

IRAN NEWS

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in a Telephone Conversation With His Russian Counterpart Sergei Lavrov Said Tehran Is Serious on Reaching a “Fair and Balanced” Deal Through Negotiations With the United States

Iran's Foreign Minister in a Phone Call With His Egyptian Counterpart Underscored Efforts to Prepare a Draft Negotiating Text with the United States Based on Mutual Respect, as Indirect Talks Over Iran's Nuclear Program and Lifting of Sanctions Move Into a More Detailed Phase

VOL. XXIX, No. 8475 TEHRAN Price 50,000 Rials

www.irannewsdaily.com

SUNDAY FEBRUARY 22, 2026 ESFAND 03, 1404

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Araghchi Urges Trump to Provide Evidence for Iran Death Toll Claim



TEHRAN (Dispatches) - Iran's foreign minister has categorically dismissed US President Donald Trump's claim that 32,000 people were killed in just two days of riots across Iran last month, urging him to prove the claim.

"Fulfilling our pledge of full transparency towards our own people, Iran's Government has already published a comprehensive list of all 3,117 victims of recent terrorist operation, including about 200 officers," Araghchi wrote in a post published on his account on the social media platform X on Saturday.

"If anyone disputes accuracy of our data, please share any evidence," he added.

Fulfilling our pledge of full transparency towards our own people, Iran's Government has already published a comprehensive list of all 3117 victims of recent terrorist operation, including about 200 officers. Trump alleged in a news briefing on Friday that 32,000 people were killed during the January riots in Iran.

He made the remarks while addressing the Supreme Court's ruling striking down his sweeping tariffs. He did not offer a source for the death toll.

On January 26, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei also slammed as "big lie" similar claims made by anti-Iran news outlets.

Gov't Names Nowruz 1405 the “Nowruz of Solidarity and Empathy” to Foster Unity Beyond Grief



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts has announced that Nowruz 1405 (2026) will officially be designated as the “Nowruz of Solidarity and Empathy,” following a decision by the Cabinet, emphasizing the importance of national unity and reconciliation both domestically and internationally.

In an interview IRNA, Seyyed Reza Salehi Amiri referred to a detailed report presented by his ministry during a recent Cabinet session outlining preparations for the upcoming Persian New Year. He stated that, with the approval of President Masoud Pezeshkian and by decision of the Cabinet, Nowruz 1405 has been officially named the “Nowruz of Solidarity and Empathy.”

Salehi Amiri said the naming reflects a broader national objective to overcome divisions and strengthen cohesion. “In the Nowruz of Solidarity and Empathy, we must move beyond all marginal issues and underscore this essential point that ‘our Iran,’ as a civilization that inspires pride, continues to shine in today's world,” he said. He called on Iranians to set aside grievances and discord, whether inside the country or abroad, and to prioritize empathy — and, most importantly, solidarity — as guiding principles in the year ahead.

FM Warns War Hawks Pushing for Catastrophic War



IRAN NEWS POLITICAL DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's Foreign Minister has said Washington has not demanded zero uranium enrichment in ongoing indirect talks, while warning that hardliners are attempting to steer U.S. policy toward a “catastrophic war.”

“We have not proposed any suspension and the US also has not asked us for zero enrichment,” Abbas Araghchi told the Morning Joe show on US TV network MSNBC on Friday, referring to the latest round of indirect talks, which were held in Geneva on Tuesday. Araghchi also said that the talks focus on making sure that Iran's nuclear program, which includes enrichment, will remain peaceful.

He described the latest round as “very good,” adding that the sides agreed on a number of guiding principles for the negotiations.

He added that Tehran will prepare a draft of a possible agreement in the next “two or three days” and will be handed over to Steve Witkoff, head of the US negotiating team, after approval by senior authorities.

“There may be a need for another meeting to discuss it, after which we can begin working on the text of that draft,” he added.

The top diplomat also pointed to the growing US military threats against Iran in the past few weeks despite ongoing negotiations.

“I hope that those who seek war and want to drag the United States once again into an unnecessary and catastrophic war will not succeed, and will allow us diplomats to work together and find a diplomatic solution that I believe is within reach and can be achieved in

a short time,” Abbas Araghchi said in an interview with Morning Joe program on MC Now. His remarks come as a report, citing statements from US officials, said the Israeli regime has been pressing US President Donald Trump to authorize a strike on Iran.

Trump on Thursday renewed his threats of military action against Tehran, just days after the Geneva talks, which were largely described in positive terms.

Araghchi stressed that no military action can solve the nuclear issue with Iran, noting that it was tried during the US-Israeli aggression in June and proved to be a failure.

