

Iran Ramped Up Its Steel Output in November to Maintain Its Position as a Leading Global Steel Producer Despite Foreign Sanctions That Have Affected the Country's Energy Supply and Distribution Systems

IRAN NEWS

The Deputy Minister of Agriculture Jihad, Safdar Niazi Shahraki, Said That the Agricultural Inputs Sector Generated Around \$100m in Foreign Exchange Earnings for the Country Through Exports Last Year

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U.S. Kidnapping of Venezuela's President "Clear Instance of State Terrorism"



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's foreign minister has sharply condemned the United States' military aggression against Venezuela and the kidnapping of President Nicolas Maduro and his wife, describing the move as a "clear instance of state terrorism" and a blatant violation of the Venezuelan people's sovereignty.

Abbas Araqchi made the remarks during a telephone conversation on Saturday evening with Yvan Gil Pinto, his Venezuelan counterpart, as the two discussed the latest developments following the aggression.

The former denounced the abduction of Venezuela's legitimate president and his spouse in the strongest terms, saying the action constituted an open assault on Venezuela's national will.

He reaffirmed the Islamic Republic's support for the Venezuelan people and their elected government.

For his part, Venezuela's foreign minister thanked Iran for its principled stance and expression of solidarity, stressing that the Venezuelan people and government were determined to defend their national sovereignty and right to self-determination in the face of Washington's bullying and illegal policies.

The call came amid escalating tensions following statements by US President Donald Trump, who said Washington would take control of Venezuela during an interim period after the kidnapping. Speaking at a press conference in Florida, Trump said the United States would "run" the country until a "safe, proper, and judicious" transition of power took place, adding that officials from his administration would oversee "governance" during that time.

Gen. Soleimani Thwarted U.S. Plots in West Asia Region



TEHRAN (PressTV) - The Hezbollah secretary-general has paid tribute to Lieutenant General Qasem Soleimani, stressing that the primary objective of Iran's late top anti-terror commander was to support the Axis of Resistance and thwart US plots in the West Asia region.

Sheikh Naim Qassem made the remarks during a televised speech at a ceremony in the Lebanese capital of Beirut on Saturday evening, marking the sixth anniversary of the US assassination of General Soleimani and his Iraqi companion Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis.

"General Soleimani rose rapidly through various positions due to his exceptional qualities. He possessed remarkable military competence and was constantly engaged in training and instruction," he stated.

Sheikh Qassem noted that Gen. Soleimani had deep military and political awareness, analyzed and reflected on issues in all their dimensions, and was truly a man of the battlefield.

"General Soleimani had a close relationship with the late Hezbollah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. The relationship was distinctively marked by a unique brotherhood and mutual respect," he pointed out.

The Hezbollah chief underscored that Gen. Soleimani and his Iraqi companion Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis diligently fought against the Daesh terrorist group, and their fight could be best described as a confrontation with Washington and its fiendish plots.

"The fall of Daesh marked the collapse of an American scheme. To Hajj Qassem Soleimani: We are continuing, so your blood gave us momentum," Sheikh Qassem said.

Gov't Aims to Ease Cost-of-Living Pressures on the Public

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Speaking at a ceremony honoring those involved in the construction of the Hazrat Fatemeh Zahra (PBUH) residential complex for the Law Enforcement Command of the Islamic Republic of Iran (FARAJA), the President said that, in cooperation with Parliament to reform support policies, the government's goal is to reduce cost-of-living pressures on the public and prevent corruption in supply and distribution chains. He emphasized that the government welcomes criticism, oversight, and cooperation from all well-intentioned stakeholders in the country.

Masoud Pezeshkian on Saturday afternoon, 13 Dey, attended a ceremony marking the completion of the 1,500-unit Hazrat Fatemeh Zahra (PBUH) residential complex for FARAJA. The event coincided with the auspicious anniversary of the birth of Imam Ali (PBUH). Expressing appreciation for the efforts and dedication behind the project, the President described it as a valuable example of moving along the right path of public service.

He stated that the measures taken in this project demonstrate the opening of a new path and a different approach to solving the country's challenges—one that proves limitations and perceived impossibilities can be turned into opportunities through determination, a comprehensive outlook, and efficient management, resulting in more complete and impactful outcomes.

The President stressed that despite the possibility of further expansion and completion, the project at its current stage represents a major achievement worthy of appreciation, adding that the government considers itself, to the extent of its capabilities, a partner and supporter of this path.

Pezeshkian went on to say that adherence to the teachings and conduct of Imam Ali (PBUH) is key to resolving many of the country's challenges. He noted that Imam Ali's words and conduct are not merely ethical recommendations or personal advice, but a clear and practical guide for governance and just administration. If society claims to follow Imam Ali, he said, it must implement his directives in behavior, decision-making, and policymaking, rather than limiting itself to expressions of devotion or ceremonial commemorations.

Emphasizing that the Holy Qur'an and the sayings of Imam Ali (PBUH) must be regarded as "instructions for implementation," the President said that when Imam Ali commands or forbids an action, the duty is clear. Any behavior, decision, or policy that deviates from this path cannot claim adherence to the Alawite way. He added that the true measure of religiosity and Shi'a identity lies in practicing justice, fairness, and respect for people's rights.

Referring to Imam Ali's historic letter to Malik al-Ashtar, the President described it as a comprehensive charter of Islamic governance. He said the letter advises rulers to avoid following personal desires, to act with fairness toward both friends and foes, to open their hearts to compassion for the people, and to refrain from unnecessary harshness. People, he noted, are either equals in faith or equals in creation, and may err due to social difficulties and harsh conditions; in such cases, the ruler's duty is to respond with forgiveness, compassion, and justice.

