

In a Post on His X Account on Sunday, the Iranian Ambassador to Riyadh, Alireza Enayati, Criticized Some Parties for Attempting to Escalate Regional Tensions and Provoke War

# IRAN NEWS

Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Denounced Yet Another Brutal Israeli Attack on the Gaza Strip, Saying Crimes Against Palestinians Are Continuation of the Regime's Policy Since Its Creation on the Occupied Territories

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## Iran's Unity and Resolve a Barrier Against Enemies' Conspiracies



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) Navy has affirmed the Iranian nation's unwavering resolve in the face of external threats, highlighting the critical role of faith, willpower, and unity in overcoming oppression and tyranny.

Rear Admiral Alireza Tangsiri made the remarks in a message on Sunday, on the occasion of Ten-Day Dawn celebrations marking the 47th anniversary of the victory of the Islamic Revolution.

He further emphasized that Iran, bolstered by its "intelligence, belief, and unity" would remain a steadfast barrier against the conspiracies of its adversaries, continuing to uphold the proud banner of the Islamic Revolution.

Tangsiri also noted that the Tenth of Dawn serves as a powerful reminder of the victory achieved by the Iranian people over despotism and the subsequent dawn of freedom and independence that followed. "This day not only commemorates the strength of the Iranian people, but also honors the sacrifices of Imam Khomeini and the martyrs of the Islamic Revolution, who gave their lives to pave the way for justice, national sovereignty, and honor," he said.

Tangsiri further underscored the significance of the Islamic Revolution as a turning point not just for Iran, but for the broader global movement of oppressed nations seeking freedom.

## Ira Army Fully Prepared for Confrontation and Retaliation



### IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces said the flames of any regional conflict would engulf the United States and its allies, stressing that Iran is fully prepared for confrontation and retaliation and harbors no fear of its enemies' threats or displays of power.

Major General Seyyed Abdolrahim Mousavi made the remarks during a nighttime visit to assess the readiness of one of the Armed Forces' units. He said the Iranian nation has consistently stood firm against what he described as the United States' arrogant and aggressive behavior, forcing it into repeated failures, including during what he called a recent complex, multi-dimensional, and terrorist conflict that disrupted enemy calculations.

Mousavi said the Iranian people have proven repeatedly over the past 47 years that Iran "cannot be swallowed," adding that an obstinate enemy that refuses to learn lessons will ultimately be defeated.

He noted that those who spent months promoting the narrative of a "weak Iran" must now either retract their claims or face what he described as a "regional slap" demonstrating Iran's power.

Referring to past conflicts, the Armed Forces chief said adversaries appear to have forgotten that in 1979, despite difficult conditions, the Iranian people resisted the world's major powers for eight years and prevailed. He added that during the so-called 12-day war, Iran thwarted and defeated what he described as a 20-year plan by the United States and the Israeli regime, and later foiled an alleged quasi-coup attempt during the unrest in the month of Dey.

## Iran Signals Cautious Openness to U.S. Talks, Insists on Sanctions Relief

### IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Foreign Ministry said on Monday that Tehran is still reviewing political and technical details surrounding a possible resumption of talks with the United States, stressing that the other side must demonstrate seriousness and goodwill, while lifting sanctions remains Iran's core and non-negotiable demand.

Speaking at a weekly press briefing, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei said Iran is currently in a phase of "assessment and decision-making" regarding any future diplomatic process with Washington. He noted that regional countries, concerned about rising tensions, are actively and sincerely playing a mediating role, unlike European states which he accused of fueling escalation.

"Various points have been exchanged through intermediaries, and we are examining different dimensions of a diplomatic track that we hope could eventually yield results," Baghaei said, adding that details related to the format, framework, and implementation are still under review.

Responding to questions about recent statements by U.S. officials and media speculation about renewed negotiations, Baghaei said Iran's caution is rooted in "a decade of repeated experiences of bad faith, deception, and broken promises by the United States," culminating in Washington's unilateral actions in recent years.

He stressed that diplomacy cannot coexist with threats, warning that U.S. military pressure and regional deployments violate fundamental principles of international law, particularly the prohibition on the use of force.

"Iran has already proven its commitment to diplomacy," he said. "It is the other side that must now prove its seriousness."

Baghaei firmly rejected claims circulating in some media that Iran's objectives have shifted from sanctions relief to merely "avoiding war."

"This interpretation is incorrect," he said. "The lifting of sanctions is an essential priority for Iran and will remain so in any diplomatic engagement."

He clarified that any potential talks would focus on the nuclear issue, which Iran says has been used as a pretext for sanctions and pressure. In return for confidence-building measures regarding the peaceful nature of its nuclear program, Iran expects the removal of what it calls "unjust and illegal sanctions" imposed on its people.

The spokesperson highlighted intensive diplomatic contacts in recent days, including calls between Iran's president and regional leaders, frequent consultations by the foreign minister with counterparts in neighboring countries, and visits to Turkey and Russia.

According to Baghaei, a shared understanding is emerging among regional states that any military escalation against Iran would have consequences far beyond its borders.

"Iran believes regional countries are fully aware that insecurity is contagious," he said, urging them not to allow third parties to exploit regional issues for destabilizing agendas.

He also addressed reports attributed to Saudi officials regarding possible U.S. military action, saying Tehran maintains close and ongoing communication with Riyadh and does not base its assessments on media speculation alone.

Baghaei sharply criticized the European Union's recent actions targeting Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), calling them "illegal, unjustified, and a serious strategic miscalculation."