“There is no military solution to Iran's nuclear program. This has been tried before. There have been widespread attacks on our facilities, our scientists have been assassinated, but they have not been able to destroy our nuclear program. Why? Because this program was developed by us and our scientists. This technology belongs to us and cannot be destroyed by bombing or military action,” he stated.

He emphasized that “The only solution is diplomacy. That is why America is back at the negotiating table and seeking an agreement.”

Iran's top diplomat also stressed that “We are ready for peace, we are ready for diplomacy, just as we are ready to defend ourselves.”

“If someone is looking for a solution to Iran's nuclear program and wants to ensure that it remains peaceful, the only path is [through] negotiation and a diplomatic solution,” he reiterated.

Over 268,000 Candidates Register for Village Islamic Councils Elections

IRAN NEWS NATION DESK

TEHRAN - More than 268,000 volunteers have registered to run in Iran's upcoming village Islamic councils elections, setting a new participation record compared to previous terms, according to the secretary and spokesperson of the country's Election Headquarters.

Mohsen Esлами, Secretary and Spokesperson of the Election Headquarters, announced the conclusion of the registration deadline at 10:00 p.m. He said that as of 2:00 p.m., a total of 268,048 candidates had completed their registration for the Islamic councils of cities and villages.

According to a report by the news center of the Ministry of Interior published by Islamic Republic News Agency, Esلامي noted that the registration process would continue until 10:00 p.m., but the figures already surpassed those of the sixth term of council elections. During the sixth round, 247,819 candidates had registered.

“The current statistics indicate that in both the city and village sectors, a new record has been set compared to all previous periods of council elections,” Esلامي said, describing the turnout as unprecedented.

Detailing the next stages following the close of registration for village council candidates, Esلامي explained that the review of candidates' records by five designated bodies would begin immediately after the deadline. This initial review process will last 10 days, starting today and continuing until the 10th of Esfand.



Once the relevant agencies announce the results of their background checks, the records will be forwarded to executive boards and district governors. District governors will have two weeks to conduct their own assessments and submit their findings to the district supervisory boards. Under the law, the district supervisory boards will then have 20 days to complete their review.

Esلامي added that April 5 (Farvardin 16) has been set as the date when village council candidates will be informed of the results of qualification assessments. Candidates who are disqualified will have the opportunity to file appeals with the county supervisory boards from April 6 to April 9 (Farvardin 17-20). Appeals will be reviewed between April 10 and April 16 (Farvardin 21-27).

He stated that, in the final stage, official notices will be issued and the names of qualified candidates will be published in accordance with the announced timetable.

Regarding the midterm elections for the Islamic Consultative Assembly in five constituencies, Esلامي said that prospective candidates have until 4:00 p.m. today and tomorrow to finalize their registration. Only individuals who participated in the pre-registration phase are eligible to complete the process.

He also noted that, based on guidelines issued to governors, notifications regarding the qualification review results for city council candidates may be delivered via text message, a process that has already begun.

22 Bahman This Year Was a Referendum

By: Hamid Reza Naghashian

The glory and magnificence of the unified presence of the people of Iran, and their statements in front of cameras, was in fact a referendum on the survival of the Islamic system. Once again, the Iranian nation placed its finger on the document affirming the survival of the Islamic Republic.

With their presence of 35 million people in cities and villages, they firmly and loudly responded to the opponents of the Islamic Republic—who generally advocate for a referendum—and proved that the Islamic system has not had, does not have, and will not have any significant opposition.

Essentially, the opponents of the Islamic Revolution outside Iran can be categorized. Based on available information, these groups mainly consist of small and highly scattered segments.

Some sources divide them into two general categories: political (using peaceful methods such as media and speeches) and armed (using terror and violence). However, a more common classification is based on ideological orientation, which I will address below in order of their level of activity and history.

New secular and constitutionalist coalitions (the most prominent recent group):

Inside and outside the country, they form a community of around one hundred thousand people. The most significant development has been the gathering of various factions of these tendencies around Reza Pahlavi and the “Solidarity Charter.” They are said to live off money stolen by Mohammad Reza Pahlavi and call for the dissolution of the IRGC and a referendum to change the system. This group represents the oldest segment of the opposition, seeking the return of the Pahlavi rule, with its core based in Los Angeles (such as the Tondar group).

Leftist and communist groups:

Including the Tudeh Party and especially Komala, which is active in Kurdistan. They have recently signed the Solidarity Charter to align with monarchists. Like the monarchists, their numbers do not exceed one hundred thousand. They are often described as deceptive intelligence-linked organizations, although Komala funds some of its activities through its own revenues.