Highlighting the heavy responsibility borne by those in power, Pezeshkian said that from Imam



vulnerable groups—directly and fairly, without being wasted along distribution chains or causing discrimination.

He continued that in the areas of essential goods, energy, gasoline, gas, and electricity, if justice is to be upheld, people's shares must be defined equally and transparently. It is unacceptable, he said, for some to benefit more from hidden subsidies due to higher consumption while a significant portion of society effectively receives no share of these resources. The government, he emphasized, is determined on this path and will not allow the implementation of justice to be sacrificed to pressure or group interests.

Referring again to cooperation between the government and Parliament in reforming support policies, the President reiterated that the government's aim is to ease living pressures on the public and prevent corruption in supply and distribution chains, welcoming criticism, oversight, and cooperation from all concerned citizens.

In another part of his remarks, Pezeshkian criticized claims by countries that present themselves as champions of human rights, particularly the United States and its allies. He said that blatant crimes against oppressed people—especially women and children—are being committed by the same actors who speak of humanity, democracy, and human rights, exposing the true face of false human-rights advocates.

Emphasizing that the Iranian nation will stand firm against pressure through faith, unity, and commitment to justice, the President said that no power can bring to its knees a nation that moves along the path of truth and justice.

In closing, he expressed appreciation for the efforts and sacrifices of the country's dedicated forces, particularly those active in security and public service. He said the government sees itself as a servant of the people and will deploy all its capabilities to resolve problems, realize justice, and preserve human dignity. He concluded by expressing hope that God would grant success before the people, the martyrs, and ultimately before God Himself.

Stronger Resistance, Declining U.S. Power



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says the assassination of Lt. General Qassem Soleimani failed to weaken Iran or the regional "resistance front," but rather led to a decline in US political and security power across West Asia and beyond.

In a statement marking the sixth anniversary of Soleimani's assassination on Saturday, the IRGC emphasized that the former commander's legacy continues to shape regional developments.

"The erosion of the political and security power of the system of domination and the collapse of the US-led order in the region and beyond are among the lasting effects of this martyr and the fighters of the resistance front," it said.

The IRGC asserted that the US and Israel targeted Soleimani in an effort to disrupt the growing network of forces opposed to their policies in the region, specifically naming US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as responsible for the "cowardly assassination."

The IRGC pointed out that the assassination had actually strengthened movements aligned with Soleimani's vision, citing events such as Operation al-Aqsa Flood by the Palestinian resistance as evidence of increased activity and coordination among the resistance forces.

According to the IRGC, Soleimani's martyrdom "marked the beginning of his enduring influence," extending across a network of groups opposing US and Israeli policies in the region.

Iran Widens Food Subsidy Coverage Amid Rising Living Costs



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran expands its food coupon program to ease pressure on households amid rising prices of staples.

The Iranian government has announced a major expansion of its food coupon program to help ease pressure on consumers from rising staple food prices.

Iran's Minister of Cooperatives, Labor and Social Welfare said on Saturday that both the monthly credit allocated to consumers for purchasing basic food items and the number of people eligible to receive the benefit will increase starting next week.

Ahmad Meidari said the credit assigned to each individual will nearly triple to 10 million rials per month, while the number of beneficiaries will rise from 67 million to more than 80 million people, covering nearly 92% of Iran's population.

Speaking to state television, Meidari said the government will also continue paying cash handouts to more than 70 million people, who currently receive an average of 4 million rials per month.

He added that the government had originally planned to launch the expanded food coupon program in October, noting that individuals will receive a total credit of 40 million rials for their January allocation to compensate for the four-month delay.

If Trump Repeats His Mistakes, Iran's Response Will Be Heavier and Harsher

IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - A member of parliament from Larestan and a member of the Majles National Security and Foreign Policy Commission said that Iran is not a country that Donald Trump can threaten, noting that recent remarks once again reveal the lack of wisdom of U.S. officials. He warned that Trump must know that if he seeks to repeat his past mistakes, Iran's response will be heavier and harsher, and all U.S. interests in the region will be within range of retaliation.

The protests have taken place in the country at a time when U.S. President Donald Trump—who claims to have ended eight wars and seeks the Nobel Peace Prize—once again intervened in Iran-related matters. Last Friday, in what Iranian officials described as an interventionist and war-mongering move, Trump wrote on the social media platform Truth Social: "If Iran shoots peaceful protesters and violently kills them, as they usually do, the United States will come to their aid. We are ready."

The U.S. intervention drew condemnation from many senior officials inside and outside Iran. Numerous political and social figures, as well as many citizens on social media, reacted to the U.S. president's remarks, describing them as interference in the internal affairs of another country.

Against this backdrop, IRNA spoke with Alaeddin Boroujerdi, a member of the Majles National Security and Foreign Policy Commission and representative of Larestan, whose comments follow.

Boroujerdi told IRNA that the country and its people are facing special economic conditions and that public protests are noteworthy and must be heard. He said the government should pay greater attention to people's concerns, expressing hope that the replacement of the Central Bank governor would help curb the uncontrolled rise of the U.S. dollar. He added that everyone knows Iran is engaged in a harsh economic war, and that the United States is using all its capabilities to exert economic pressure and strike the country.

He said Trump's stance reflects a miscalculation—assuming that the same approach used against some other countries could be applied to the Islamic Republic of Iran. This, Boroujerdi said, demonstrates Trump's lack of wisdom, noting that "testing the tested is a mistake" and that Trump has yet to understand Iran and the Iranian people.



Boroujerdi recalled that when U.S. forces violated Iran's airspace, Iran brought down the American drone intact and even produced a domestic version of it. He cited the downing of the U.S. Global Hawk drone, the detention of U.S. soldiers who entered Iranian waters, and missile strikes on U.S. military bases, saying these incidents should have made it clear that Iran's response to U.S. mistakes will be decisive and firm.