He said Iran has summoned all European ambassadors in Tehran and delivered formal written protests, while additional countermeasures are under review and will be decided in the coming days.

Describing the IRGC as a pillar of regional security, especially in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz, Baghaei accused European policymakers of acting to appease Israel and the United States.

The spokesperson also condemned what he described as intensified Israeli attacks in Gaza and Lebanon, accusing Israel of violating ceasefire understandings and international law. He said the reopening of the Rafah crossing has again been used to advance forced displacement of Palestinians.

Baghaei called on the United Nations, the Security Council, and the UN secretary-general to take responsibility for ending what he described as Israel's "impunity."

Addressing rumors about canceled joint military drills involving Iran, Russia, and China, Baghaei said no changes have occurred. He confirmed that annual naval exercises in the northern Indian Ocean and routine IRGC drills are proceeding as planned.

"These exercises are defensive, professional, and aimed at maintaining readiness," he said. Finally, Baghaei emphasized that time is a crucial factor for Iran in any potential negotiations.

"Every single day that sanctions are lifted or reduced sooner is a gain for Iran," he said. "We will move forward with both caution and urgency."

He added that Iran hopes to provide more clarity on the next steps in the coming days as internal deliberations continue.

## FM Warns War Would Engulf the Region, Urges U.S. to Act Now for a Fair Nuclear Deal

### IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araqchi has warned that the United States must act swiftly to seize what he described as a rare opportunity to reach a fair and equitable agreement with Tehran, cautioning that any military confrontation would trigger a regional catastrophe.

In an interview with CNN on Sunday, Araqchi said he remained "confident that we can achieve a deal" with Washington over Iran's nuclear program, provided the U.S. demonstrates genuine commitment.

"Unfortunately, we have lost our trust in the United States as a negotiating partner," he said, adding that progress in talks has been facilitated by friendly regional countries serving as intermediaries between Tehran and Washington.

The comments came as U.S. officials also struck an optimistic tone. Speaking to reporters aboard Air Force One on Saturday, President Donald Trump said Iran was "talking to us, seriously talking to us."

Araqchi, however, stopped short of committing to direct negotiations with U.S. officials, stressing that the substance of talks matters far more than their format.

His remarks followed a warning by the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, who said on Sunday that any U.S.-initiated war against Iran would inevitably expand into a regional conflict.

"The Americans should know that if they start a war this time, it will be a regional war," the Leader said, emphasizing that threats and shows of force would not intimidate the Iranian nation.

Addressing questions about Iran's missile capabilities—believed to have been strengthened following the Israeli-American war in June—and Tehran's regional allies, Araqchi insisted that negotiations must remain strictly focused on the nuclear issue.

"Let's not talk about impossible things," he said. "And let's not lose the opportunity to achieve a fair and equitable deal to ensure no nuclear weapons. That, as I said, is achievable even in a short period of time."

Araqchi made clear that any agreement must include the lifting of U.S. sanctions that have weighed heavily on Iran's economy for more than a decade, as well as firm guarantees for Iran's right to continue peaceful nuclear enrichment.



He also warned that Iran is fully prepared for war should diplomacy fail, noting that a conflict would almost certainly spiral beyond Iran's borders.

"A war would be a disaster for everybody," he said, adding that Iran's military would target U.S. bases across the region. He noted that Iran's missile capabilities have been tested and refined during and since the 12-day war with Israel in June.

President Trump, meanwhile, declined to say whether he had decided on launching a military strike against Iran.

"Some people think that. Some people don't," he said when asked whether stepping back from military action might embolden Tehran.

Reiterating earlier remarks, Trump said he would not disclose details of any potential strike. "I certainly can't tell you that, but we do have very big, powerful ships heading in that direction," he said. "I hope they negotiate something that's acceptable."

Amid rising tensions, diplomatic activity across the region has intensified in recent days to avert a wider conflict. On Saturday, Qatar's Prime Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani traveled to Tehran, where he met with Araqchi and Ali Larjani, secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council.

Turning to recent unrest in Iran, Araqchi said foreign-backed "terrorist elements" had fueled violence during riots in early January. He described the most violent phase as "a continuation of those 12 days of war," alleging the operation was led by Israel's Mossad from abroad and was ultimately thwarted by Iranian authorities.

"There was no plan for execution or hanging," Araqchi said, rejecting Trump's claim that Iran had provided assurances about halting planned executions. He insisted that the rights of all detainees would be respected and protected.

Iranian officials have accused U.S. and Israeli intelligence agencies of providing funding, training, and media support to armed groups that hijacked peaceful protests over economic grievances on January 8 and 9, turning them into scenes of violence and destruction.

## EU's Terrorist Labeling Aligns With U.S. Interventionism



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) says the European Union's move to add the elite force to its so-called terrorist list shows its alignment with the interventionist policies of the United States.

In a statement on Sunday, the IRGC condemned the EU's "hostile, invalid and absurd" move and expressed its appreciation to the widespread wave of support, solidarity, and the wise positions of the noble Iranian nation.

The statement came after the European Union designated the IRGC as a terrorist organization, a move condemned by Iran as illegal and irresponsible.

It said the EU designation has no legal and political legitimacy and runs counter to the principles and logic of international relations.

"Such moves will not only fail to weaken the resolve and missions of the IRGC but will instead strengthen internal cohesion and increase national determination to safeguard the country's interests and security," the statement added.

It emphasized that the EU's approach disregards the destabilizing role of those who are creating crisis in the region, particularly the "savage and terrorist" Israeli regime.

The IRGC reiterated that such measures will not only fail to contribute to regional peace and security but will make the path of constructive engagement and cooperation even more difficult.

