.

"Sabalenka was up for the challenge, and the scoreline was close."

Sabalenka, who retained her US Open title in this year, said she was keen for a rematch with Kyrgios.

"I think I put up a great fight. He was struggling, he got really tired," said Sabalenka.

## Shiffrin Wins Sixth Straight Slalom But Rips "Unsafe" Course

LONDON (Dispatches) - Mikaela Shiffrin kept her winning streak intact but left Austria frustrated after edging Switzerland's Camille Rast in a night slalom at Semmering, criticizing what she described as unsafe race conditions in the final women's World Cup event of the calendar year.

The American rebounded from a sluggish opening run to post the fastest time in the evening session, finishing 0.09 seconds ahead of world champion Rast. Albania's Italian-born prodigy Lara Colturi, 19, was 0.57 seconds back in third.

Shiffrin, who started fourth on the first run, was more than half a second off the pace on a rapidly deteriorating Panorama course, where mild weather forced organizers to



inject water and salt into the snow. Despite those measures, the surface broke apart in multiple sections during the afternoon session, which began at 2.15pm local time.

"I have to say this: It was not safe to ski for the girls," Shiffrin told Austrian television. "For me, bib four on the first run, it's not a problem. But for these women starting bib 13, 15, 18, in the 60s, this is not OK."

Only 40 of the 77 starters completed the opening run, and a deficit of nearly six seconds was still enough to qualify for the final. Conditions improved slightly for the night session, held three and a half hours later as temperatures dropped.