He stressed that Iran is not a country Trump can threaten, adding that this reality once again exposes Washington's lack of judgment. Trump, he said, must know that if he repeats his past errors, Iran's blows will be heavier and harsher, and all U.S. interests in the region will be targeted.

"This is our legitimate right," Boroujerdi said, adding that Trump must understand which country he is dealing with and refrain from using language inconsistent with the

dignity and status of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Boroujerdi noted that the positions taken by senior officials over the past two days reflect the peak of the system's authority and its firm and decisive resolve in confronting the United States. At the same time, he said, what he described as "domestic sanctions" must be removed.

He emphasized that over the years, the Islamic Republic of Iran has proven that, as a country with military power, it stands up to excessive demands and defends its interests and security.

The lawmaker stressed the need for unity and cohesion and for avoiding division and discord, saying this would help create better conditions for economic activity, greater private-sector involvement, and broader public participation in the economy. He called for facilitating the work of economic actors and accelerating development and progress by leveraging the country's abundant resources and the capabilities of its elites and specialists.

Boroujerdi described economic activists, elites, specialists, and producers as frontline soldiers in the economic battle against the United States, saying they must be strengthened and provided with better conditions to continue their activities more effectively in service of the nation.

He concluded by stressing that strengthening the economic front is currently the country's top priority, saying that although difficult economic stages must be endured to achieve greater successes, Iran will, by thwarting the enemies' plots, ultimately witness a period of prosperity by God's grace.

IRAN NEWS



Baqaei Talks With Iranian Ambassador in Caracas Over Phone

TEHRAN (IRNA) - Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baqaei in a telephone conversation with Ali Chegni, the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Caracas, expressed his appreciation for the efforts of the Ambassador and the staff of the Iranian embassy in Caracas, and was updated on the developments and situation in the Latin American country.

Emphasizing Iran's principled position in condemning US military aggression and violating the country's national sovereignty and territorial integrity, Baqaei expressed confidence that the Venezuelan people will protect their country's independence and national interests by maintaining national unity and cohesion and will follow the path of their country's development and progress.

Risk of Oil Migration in the Largest Shared Oil Field



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - An energy expert has warned that delays in developing the Azadegan oil field could lead to significant losses for Iran, stressing that in shared fields, any delay in production allows the neighboring country to extract more oil, causing fluid migration—a serious and pressing risk.

According to ILNA, the Azadegan oil field, located along the Iran-Iraq border, is one of the world's largest shared oil fields. With its vast reserves, it has the potential to play a crucial role in Iran's energy supply and national economy. However, the development of the field has faced numerous challenges in recent years.

One of the main obstacles is the technical capacity of domestic companies to carry out large-scale oil projects such as Azadegan, which requires careful assessment. While the involvement of major international oil companies could accelerate development and help achieve targets more quickly, utilizing capable domestic firms could also reduce costs and speed up project implementation.

Another major challenge is securing the necessary financial resources. Despite the signing of multi-billion-dollar contracts, delays in providing initial financing have continued.

Iran, Pakistan Call for Official Media Cooperation to Counter Fake News



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN (IRNA) - he Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan have stressed the need to make a joint media effort to combat fake news.

In a meeting between Iran's Ambassador to Pakistan and the head of Pakistan's official news agency, both sides emphasized the crucial role of sustained interaction between IRNA and the Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) in confronting fake news and boosting bilateral ties.

During his visit to the headquarters of the APP in Islamabad on Saturday, Iranian Ambassador Reza Amiri Moghaddam held talks with Muhammad Asim Khichi, the Managing Director of the Pakistani news agency.

In the meeting, the two sides exchanged views on regional developments and bilateral relations between Iran and Pakistan, with a particular focus on enhancing media cooperation.

Referring to the longstanding cooperation between IRNA and APP as the official news agencies of the two neighboring nations, the Iranian ambassador underscored that the role of such official institutions is highly influential in countering the phenomena of news distortion and the spread of disinformation.

Commending the support of the Pakistani people and government for the Iranian nation during the 12-day imposed war by the Zionist regime, Amiri Moghaddam stated, "The two countries are proven friends of each other in difficult times."

The ambassador emphasized the importance of Tehran's peace-seeking diplomacy in the region and highlighted the significant role of public diplomacy and bilateral media interactions in identifying new avenues for cooperation.

Outlining measures by the Islamic Republic to open new border crossings with Pakistan and launch direct flights between Islamabad and Tehran, he added that numerous high-level Iranian officials have visited Islamabad in recent months, during which Pakistan's President was also formally invited to pay an official visit to Tehran.

Internal Divisions Are the Greatest Threat to Sustainable Development

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Vice President of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) has warned that internal disagreements pose the most serious threat to sustainable development, stressing the urgent need for economic cohesion and swift reform of the country's foreign exchange system.

Speaking at a meeting of the Board of Representatives of the Ahvaz Chamber of Commerce, Mohammadreza Bahraman said, "We are all in the same boat, and cohesion is the key to overcoming economic crises." He noted that coordinated and empathetic action by policymakers and economic actors would significantly smooth the path to success, adding that accurately identifying challenges and navigating them intelligently is the primary responsibility of the private sector's parliament.

Bahraman cautioned against the consequences of internal disputes, saying such divisions open the door to non-specialist and unprofessional approaches in provincial economic management. "This is the greatest threat to sustainable development," he said, adding that demonstrating unity is the most effective tool available to the private sector in confronting economic difficulties.