It noted that IRGC forces have never hesitated over the past decades to safeguard Iran's independence, security, and territorial integrity, and serve the Iranian people.

## Recent Enemy Plot Foiled by Public Vigilance; Problems Must Be Solved



### IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Chief Justice Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei said recent events in the country amounted to a "major sedition" that was thwarted through public awareness and participation, stressing that authorities must focus on solving people's problems.

Speaking on Monday at a ceremony renewing allegiance to the ideals of the Islamic Revolution and Imam Khomeini (RA) at the mausoleum of the late founder of the Islamic Republic, Mohseni Ejei said the Iranian people once again "finished the job," noting that millions of devout, vigilant, and Iran-loving citizens took to the streets and neutralized what he described as enemy plots.

He said the judiciary, alongside security and intelligence forces, had stood with the people since the first day of the recent unrest and would continue to do so. He reiterated that those involved in acts of terrorism, violence, arson, attacks on religious sites, and threats to people's lives and property would be dealt with firmly, but fairly and justly.

Mohseni Ejei emphasized that Iran would not allow enemies to create insecurity through assassination, sabotage, or unrest. He said the country would overcome the recent turmoil with God's grace, the "wise leadership" of the Supreme Leader, public support, and the efforts of security forces.





## Transit Flights Cut by Half; No Flight Restrictions in Place

TEHRAN (ILNA) - Iran's Deputy Minister of Roads and Urban Development said the number of transit flights has dropped by 50 percent compared to last month, citing regional conditions and airline risk assessments, while stressing that no flight restrictions are currently in effect.

Speaking to reporters, Mohammad Amirani, CEO of Iran Airports and Air Navigation Company, responded to an ILNA question regarding the decline in overflight traffic. He said it is natural for transit flights to decrease given the current regional situation, as airlines continuously assess and identify potential risks. "Based on these evaluations, the number of transit flights through Iran's airspace and across the region has fallen by about half compared to last month," he said.

## Iran-Turkey Trade Holds Significant Potential



### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - A member of Iran's Parliament representing Tabriz, Azarshahr, and Osku said that trade between Iran and Turkey has considerable potential, noting that East Azerbaijan Province plays an important role in economic exchanges between the two countries due to its industrial and tourism capacities.

Rouhollah Motefakker-Azad referred to the volume of economic exchanges between Iran and Turkey and said that bilateral trade exceeds \$19 billion, with Turkey ranking as Iran's third-largest economic partner.

He added that East Azerbaijan Province accounts for a significant share of economic interactions between the two countries, a fact attributable to the province's geographical position and industrial infrastructure.

Pointing to Tabriz's industrial capabilities, Motefakker-Azad said that the city's industrial character has paved the way for cooperation in industrial and manufacturing sectors, adding that many Turkish companies are currently operating in Tabriz.

He also noted that existing trade routes between Iran and Turkey are defined through the northwest of the country, which makes East Azerbaijan's role in these exchanges particularly significant.

In another part of his remarks, Motefakker-Azad highlighted Tabriz's tourism potential, stating that the historic bazaar registered on UNESCO's World Heritage List, the city's unique historic fabric, prominent museums, historic houses, and the diversity of handicraft fields are among Tabriz's most important tourism advantages, which are well recognized at the regional level.

## All Genuine Traders Welcome Currency Unification



### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The head of the Iran-Brazil Joint Chamber of Commerce has described the unification of the exchange rate as a major decision by Iran's 14th administration, saying it is a correct policy that should have been implemented several years ago.

Seyed Fakhraddin Amerian praised the government's move to implement a single exchange rate system, stressing that for the policy to succeed, the exchange rate must have only one price, with no distinction between official (government) and free-market rates.

Amerian said the policy would ultimately improve Iran's economic conditions as well as its import and export sectors. "With a single exchange rate, traders will be forced to import higher-quality goods and engage in healthy competition," he noted. "Previously, when preferential currency was allocated, some importers brought in low-quality goods, and consumers had no choice but to buy them. This allowed a small group to earn excessive profits."

He acknowledged that problems are likely in the first few months of implementation, adding that the public—especially lower-income groups—may face temporary hardship. "However, after this initial period, conditions will certainly improve, and we will see quality goods supplied at reasonable prices," he said.

Amerian also pointed out that the government should have taken preventive measures before rolling out the policy to avoid shortages of essential goods such as cooking oil. "If basic commodities had been sufficiently supplied to the market beforehand, we would not have witnessed shortages and the resulting multiple-fold price increases," he said.

The economic activist emphasized that all genuine traders support the policy, expressing hope that those who benefited from preferential currency allocations would not pressure the government to reintroduce multiple exchange rates for certain goods.

## Central Bank Unveils New Strategy for Foreign Exchange Policy

### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK



TEHRAN - The Governor of the Central Bank of Iran has outlined the institution's new strategy for managing the country's foreign exchange policies, reporting a significant reduction in currency market volatility following the unification of exchange rates. He said that over the past two weeks, the commercial foreign exchange market has shifted from a \$500 million demand surplus to a \$70 million supply surplus.

According to ILNA, citing the government's information portal, Abdolnaser Hemmati explained the performance of the commercial foreign exchange market after the unification of exchange rates and detailed the framework of the country's new foreign exchange policy as well as the market's two-week performance.

Hemmati emphasized that under Article 20 of the Law on Permanent Provisions of Development Programs, Article 44 of the Central Bank Law, Article 11 of the Seventh Five-Year Development Plan, and Clause 19 of the General Policies of the Resistance Economy, the Central Bank's foreign exchange strategy is based on a "managed floating exchange rate with the application of necessary controls."