Emphasizing the role of experience and expertise among economic actors, the ICCIMA vice president stated that the true power of the Iran Chamber lies not in its buildings or formal structures, but in the credibility of each of its members. "When this credibility is aggregated, it can become a decisive force in resolving the country's major economic challenges," he said.

In another part of his remarks, Bahraman criticized Iran's multiple exchange-rate system, arguing that as long as preferential and rent-seeking rates exist, fair distribution of wealth will not be achieved. "Iran's economy urgently needs to move toward a single exchange rate and eliminate the foundations of corruption," he said.

Referring to problems related to the clearance of goods at ports, he called for mechanisms that would allow the supply and clearance of goods with minimal friction even in the absence of foreign currency transfers, so that opportunists cannot exploit market fluctuations.

As Head of the Iran Mining House, Bahraman described engagement with the judiciary and public prosecutors as part of the legal duty of the private sector's parliament. He stressed that such demands are not based on accusations, but are aimed at increasing national wealth, safeguarding the country's resources, and improving people's livelihoods. "The precise enforcement of the law is the main prerequisite for achieving sustainable development," he said.

Commending the Ahvaz Chamber for taking the lead in establishing specialized branches, Bahraman noted that the current atmosphere of stability and calm has enabled the chamber to play a more prominent role in international affairs and economic



diplomacy. "The Ahvaz Chamber is a driving force of economic diplomacy among provincial chambers," he said.

Reiterating that the real strength of the private sector's parliament lies in the credibility of its members, Bahraman called for serious efforts to eliminate rent-seeking, move toward a single exchange rate, and strengthen internal cohesion among economic actors. He also highlighted the importance of corporate social responsibility, adding that understanding the economic history of each region is essential for guiding its future development.

According to Iran Chamber Online, Shahla Amouri, Secretary of the Khuzestan Government-Private Sector Dialogue Council, also addressed the meeting, criticizing the application of uniform policies and directives across all provinces as a major challenge to foreign trade. She said this approach has seriously disrupted export routes through Khuzestan's borders and hindered effective use of the province's border and economic capacities.

Referring to Khuzestan's strategic position in the national economy, Amouri said that despite its vast natural, industrial, and human resources, there remains a significant gap between the province's potential and its current situation.

She added that existing coordination among institutions is often superficial, and that fragmented decision-making and one-size-fits-all policies have failed to create real synergy, instead complicating Khuzestan's economic development process.

The Head of the Ahvaz Chamber of Commerce emphasized the additional pressures faced by the province's economic actors, noting that exporters must contend not only with harsh climatic conditions but also with sudden bans and non-expert decisions—measures she described as contrary to the spirit of the law, national interests, and the requirements of foreign trade development.

Pointing to the importance of the Shalamcheh and Chazabeh border crossings, Amouri stressed that these are national borders and should not be managed solely from a provincial perspective. She expressed hope that ICCIMA would play a more effective national role in organizing border activities and facilitating exports.

She also proposed the establishment of border markets under the auspices of the Iran Chamber as a sustainable measure to support small-scale employment, improve the livelihoods of border residents, and preserve their social dignity.

Finally, referring to the upcoming "Khuzestan Expo," an exhibition showcasing the province's export capabilities, Amouri described the event as a national opportunity for developing Iran's foreign trade. Given the financial limitations of the Ahvaz Chamber, she said, practical support from the Iran Chamber is expected to help introduce Khuzestan's real capacities at both national and international levels.

Mismatch Between Specialized Skills and Labor Market Needs a Major Cause of Unemployment

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Deputy Minister of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare and Head of Iran's Technical and Vocational Training Organization (TVTO) has said that one of the main causes of unemployment in the country is the lack of specialized skills aligned with labor market needs, stressing that expanding targeted skills training can play a key role in reducing unemployment and creating sustainable jobs.

According to a report quoting the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare, Gholamhossein Mohammadi made the remarks during a joint meeting with the Majles (Iranian Parliament) Social Affairs Commission, held as part of planning efforts for Khuzestan Province and the city of Shadegan.

Mohammadi noted that while part of the challenges facing the labor market is related to wage and income issues, the most fundamental and sustainable solution lies in developing targeted, demand-driven skills training. "Without equipping the workforce with practical and relevant skills, employment challenges will persist, regardless of other policy measures," he said.

Emphasizing the need to restore balance within the national education system, Mohammadi explained that current policymaking efforts are focused on increasing the share of vocational and skills-based training alongside academic education, while also strengthening coherence within the country's skills development ecosystem. In this context, he announced the formation of a "skills consortium" in Khuzestan Province, aimed at coordinating public and private stakeholders involved in training and employment.

He added that under current plans, approximately 60,000 people are expected to receive targeted vocational training in Khuzestan over the next five years. "In addition, a dedicated and tailored



program has been designed specifically for Shadegan County, taking into account its local capacities and labor market requirements," Mohammadi said.

The head of the Technical and Vocational Training Organization identified the shortage of qualified instructors as one of the most serious challenges facing the sector. According to him, Iran is currently facing a shortfall of around 1,500 technical and vocational training instructors nationwide. He noted that although financial resources have been allocated for the

ranking and professional classification of instructors, cooperation from the Administrative and Recruitment Affairs Organization has not been forthcoming, hindering progress in this area.

During a visit to the Dasht-e Azadegan Technical and Vocational Training Center, Mohammadi also announced the allocation of 3 billion tomans in funding for the counties of Dasht-e Azadegan and Hoveyze. He said that around 1 billion tomans of this amount has been earmarked for the purchase of training equipment, which is scheduled for delivery next week. The remaining 2 billion tomans will be provided through national social responsibility funds of the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare to support infrastructure development.

He further noted that additional funding from provincial capital asset resources will be allocated by the end of the year, helping to strengthen training facilities and expand access to skills education.

Mohammadi concluded by highlighting Khuzestan's significant human and industrial capacities, describing the province as well positioned for the expansion of skills training initiatives. "Targeted investment in vocational education can act as a driving force for employment transformation and a meaningful reduction in unemployment across the province," he said.

Venezuela Seen as Key Driver of Future Gold Market Volatility



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - A member of the Specialized Gold, Jewelry, and Silver Commission of the Iran Guilds Chamber said recent developments in Venezuela are expected to play a decisive role in future gold price fluctuations, noting that the appointment of Abdolnaser Hemmati as the new Governor of the Central Bank has also had an impact on currency and precious metals markets.

Speaking to IRNA, Mohammad Kashti-Araei referred to the closure of the domestic market and the decline in trading volumes over the past few days, stating that the appointment of Hemmati as Central Bank governor was not without effect on market prices. "With the reopening of markets in the coming days, developments related to Venezuela will certainly influence prices," he said.

Kashti-Araei explained that over the past several days, domestic markets were closed, while global markets were also largely inactive due to year-end holidays. As a result, the last recorded prices showed no significant difference compared to previous days.

He added that early on Friday morning, global gold prices rose slightly, with the price of an ounce increasing by about \$50 to \$60. However, by Friday afternoon, as markets closed and the new Gregorian year began, prices returned to earlier levels. "Markets are still closed, and the developments in Venezuela have not yet shown their full impact on financial markets," he said. "But if the situation continues, global gold prices will inevitably experience volatility."

The gold market analyst noted that domestic markets have also been closed for the past two to three days, leading to lower transaction volumes. "On the first day following Hemmati's appointment, it was announced that the exchange rate had declined," he said. "However, transactions currently taking place in online and informal markets indicate a slight increase in gold and coin prices."

Decline in Water Quality and Quantity a Serious Concern



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Director General of Water Information and Data at Iran's Ministry of Energy has warned that both the quality and quantity of water resources in parts of the country have deteriorated significantly due to prolonged drought, making water supply increasingly difficult in some regions. He also ruled out the transfer of seawater to Tehran as neither technically nor economically viable.

Speaking to ILNA, Firouz Ghasemzadeh said that since the beginning of the current water year, inflows into the country's dams have declined by around 17 percent compared to last year, adding that last year itself was also an exceptionally dry year.

Ghasemzadeh noted that at this point in the water year, dam reservoirs should normally be more than 40 percent full. "However, current figures show that reservoirs are only about 34 percent full, which is a very low and concerning level," he said.

He stressed that the intensity of drought in recent years has caused serious declines in both surface and groundwater resources in several areas of the country, in terms of both quantity and quality. "As a result, water supply in these regions has become extremely challenging," he said.

UNSC to Meet Monday Over U.S. Action in Venezuela

UNITED NATIONS (Dispatches) - The United Nations Security Council is due to meet on Monday after the U.S. attacked Venezuela and deposed its long-serving autocratic President Nicolas Maduro, a move that U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres views as setting "a dangerous precedent."

Colombia, backed by Russia and China, requested the meeting of the 15-member council, diplomats said. The U.N. Security Council has met twice - in October and December - over the escalating tensions between the United States and Venezuela.

U.S. President Donald Trump said on Saturday that Washington would run Venezuela "until such time as we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition." It is unclear how Trump plans to oversee Venezuela.



Yemen Presidency Says Saudi-Backed Forces Retake Key Province of Hadramawt



SANAA (Dispatches) - Yemen's Saudi-backed, internationally recognized government, said on Saturday it had retaken control of the resource-rich Yemeni province of Hadramout from UAE-backed southern separatists who seized it last month.

The Saudis and Emiratis have long supported rival factions in Yemen's fractious government, and a December offensive by the UAE-backed secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) to capture Hadramawt had angered Riyadh and left the oil-rich regional powers on a collision course.

But Rashad al-Alimi, head of the Presidential Leadership Council, said in a statement that Saudi-backed National Shield forces achieved "record success" in "retaking all military and security positions in the province" bordering Saudi Arabia in the operation launched Friday.

Two government military officials also told AFP earlier that neighbouring Mahra province and its armed forces, which had also fallen in with the STC during its recent advance, had switched their loyalty to Saudi-backed forces without any resistance.

One of the two officials said the Mahra forces had "lowered the separatist flag and raised the Yemeni flag".

The Saudi-led coalition has launched repeated warnings and air strikes over the past week, including one on an alleged Emirati arms shipment to the STC.

Cuban President Denounces State Terrorism Against Venezuela



HAVANA (Dispatches) - Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel on Saturday condemned the United States for attacking Venezuela and capturing its president at a rally of thousands of Havana residents in front of the U.S. Embassy in the Cuban capital.

"Cuba condemns and denounces these actions as an act of state terrorism," Diaz-Canel said.

"It is a shocking violation of the norms of international law - the military aggression against a peaceful nation that poses no threat to the United States," he added.

Venezuela supplies around 30% of Cuba's already scarce oil imports in exchange for thousands of medical personnel who work in the South American country.

Analysts agree the loss of the oil would be a devastating blow to Cuba's already shaky power grid and energy supplies.

Meanwhile, thousands of Cubans are worried over the fate of relatives and friends working in Venezuela. Cuba's health ministry tweeted on Saturday they were "well protected."

In an interview U.S. President Donald Trump gave to the New York Post on Saturday, he said he is not considering additional military action against Cuba.

"No, Cuba is going to fall of its own volition. Cuba is doing very poorly," Trump said.

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro was in a New York jail on Saturday, hours after American special forces seized and flew him out of his country - which Donald Trump said would come under effective U.S. control.