According to Hemmati, the Central Bank's strategy is to manage the foreign exchange market in line with fundamental economic variables, ensuring minimal volatility around the trend, while taking into account foreign exchange reserves, the competitiveness of domestic enterprises, and the prevention of corruption-prone environments in foreign exchange and trade.

He added that given ongoing sanctions, the intensification of economic warfare, and the inadequacy of conventional foreign exchange intervention methods to maintain exchange rate stability—along with disruptions in foreign exchange flows—the implementation of certain foreign exchange controls has become necessary.

Hemmati noted that by converging multiple exchange rates, an integrated exchange rate system will be formed. Requirements such as order registration, currency allocation, registration of the source of foreign currency, systematic operation of

exchange offices, and capital account controls are among the key examples of these foreign exchange controls.

Referring to developments in the commercial foreign exchange market over the past two weeks, Hemmati said that despite an almost threefold increase in outstanding currency allocations—from \$1.3 billion to \$3.7 billion—the market has moved from a daily \$500 million excess demand for foreign currency to a \$70 million excess supply. He attributed this shift to the elimination of import-related rent-seeking.

He added that while part of the decline in demand may be due to the need for rial liquidity, a 50 percent increase in trading volume—equivalent to a \$70 million rise in daily transactions from \$80 million to \$150 million—indicates that the commercial market has become deeper and more central to the integrated management of the foreign exchange market.

The Central Bank governor said that during the two-week period, various currencies equivalent to \$2.75 billion were traded in the commercial foreign exchange market, all of which were supplied by non-oil exporters.

He noted that the average exchange rate in this market ranged between 120,000 and 130,000 rials per dollar.

Hemmati stressed that the Central Bank's focus is on the repatriation of export revenues and on creating incentives and removing obstacles in the process of returning foreign currency. He said this approach has led to a meaningful increase in the return of export proceeds to the country's commercial cycle in the short term and will contribute to higher exports in the long term.

In closing, the Central Bank governor announced that to date, more than 27 million households have used the electronic coupon subsidy program, amounting to 785 trillion rials, to purchase essential goods.

## Impact of Migrants' Departure on Energy Consumption and Essential Goods

### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The Governor of Tehran Province said that migrant populations returned to their home countries in full compliance with legal and religious regulations and with respect for human dignity. He noted that following their departure, more than 3,000 classrooms were freed during the current academic year, and there have also been positive effects on water and electricity consumption, housing supply, and a reduction in rental prices.

In an interview with ILNA, Mohammad Sadeqh Motamadian commented on the impact of Afghan migrants on Tehran's water consumption, stating: "One of the programs launched by the 14th government at the national level and in Tehran Province is the organization and regulation of foreign nationals. Given that 50 percent of foreign nationals reside in Tehran Province, we have pursued this plan with seriousness."

He emphasized that with strong cooperation from various law enforcement and supervisory bodies under the Law Enforcement Command (FARAJA), more than 500,000 people have been returned to their home countries through shared borders since the start of the plan. "This is a significant figure. These migrants returned in full observance of legal and religious requirements and with respect for human dignity," he said.

Referring to the tangible impact of the Afghan population on public service capacity, the Governor of Tehran stated: "With the departure of this population, more than 3,000 classrooms were freed during the current academic year. Given the sizable number of people who left the country, there has certainly been an impact on water and electricity consumption as well."



Motamadian added: "In the housing sector, the plan has also contributed to a reduction in rental prices. In areas where migrants had been present, we have seen rental price declines of around 30 to 35 percent. It has also had a noticeable impact on improving public security. In addition, there has been a reduction in demand for essential goods in various regions, with significant effects."

He stressed that the plan is being implemented on an ongoing basis and clarified that its scope is limited solely to undocumented migrants.

Regarding water management for next summer, Motamadian said: "A set of measures is underway, including water transfer projects and efforts to reduce consumption through the installation of water-saving devices. The replacement of treated wastewater is also being implemented. Tehran Province produces nearly 52 percent of the country's wastewater, but unfortunately it has not yet been fully substituted. As a result, some green spaces in different areas—especially in Tehran—are still irrigated using groundwater wells. We have plans in place to replace this with treated wastewater."

The Governor of Tehran emphasized that excessive extraction from underground water tables and aquifers has serious environmental consequences. "The land subsidence phenomenon that we are currently facing in Tehran is directly linked to these issues," he said.

He concluded: "With the set of programs that have been considered and the cooperation of all agencies, including Tehran Municipality, we hope there will be full compliance with the law so that instead of extracting more than 150 million cubic meters of water annually from wells to irrigate green spaces, treated wastewater will be used."

## Iran's Tourism on the Brink of a Deep Recession



### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - As political and security tensions in the region and the Middle East have once again escalated, Iran's tourism industry is facing a worrying outlook. Following recent developments, alongside rising tensions and the U.S. military buildup in the region and their global repercussions, a new wave of travel warnings against visiting Iran has been issued. These warnings have seriously affected not only inbound tourism but also domestic tourism.

According to ILNA, Seyed Mostafa Mousavi, Head of the Tourism Commission of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, emphasized the current conditions, stating:

"Under the present circumstances, tourist arrivals to the country have dropped to their lowest level, and the only people traveling to Iran are those seeking medical and health tourism. Given the current atmosphere in the country and the U.S. military posture against Iran, it is natural that foreign governments advise their citizens not to travel to Iran."