The U.S. president's announcement followed a lightning pre-dawn attack in which commandos grabbed Maduro and his wife while air strikes pounded sites in and around Caracas.

A U.S. government plane carrying Maduro landed at a military base shortly after nightfall, and he was transported by helicopter to New York City, where the couple were to be arraigned on drug trafficking and weapons charges.

The White House posted video on X of Maduro, handcuffed and in sandals, escorted by federal agents through a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration facility in New York.

"Good night, happy new year," the 63-year-old leftist is heard saying in English.

Despite the success of the risky raid, what happens next is highly uncertain.

Trump said he was "designating people" from his cabinet to be in charge in Venezuela but gave no further details.

In another surprise, Trump indicated US troops could be deployed, saying Washington is "not afraid of boots on the ground."

But he appeared to reject the possibility of the country's opposition taking power and said he could work instead with Maduro's vice president, Delcy Rodriguez.

One aspect that became clearer was Trump's interest in Venezuela's vast oil reserves.

"We're going to have our very large United States oil companies... go in, spend billions of dollars, fix the badly broken infrastructure," he said.

"We'll be selling large amounts of oil."

U.S.-backed opposition leader Maria Corina Machado, who won last year's Nobel Peace Prize, posted on social media that "the hour of freedom has arrived."

She called for the opposition's 2024 election candidate, Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia, to "immediately" assume the presidency.

But Trump was surprisingly cold about expectations that Machado could become Venezuela's new leader, saying she doesn't have "support or respect" there.

Instead, he touted Rodriguez, saying "she's essentially willing to do what we think is necessary to make Venezuela great again."

North Korea Fires Ballistic Missiles Towards Sea of Japan

SEOUL (Dispatches) - North Korea fired multiple ballistic missiles off its east coast, into the body of water also known as the Sea of Japan on Sunday, South Korea's military said. Pyongyang's pointed show of force came just hours before South Korean President Lee Jae Myung departs for a summit in China.

Sunday's launch follows a US military operation against Pyongyang's socialist ally Venezuela that snatched President Nicolas Maduro out of his country -- for decades a nightmare scenario for North Korea's leadership, which has long accused Washington of seeking to remove it from power.

Seoul's defence ministry said it had detected "several projectiles, presumed to be ballistic missiles" fired from near the North Korean capital Pyongyang around 7:50 am (2250 GMT Saturday).

The missiles "flew approximately 900 kilometres (559.2 miles)", the military said, adding that South Korea and the United States were "closely analysing the specifications" while "maintaining a full readiness posture".

The National Security Council in Seoul convened an emergency meeting after the launch, which a presidential office statement said "constitutes a provocative act in violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions".

Japan's defence ministry also said it had detected a possible ballistic missile, noting that two missiles reached an altitude of 50 kilometres and flew distances of 900 and 950 kilometres respectively.

"North Korea's nuclear and missile development threatens the peace and stability of our country and the international society, and is absolutely intolerable," Japan's defence minister Shinjiro Koizumi told reporters.



It is Pyongyang's first ballistic missile launch since November, when it staged a test after US President Donald Trump approved South Korea's plan to build a nuclear-powered submarine.

One analyst said Trump's military operation against Venezuela on Saturday likely played a role in the decision to carry out the launch.

Pyongyang has for decades argued it needs its nuclear and missile programmes as a deterrent against alleged regime change efforts by Washington. The United

Venezuelan authorities have yet to release casualty figures. But Trump told the New York Post that "many" Cubans in Maduro's security detail were killed.

Within hours of the operation, Caracas had fallen eerily quiet, with police stationed outside public buildings and the smell of smoke drifting through the streets.

The U.S. and numerous European governments did not recognize Maduro's legitimacy, saying he stole elections in 2018 and 2024.

Maduro—in power since 2013 after taking over from leftist mentor Hugo Chavez—long accused Trump of seeking regime change in order to control Venezuela's oil reserves.

Trump has offered several justifications for the aggressive policy toward Venezuela, at times stressing illegal migration, narcotics trafficking and oil.

But he had previously avoided openly calling for regime change.

Several members of Congress quickly questioned the legality of the operation. But Trump's key ally Mike Johnson, top Republican in the House of Representatives, said it was "justified."

States has offered Pyongyang repeated assurances that it has no such plans.

"They likely fear that if the United States so chooses, it could launch a precision strike at any moment, threatening the regime's survival," said Hong Min, an analyst at the Korea Institute for National Unification.

"The underlying message is likely that attacking North Korea would not be as easy as a strike on Venezuela," he said.

A former senior North Korean diplomat said Pyongyang should learn from the US operation to detain Maduro.

"I hope it remembers former president Maduro for a long time -- as a man who squandered a valuable opportunity through bluster," Lee Il-kyu, Pyongyang's former political counsellor in Cuba who defected to South Korea in 2023, said in a Facebook post on Sunday.

The test also came just hours before South Korean President Lee Jae Myung departs for Beijing for talks with his counterpart Xi Jinping, whose government is a key economic backer of North Korea.

Lee hopes to possibly harness China's clout over North Korea to support his bid to improve ties with Pyongyang.

North Korea has stepped up missile testing significantly in recent years.

Analysts say this drive is aimed at improving precision strike capabilities, challenging the United States as well as South Korea and testing weapons before potentially exporting them to Russia.

Pyongyang is also set to hold a landmark congress of its ruling party in the coming weeks, its first in five years.

Who Is Delcy Rodriguez, the VP Who Replaced Maduro?

CARACAS (Dispatches) - The following are some facts about Venezuela's Vice President Delcy Rodriguez, who said on Saturday that Nicolas Maduro remained the country's only president despite his capture by U.S. forces. Her comments contradicted earlier remarks by U.S. President Donald Trump, who said Rodriguez had been "sworn in" as president and was "willing to do what we think is necessary to make Venezuela great again." Trump said the U.S. would be running Venezuela in the immediate future.

State television showed Rodriguez speaking in Caracas despite previous reports that she was in Russia.

Maduro has called Rodriguez a "tiger" for her diehard defense of his socialist government.

She works closely with her brother, Jorge Rodriguez, who is the head of the national assembly legislature.

Caracas native Rodriguez, 56, was born on May 18, 1969, opens new tab and is the daughter of left-wing guerrilla fighter Jorge Antonio Rodriguez, who founded the revolutionary Liga Socialista party in the 1970s.

Rodriguez's roles as finance and oil minister, held simultaneously with her vice-presidential post, have made her a key figure in the management of Venezuela's economy and gained her major influence with the country's withered private sector. She has applied orthodox economic policies in a bid to fight exaggerated inflation.

She called on the U.S. government to provide proof of life for Maduro and his wife in



an audio message played on state television on Saturday, but her exact whereabouts are unknown.

She is an attorney who graduated from Universidad Central de Venezuela and rose rapidly through the political ranks in the last decade, serving as Communication and Information Minister between 2013 and 2014.

Rodriguez, known as a lover of designer fashions, was foreign minister from 2014 to 2017, during which time she attempted to crash a Mercosur trade bloc meeting in Buenos Aires, following Venezuela's suspension from the group.

She began serving as the head of a pro-government Constituent Assembly, which expanded Maduro's powers, in 2017.

Rodriguez was named vice president in June 2018, with Maduro announcing the appointment on X by describing her as "a young woman, brave, seasoned, daughter of a martyr, revolutionary and tested in a thousand battles."

In August 2024, Maduro added the oil ministry to Rodriguez's portfolio, where she has been tasked with managing escalating U.S. sanctions on the country's most important industry.

Meanwhile the Constitutional Chamber of Venezuela's Supreme Court ordered that Vice President Rodriguez assume the role of acting president of the country in the absence of Maduro, who was detained in an operation by U.S. forces.



Arsenal Stretch Premier League Lead as Villa Win

LONDON (Dispatches) - Arsenal fought back from a goal down to beat Bournemouth 3-2, stretching their lead at the top of the Premier League as Aston Villa extended their winning run at home. A goal from Gabriel Magalhaes and two from the returning Declan Rice sent the Gunners six points clear of second-placed Villa and seven ahead of Manchester City. Arsenal manager Mikel Arteta praised the character of his team, singling out Rice and Gabriel, whose sloppy pass set up Bournemouth for the opening goal. "I love the character of Gabriel, the way he overcome that situation—it's just unbelievable, it says a lot about how much we've grown," he told Sky Sports. "The team found a way to beat them and it's a massive win." The Spaniard said that Rice had worked hard to be available after missing Tuesday's 4-1 home win against Villa with a knee problem. "He has stretched himself to the very limit and the team were awarded with two great goals," he added. Evanilson gave impressive Bournemouth an early lead, stroking home after Gabriel's error but the Brazil defender made up for his mistake just minutes later, converting after Noni Madueke's drive to the byline. England midfielder Rice side-footed the Gunners ahead in the 54th minute from the edge of the area and gave them breathing space with about 20 minutes to go, producing a low finish from substitute Bukayo Saka's cutback. Junior Kroupi brought Bournemouth back into the game with a thunderous right-footed finish but Arsenal held on for a fifth straight Premier League win—keeping them firmly on course for a first English title since 2004. Earlier, Unai Emery's Villa bounced back from their chastening defeat at Arsenal to beat Nottingham Forest 3-1, recording their 11th consecutive home win in all competitions. England forward Ollie Watkins gave Villa a deserved lead on the cusp of half-time with a powerful strike

from just outside the area and John McGinn scored twice in the second half, either side of a Morgan Gibbs-White goal. Villa boss Emery said his players and coaching staff had held a meeting after their drubbing at the Emirates Stadium. "I am so happy," he said. "We had to recover our energy and our confidence. Here, at Villa Park, the energy we create was really important. "Forest are competitive. After the Arsenal match we met—the players and staff -- (and discussed) how we are doing this season, how we are feeling, how we needed to keep the same consistency as before, how we needed to be together and strong." Sean Dyche's Forest, who have now suffered four straight league defeats, remain one place above the relegation zone, four points clear of West Ham, who slumped to a damaging 3-0 loss at Molineux. Relegation-threatened West Ham travelled to face winless basement club Wolves in desperate need of a victory. Jhon Arias gave the home side an early lead and Hwang Hee-chan doubled their advantage from the penalty spot shortly after the half-hour mark. Teenager Mateus Mane drilled in his first Premier League goal shortly before half-time, all but guaranteeing Rob Edwards's team a first league win of the season. Nuno Espirito Santo's Hammers are in danger of being cut adrift at the bottom of the Premier League along with Wolves and Burnley. "Everybody needs to think and reflect and question ourselves," Nuno said. "It's about actions. It's been very bad, very bad." Wolves, who drew with Manchester United in midweek, remain 12 points from safety.