According to the Communications Committee of the Tourism Commission of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Mousavi said the impact extends beyond inbound tourism, warning that other sectors of the tourism industry will also fall into recession.

He cautioned that the current situation could lead to the cancellation or suspension of major tourism events in Iran, including the possible non-holding of the Iran International Tourism Exhibition—an issue that itself signals a deepening recession in the country's tourism sector.

## Cooperation With China on Rice Variety Development



### IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The head of Iran's Agricultural Research, Education and Extension Organization (AREEO) said that cooperation with China to establish a joint rice research center is still being pursued, adding that Iran is also working on introducing new varieties of aerobic and hybrid rice.

In an interview with ILNA, Gholamreza Golmohammadi, Deputy Minister of Agriculture Jihad and head of AREEO, responded to a question about the fate of the joint Iran-China rice research center, saying: "We are following up on that joint research center with China. At the same time, we are seeking to introduce varieties for aerobic rice as well as hybrid rice."

Responding to another question on newly introduced drought-resistant rice varieties amid ongoing drought and water stress, Golmohammadi said that last year a drought-tolerant rice variety named Hasti was introduced in cooperation with the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, noting that the variety consumes 2,000 cubic meters less water.

The Deputy Minister added that shortly after its introduction, a contract was signed with a private company, and the Hasti rice variety was cultivated on 1,000 hectares during the 2024-2025 crop year, with the harvest now completed.

Golmohammadi said plans are in place to expand the cultivation of Hasti rice to 5,000 hectares this year.

Referring again to cooperation with China, Golmohammadi said that AREEO is actively pursuing the establishment of the joint research center, while also focusing on introducing new aerobic and hybrid rice varieties.



## Venezuela Releases 30 Prisoners Including Activists

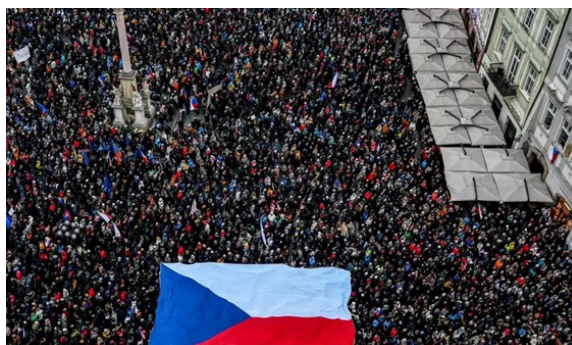
CARACAS (Dispatches) - More than 30 people in Venezuela considered to be “political prisoners” were released on Sunday, legal rights group Foro Penal said, as part of a prisoner release process that families have said is too slow.

The releases come after Venezuela’s interim President Delcy Rodriguez on Friday announced a proposed “amnesty law” for hundreds of prisoners, and said the Helicoide detention center in Caracas would be converted into a center for sport and social services.

A 2022 United Nations report said prisoners in Helicoide were subjected to torture, an accusation the government rejected. Rights group Foro Penal said it had verified that 344 “political prisoners” had been freed since the government announced the new series of prisoner releases in early January, 33 of them on Sunday.



## Czechs Rally to Back President Locking Horns With Gov’t



PRAGUE (Dispatches) - Tens of thousands of Czechs rallied in Prague on Sunday to support the country’s pro-Ukrainian president, who is locked in a dispute with the government’s nationalist billionaire leader Andrej Babis.

Organizers from the independent Million Moments for Democracy movement claim up to 90,000 people attended the demonstration, where some participants waved Czech, European and Ukrainian flags.

Babis leads a government comprising his catch-all ANO party and two eurosceptic parties, the far-right SPD and the right-wing Motorists, following a general election last October.

President Petr Pavel and the government have since then been embroiled in disagreement over Babis’s naming of a contentious minister under investigation for rape, and over the question of whether the Czech Republic should continue supporting war-ravaged Ukraine.

“We are here to show the president that he is not alone -- the devil of dictatorship never sleeps and we have to stay vigilant,” Alena Krotka, a pensioner who demonstrated against the communist regime in Prague on the same Wenceslas square in 1989, told AFP.

On Tuesday, Pavel published short messages in which Motorists chairman and Foreign Minister Petr Macinka threatened retaliation if the president keeps refusing to name Motorists candidate Filip Turek as the environment minister.

Turek, a former member of the European Parliament, is under investigation for domestic violence and rape following a complaint filed by a former girlfriend.

## Japan PM Takaichi’s Party Poised for Landslide Victory



TOKYO (Dispatches) - Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi’s party is likely to score a landslide victory in next week’s lower house election, a survey by the Asahi newspaper showed, heightening the chance the country will continue to pursue big spending and tax cuts.

A strong showing in Sunday’s election would solidify Takaichi’s grip on her party and give her a mandate for her expansionary fiscal policy, which could heighten concerns about Japan’s finances and push bond yields higher.

Takaichi’s Liberal Democratic Party is likely to well exceed a majority of 233 seats out of 465 seats up for grabs in the lower house, according to Asahi’s poll released on Sunday. That would be an increase from 198 seats now.

Together with LDP’s coalition partner, the Japan Innovation Party or Ishin, the ruling alliance will likely reach 300 seats, the poll showed.

“A huge LDP win would further strengthen Takaichi’s grip on power. It won’t be surprising for markets to see a higher chance of Takaichi pursuing her flagship proactive fiscal policies including a consumption tax cut,” said Keisuke Tsuruta, senior bond strategist at Mitsubishi UFJ Morgan Stanley Securities.



## U.S. Talking Deal With Highest People in Cuba

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) – U.S. President Donald Trump said that Washington was negotiating with Havana’s leadership to strike a deal, days after he threatened Cuba’s reeling economy with a virtual oil blockade.

“Cuba is a failing nation. It has been for a long time, but now it doesn’t have Venezuela to prop it up. So we’re talking to the people from Cuba, the highest people in Cuba, to see what happens,” Trump told reporters at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Florida.

“I think we’re going to make a deal with Cuba.”

Trump gave no indication what such a deal might entail.

His second administration has been ratcheting up pressure on the communist-run island nation off south Florida since the January 3 US ouster of Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro, whose country was a close ally of Havana and a crucial source for oil exports to Cuba.

On Thursday, the Republican president signed an executive order threatening to impose additional tariffs on countries that sell oil to Cuba.

The following day, Cubans were queueing up in long lines at gas stations in Havana.

Mike Hammer, the US charge d’affaires to Cuba since 2024, said during a visit this weekend to Trinidad province in central Cuba that he encountered residents who “shouted some insults” at him.

“I think they belong to a certain party, but I know they do not represent the Cuban people, the ordinary Cubans,” Hammer said

in a video posted to X, in reference to the Cuban Communist Party.

Meanwhile, the US State Department’s Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs said in a statement on X: “The illegitimate Cuban regime must immediately stop its repressive acts of sending individuals to interfere with the diplomatic work of CDA Hammer and members of the @USembcuba team.”

“Our diplomats will continue to meet with the Cuban people despite the regime’s failed intimidation,” the agency added.

Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, the Miami-born son of Cuban exiles, have made no secret of their desire to bring regime change in Havana.

After Maduro’s fall, the US president warned Havana to “make a deal soon” or face unspecified consequences.

“NO MORE OIL OR MONEY FOR CUBA: ZERO!” Trump had stated earlier, claiming Cuba was “ready to fall.”

Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said Sunday her administration was planning to send humanitarian aid to Cuba, including “food and other products,” while working on a diplomatic solution to continue sending oil to the island despite Trump’s threatened tariffs.

“We never discussed with President Trump the issue of oil with Cuba,” Sheinbaum added, after the two leaders had spoken by phone Thursday.

For its part, Cuba’s government has accused Trump of seeking to economically strangle the island, where daily power cuts are intensifying and lines at gas stations keep getting longer.

## Russian Drone Strike Kills 12 Miners as Kyiv Announces New Talks

KYIV (Dispatches) - A Russian drone strike on a bus carrying miners killed at least 12 people, Ukrainian officials said on Sunday, hours after President Volodymyr Zelenskiy announced new peace talks amid uncertainty over a Russian suspension of attacks on energy infrastructure.

First Deputy Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said the strike in the southeastern Dnipropetrovsk region was a “cynical and targeted” attack on energy workers. Their employer DTEK said the victims were finishing a shift.

Kyiv is under U.S. pressure to agree a peace deal in the nearly four-year war while grappling with a Russian campaign of airstrikes that has ravaged its energy system during one of the coldest winters in years.

The first round of U.S.-backed trilateral talks between Ukraine and Russia took place in late January, but led to no movement on the vital question of territory, with Moscow still demanding Kyiv cede more land in its war-torn east, which it refuses to do.

Zelenskiy said the new round would take place on February 4 and 5, and that Ukraine - also struggling to stop grinding Russian advances on the battlefield - was ready for “substantive” talks.

The Kremlin said two days ago it had agreed to halt strikes on energy infrastructure until Sunday at the request of U.S. President Donald Trump, and Kyiv said it would reciprocate.

Ukraine - which faced a new cold snap on Sunday with temperatures hovering around minus 15 C (5 degrees Fahrenheit) - said the suspension was supposed to last until the following Friday.

The countries have not reported major strikes on their energy systems in recent days, though Zelenskiy said on Sunday that Russia was attacking railway



infrastructure and other logistics.

He also said its forces had attacked the power grid in two cities across the Dnipro river from the front line, but did not explicitly accuse Russia of breaking the energy ceasefire.

In southeastern Ukraine, two people were killed overnight in a drone strike on a house in the city of Dnipro, and nine people were wounded in attacks on a maternity ward and a residential neighbourhood in Zaporizhzhia, regional officials said.

Zaporizhzhia resident Daria Makarenko, 29, whose neighbour’s house was damaged in one of the strikes, lashed out at Russia as she stood outside near the mangled structure.

“We’re not hitting energy, but we can destroy people?” she said, mocking Moscow’s forces while tearing up. “How can that be? Why are (innocent) people to blame?”

In the capital Kyiv, nearly 700 apartment buildings remained without heating on Sunday afternoon, said Deputy Prime Minister Oleksiy Kuleba, as a new wave of bitter cold swept across much of the country.

Workers raced to restore heating after a widespread grid malfunction on Saturday knocked out power across parts of the country and heating to nearly 3,500 high-rises in Kyiv.

Officials did not directly link it to war damage, but the resulting blackouts - which spread to neighbouring Moldova - underlined the vulnerability of Ukraine’s energy system after months of Russian attacks.

Temperatures dropped even further on Monday to well below minus 20 C in Kyiv. Grid operator Ukrenergo said late on Saturday that planned outages would be in force throughout the entire country.

Kyiv’s energy ministry said on Sunday it was importing a record daily level of 41,987 gigawatt hours in January to keep the system stable.

Anatoliy Veresenko, a 65-year-old veteran who was out for a run at a Kyiv park, said he was warily anticipating new attacks and did not place much hope in the peace process.