Bucs Beat Panthers to Keep NFL Playoff Hopes Alive

LOS ANGELES (Dispatches) - Baker Mayfield and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers held off Carolina 16-14 on Saturday to keep their playoff hopes alive to the bitter end of the NFL season. The victory prevented the Panthers from locking up the NFC's last post-season berth and leaves both teams anxiously watching Sunday's results to learn which one progresses. Tampa Bay edged an error-strewn, rain-soaked clash, taking an early lead and relying on cautious tactics and multiple field goals to cling on. "We just found a way to win right there -- tough divisional opponent, and we did everything we could today," said Bucs' quarterback Mayfield. "Sit back and see what happens tomorrow," said Mayfield, who threw for a touchdown, completing 16-of-22 attempted passes for 203 yards. Despite both teams ending the regular season with an 8-9 losing record, one of them is still guaranteed to win the historically weak NFC South division and reach the playoffs. Whether the Bucs or the Panthers advance now



depends on the outcome of a clash between two teams with no hope of reaching the playoffs -- the Atlanta Falcons and the New Orleans Saints. Tampa Bay, who have won the NFC South for the past four years and started this season well before imploding, will be rooting for the bottom-placed but in-form Saints. Meanwhile, Carolina must rely on inconsistent Atlanta. If the Falcons win, a three-way tie atop the NFC South at 8-9 would see the Panthers edge through on head-to-head results. Tampa Bay scored on the game's opening drive, as tight end Cade Otton belatedly caught his first touchdown of the season, and the Bucs soon added a field goal. But following an intercepted Baker Mayfield pass, a wide-open Tommy Tremble grabbed a Panthers touchdown with a clever, mazy run. With torrential downpours hampering both sides, another interception -- this time off Carolina's Bryce Young -- set up another Bucs field goal for a 13-7 half-time lead.

Wawrinka Kicks Off Farewell Season With Fighting Win at United Cup

SYDNEY (Dispatches) - Three-times Grand Slam champion Stan Wawrinka began his farewell season with a battling victory over Frenchman Arthur Rinderknech at the United Cup on Saturday and declared that turning 40 had not dulled his competitive edge. Switzerland's Wawrinka, who made his debut in 2002 and will celebrate his 41st birthday in March, said last month he wanted to bring the curtain down on his career at the end of the season. He toiled in the Perth heat to seal a 5-7 7-6(5) 7-6(5) win over world number 29 Rinderknech, showing the resilience he will hope to take to this month's Australian Open, an event he won in 2014 before enjoying further Grand Slam triumphs at



the French and U.S. Opens. "I'd have loved a quicker win, but no, this is why I keep playing. I'm passionate about the game. I'm always going to push my own limit," Wawrinka told reporters after giving his team a 2-0 lead. "I've said I've been working hard this off-season. Even if it's my last year, I don't just want to play to play. I want to play to compete and try to win. "I'm super happy with the performance today, with the win. It was a tough fight, big fight, but I stayed quite positive and really focused on my own discipline during the game. "I try to find solutions, find the better way of playing. When I got the opportunity to finish, I went for it."

Surging Sixers Hand Knicks Their Third Straight Loss



NEW YORK (Dispatches) - Tyrese Maxey scored 36 points to highlight the Philadelphia 76ers' 130-119 road win over the slumping New York Knicks on Saturday. Maxey finished 14-of-22 from the field (6-of-9 from 3-point range), while rookie VJ Edgecombe knocked down four 3-pointers in a strong 26-point performance. Joel Embiid added 26 points and 10 rebounds as Philadelphia prevailed in the finale of a five-game road trip. New York matched a season high with its third straight loss despite 31 points from Jalen Brunson. Karl-Anthony Towns contributed 23 points and 14 rebounds for the Knicks, while OG Anunoby notched 19 points for the hosts. After leading by eight points at halftime, Philadelphia increased its advantage to 17 points in the first four minutes of the third quarter. Paul George hit two 3-pointers early in the period before Maxey's triple made it 81-64. The Sixers led by 19 with under three minutes to go in the third. However, the Knicks' bench made a push in the closing stretch to get the team within 12 points (99-87) entering the fourth. Towns scored seven points in the first two minutes of the final period, bringing New York within 103-94, but Philadelphia regained the momentum when Edgecombe blocked a 3-pointer by Mikal Bridges then hustled downcourt for a transition dunk. With under five minutes remaining, Maxey silenced the crowd with a tough jumper and a contested 3-pointer. Embiid dunked in the waning seconds -- his first slam of the season -- as the Sixers went on to win their third straight game. Philadelphia led 31-30 after a first quarter in which neither team led by more than five points.

Ten-Man Mali Beat Tunisia on Penalties to Reach Cup of Nations Quarters



CASABLANCA (Dispatches) - El Bilal Toure scored the winning spot-kick as 10-man Mali beat Tunisia 3-2 on penalties to reach the Africa Cup of Nations quarter-finals after their last-16 tie had finished 1-1 at the end of extra time. It looked as if Tunisia had got the job done against a Mali side forced to play most of the game a man down when substitute Firas Chaouat headed the Carthage Eagles in front in the 88th minute. Mali had defender Woyo Coulibaly sent off in the 26th minute at the Mohammed V Stadium in Casablanca, but earned a reprieve when they were awarded a stoppage-time penalty. Lassine Sinayoko converted from the spot to take the tie to extra time and eventually on to the decisive shoot-out. Captain Yves Bissouma, the Tottenham Hotspur midfielder, blazed Mali's first kick over the bar, but Ali Abdi then missed for Tunisia before Eagles goalkeeper Djigui Diarra saved two further penalties and Toure won it. Tom Saintfiet's Mali advance to a quarter-final next Friday in Tangiers against West African neighbours Senegal, after the 2022 champions came from behind to beat Sudan 3-1 earlier. "Before the game I said my team were already heroes and now there is no other word," said Belgian coach Saintfiet. "Every player fought for their country and did everything to stay in this competition, and the goalkeeper helped us in the penalty shoot-out." Mali have never won the Cup of Nations and their prospects here were not helped when right-back Coulibaly, currently based in Italy's Serie A with Sassuolo, was shown a straight red card for raking his studs down the back of Hannibal Mejbri's calf.