“Talks are talks. We hope for peace, but we still need to fight and secure victory,” he said.

## Fernandez Overwhelmingly Wins Costa Rica Presidency

SAN JOSE (Dispatches) - Right-wing populist Laura Fernandez won a commanding victory in Costa Rica’s general elections on Sunday, while her ruling party is set to gain a majority in Congress.

Fernandez has nearly half of the votes with 88.43% of ballots counted. Fernandez was leading in opinion polls before Sunday’s election and only needed 40% of the vote to win outright and avoid an April 5 runoff.

A protege and former chief of staff of outgoing President Rodrigo Chaves, Fernandez has pledged to continue his tough security policies, populist proposals and anti-establishment message. While consecutive reelection is not allowed in Costa Rica, Fernandez has vowed to include Chaves in her government.

“Change will be deep and irreversible,” Fernandez said during her victory speech, announcing Costa Rica was entering a new political era. The Central American nation’s second republic, which began after the 1948 civil war, “is a thing of the past,” she said.

“It’s up to us to build the third republic,” Fernandez told flag-waving supporters in San Jose. At the Hispanidad Fountain, a popular national celebration point for sporting or political events, Fernandez supporters gathered by car and on foot, waving flags and stuffed jaguars, a symbol adopted by Fernandez’s party.

Alvaro Ramos, a centrist economist and her closest contender, secured about one-



third of the vote, while Claudia Dobles, a progressive architect and former first lady, was just shy of 5% of the vote.

“We need to keep fighting, that’s our job, that’s our commitment,” Ramos said during his concession speech, adding that he’d support Fernandez in decisions that benefitted the country, but oppose her when they don’t.

“We’ll keep calling for the country’s unity and to heal a wounded country,” Ramos said.

Fernandez’s party, the Sovereign People’s Party, is projected to win a majority of 30 seats in the 57-seat Congress, up from its current eight seats, but short of a “supermajority” that would give it greater powers.

Earlier on Sunday, parks and plazas near voting centers around the country were filled with flag-waving supporters and election observers as voting got underway.

In Esparza, a small town in the coastal province of Puntarenas where Fernandez was born, the cyan-colored flags of her party outnumber those of other parties and candidates.

Ricardo Mora, 59, grew up in Esparza and said he and his 11 siblings supported the centrist Ramos’ National Liberation Party (PLN) most of their lives, but all but two of them now backed Fernandez because they were fed up with corruption scandals and bad governance.





## Alcaraz Ends the Djokovic Era, Seals Australian Open

MELBOURNE (Dispatches) - Carlos Alcaraz swept past Novak Djokovic to win his first Australian Open and become the youngest man to complete a career Grand Slam, denying the Serbian great an unprecedented 25th major.

The Spaniard was imperious after a slow start in dismissing the 38-year-old, 2-6, 6-2, 6-3, 7-5 on Rod Laver Arena to claim a seventh Slam title and cement himself as undisputed world number one. He becomes the youngest man in the Open era to win all four majors, adding to his two titles each from Wimbledon and the French and US Opens.

At 22, he surpassed legendary countryman Rafael Nadal — in the crowd to witness the feat — who was 24 when he did the same.

A seventh Slam put him alongside John McEnroe and Mats Wilander and one behind Andre Agassi, Jimmy Connors and Ivan Lendl.

“Lifting the trophy for the first time in Australia was crazy,” Alcaraz said, before writing on a TV camera lens: “Job finished. Four out of four complete.”

He added: “A dream come true. I dreamt about getting an Australian Open and completing the career Grand Slam.”

He paid tribute to Djokovic.

“You were talking about how I’m doing the things I am, but what you’re doing is really inspiring, not only for tennis players but athletes around the world.”

It was a first defeat for Djokovic in a Melbourne final, having won all 10 previously, leaving him still searching for a landmark 25th major to better Australia’s Margaret Court, who was also watching on centre court.

Djokovic, striving to become the oldest man to lift a Grand Slam singles trophy, last won one at the US Open in 2023. Since then Alcaraz and Jannik Sinner have dominated.

“I must be very honest and say that I didn’t think I would be standing in the closing ceremony of a Grand Slam again, so I owe you the gratitude of pushing me forward in the last couple weeks,” Djokovic said, speaking to the fans in the stadium.

He went on to hint this could be his last time at Melbourne Park.

“God knows what happens tomorrow, let alone in six months or 12 months, so it has been a great ride.”

He also joked with Nadal in the stands, saying: “There are too many Spanish legends. I feel like I was one against two tonight. It’s not fair.”

Both men battled through five long sets in their semi-finals, Alcaraz against Alexander Zverev and Djokovic with Sinner, and recovery was always going to be key.

But they showed few signs of fatigue in another gladiatorial contest.

They both opened with comfortable holds before Djokovic was presented with the first break point chance at 2-1.

## Man United Snatch 3-2 Thriller From Fulham at the Death

MANCHESTER (Dispatches) - Manchester United’s Benjamin Sesko struck deep into stoppage time in a dramatic 3-2 Premier League victory over Fulham as the home side continued their resurgence under interim boss Michael Carrick.

The win propelled United to fourth place in the standings on 41 points and added another statement result to Carrick’s reign, coming after wins over Manchester City and leaders Arsenal. Fulham fell to eighth.

United led 2-0 after goals from Brazilians Casemiro in the 19th minute and Matheus Cunha in the 56th. But Fulham battled back with Raul Jimenez scoring from the penalty spot in the 85th and then Kevin celebrated the equaliser in the 91st minute.

But second-half substitute Sesko had the Old Trafford crowd roaring in the fourth minute of stoppage time after Bruno Fernandes touched the ball past Fulham’s Calvin Bassey and then picked out the Slovenian striker in the box. Sesko, who had hit the post minutes earlier, turned and smashed it into the top corner.

The victory continued United’s stunning turnaround



since Ruben Amorim was sacked on January 5 after just over a year at the helm.

“This was a big game,” Carrick, a former United midfielder and captain, told Sky Sports. “(Fulham) are a good team, close behind us in the league.

“Every game is a big game and we have to treat it like that and we will do. Today was a tough one, if not tougher because everyone expected that it would be different, but we didn’t and we got it in the end.

“I’m so delighted for Ben,” he added. “To win the game in front of the Stretford End, there’s not much better than that.”

Casemiro, who has announced he will leave United when his contract expires at season’s end, leapt to head home Fernandes’s free kick in the 19th minute, awarded after a tackle on Cunha just outside the 18-yard box.

Cunha doubled United’s lead with a strike from a tricky angle after Casemiro had slipped a ball to him through Fulham’s defence with a no-look pass.

## Knicks Boost Win Streak to Six by Beating LeBron’s Lakers

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - The New York Knicks spoiled what might have been LeBron James’s last game at Madison Square Garden, stretching their win streak to six games with a 112-100 victory.

OG Anunoby scored 25 points and reserve Landry Shamet added 23 to lead the Knicks.

Four-time NBA Most Valuable Player James, a 41-year-old Lakers star, remains uncommitted beyond this season, his NBA-record 23rd.

Josh Hart added 20 points for the Knicks while All-Star guard Jalen Brunson had 12 points, 13 rebounds and seven assists.

“We’ve just been playing together,” Brunson said of their win streak. “Sticking together, that’s the biggest part, having each other’s back holding each other accountable.

“We have to continue to do that. Can’t be satisfied. It’s a collective effort.”



The Knicks improved to 31-18, second in the Eastern Conference behind Detroit, while the Lakers fell to 29-19 despite 30 points from Luka Doncic and 22 from James, who fell to 23-9 in the Garden the same day he was named to his record 22nd NBA All-Star Game.

It was the first Laker loss of the season after they led at half-time.

Detroit delivered the most lopsided victory in team history as Jalen Duren scored 21 points and grabbed 10 rebounds while Cade Cunningham had 18 points and 12 assists in a 130-77 rout of visiting Brooklyn.

Swedish guard Pelle Larsson and Bam Adebayo each scored 20 points as host Miami ripped Chicago 134-91, the third-biggest rout in Heat history.

Jaylen Brown had 30 points and 13 rebounds to lead the Boston Celtics over Milwaukee 107-79.

## Inter Go Eight Clear as Audero Survives Firecracker Scare



MILAN (Dispatches) - Inter Milan extended their lead at the top of Serie A to eight points with 2-0 win at Cremonese, a match which was marred by away fans nearly hitting the hosts’ goalkeeper Emil Audero with a firecracker.

Lautaro Martinez and Piotr Zielinski’s first-half strikes were enough for Inter to extend their unbeaten league run to 11 matches and pile pressure on nearest challengers AC Milan who face Bologna on Tuesday.

Inter again comfortably dealt with one of the division’s lesser lights, their consistency against the lower-ranked teams. Cristian Chivu’s team have collected 31 points from those 11 fixtures.

“It’s not a message to the rest of the league, it’s a message to ourselves,” said Martinez.

“There’s still along way to go and it’s a very evenly-balanced division.”

Martinez’s header, which came in the 16th minute from Federico Dimarco’s corner, made him Inter’s joint fourth-highest goalscorer in Serie A – level on 128 with Alessandro Altobelli who won the World Cup with Italy in 1982.

Martinez celebrated both his goal and his daughter’s fifth birthday, but a positive evening for him and Inter almost took a darker turn when Audero fell to the turf following the arrival of the firecracker from the Inter fans massed behind his goal.

The match was stopped for a few minutes and for a moment it appeared Audero, who played four times for Inter during the 2023/24 season, had been directly struck by the explosive, which went off near him in the penalty area.

## England Underline World Cup Credentials With Series Win Over Sri Lanka



PALLEKELE (Dispatches) - England completed a convincing six-wicket win over Sri Lanka in the second T20 international to wrap up the three-match series with a game to spare at Pallekele.

The series, a warm-up for the upcoming T20 World Cup to be co-hosted by Sri Lanka and India, underlined why England remain among the contenders for the title.

Having edged the opener by 11 runs, the tourists produced another clinical display to take an unassailable 2-0 lead.

“It was an outstanding performance. We are gearing up well for the World Cup and couldn’t have asked anything better from the lads,” said England captain Harry Brook.

“Our batting looks good and so is our bowling, especially the spin department as we know spin will be a key factor playing in this part of the world.”

A rain interruption with England on 57 for two in 7.2 overs saw an original target of 190 revised to 168 in 17 overs under the DLS method.

At that stage, the hosts sensed an opening as their spinners tightened the screws and dragged England behind the required rate.

However Brook changed the complexion of the chase in the blink of an eye.

Brook launched a brutal counter-attack, smashing 36 off just 12 deliveries, peppering the stands with two fours and four towering sixes to swing the momentum firmly England’s way.

Brook’s assault reduced the equation to a manageable 39 off 27 balls and from there it was a matter of milking the bowling and punishing anything loose.

Tom Banton played the finisher’s role to perfection, anchoring the chase with a fluent 54 off 33 balls as England crossed the line with two balls to spare.