The Mojahedin-e Khalq Organization (MKO) (referred to as “Hypocrites”):

The most controversial group. Due to fighting alongside Saddam against the Islamic Republic of Iran during the 1980s, they are considered the most hated group inside Iran and lack any popular base. Although they have been removed from the U.S. and European terrorist lists, their ISIS-like violent approach was reportedly displayed during recent unrest. The seed of hatred planted within them is described as incomprehensible and beyond analysis, and they are accused of brutal behavior toward Iran's religious and prayer-observing people.

Civil and labor networks:

Including Nobel Prize winner Shirin Ebadi and dozens of small human rights organizations in Europe and the United States, mainly focused on “Woman, Life, Freedom” and justice-seeking efforts. Their numbers are said not to reach even 30,000. They support themselves financially, have media platforms, and have gained influence within party and human rights structures. Their goal is described as misrepresenting the people-oriented path of the system, particularly by relying on feminism.

The Baha'is:

Described as the most organized group opposing the Islamic system, with an almost religious approach. They are said to have their strongest source of cohesion in Israel, with alleged deep Mossad influence. Their establishment is attributed to Britain as a means of ideological confrontation with Shi'ism and to create deviation in Shi'ite messianic beliefs. They are described as the wealthiest anti-revolutionary movement, with a larger following than the other groups.

Overall, this categorization suggests that foreign intervention has caused ideological divisions among these groups. They are deeply polarized over the issue of supporting military attacks. The majority oppose U.S. and Israeli attacks and the fragmentation of Iran, while a minority (including some monarchists, the MKO, and supporters of Shirin Ebadi) have at times been willing to coordinate with foreign powers against the Islamic Republic.

An important point is that these groups are often highly scattered, lack cohesion, and suffer from mutual distrust. They have no effective connection with developments inside Iran and essentially cannot be called fighters against the system.

Based on this analysis, the Islamic Republic can be considered to lack any significant opposition. If their voices are heard in foreign media and cyberspace, they are mostly seen as advancing the hostility of Western intelligence agencies against our country—something clearly evident to the Iranian nation.

This year, three “Days of God” falling on the 22nd of each month—22 Dey condemning the unrest, 22 Bahman renewing commitment to the ideals of the Islamic Revolution and national solidarity, and, God willing, 22 Esfand on Quds Day—have shown and will continue to show outstanding manifestations of the Iranian nation's power, disappointing the bloodthirsty enemies of the Iranian people.

IRAN NEWS



Iranian Destroyer Dena Docks at Indian Port to Participate in MILAN 2026 Drills

TEHRAN (IRNA) - The destroyer "Dena" has docked at Visakhapatnam Port, eastern India, to participate in the international MILAN 2026 exercise, aimed at developing maritime diplomacy, expanding defense interactions, and showing operational capabilities of the Iranian navy in international waters.

The MILAN drills are held every two years in one of India's largest ports. In the current edition, more than 70 countries are participating. This year's exercise will be held from February 18 to February 25 at Visakhapatnam Port and in the waters of the Bay of Bengal.

Gov't Targets €6b in Revenue from Health Tourism



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Minister of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts announced that under the Seventh Development Plan, the country aims to attract two million health tourists and generate 6 billion in revenue by 2028 (1407 in the Iranian calendar), stating that the plan will "definitely" be implemented.

Seyed Reza Salehi Amiri told reporters that Iran has a large economy and that in 2024 (1403), some 1.2 million health tourists traveled to the country, spending approximately \$2 billion.

He emphasized that a comprehensive national health tourism system has been designed and its software platform developed, adding that the system will be officially unveiled in the coming days.

Salehi Amiri said a lack of coordination among responsible agencies had previously posed challenges, but this issue has been resolved under the Fourteenth Government. Over the past year, more than 50 joint meetings have been held among the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicrafts, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Cooperatives, Labour and Social Welfare, the Social Security Organization, and other relevant bodies. A comprehensive health tourism framework and national division of responsibilities have now been finalized, clarifying the roles of each institution and the private sector.

The minister cited three key advantages underpinning Iran's health tourism strategy. First, he said Iran is among the few countries in the region with highly qualified doctors and medical specialists. Second, the country has more than 800 hospitals, medical centers, and advanced medical facilities. Third, he highlighted affordability, noting that average medical costs in Iran are one-fifth of those in neighboring countries and one-tenth of costs in Europe, while offering comparable services.

He expressed hope that 2026 (1405) would mark a major transformation in Iran's healthcare system.

Salehi Amiri also addressed tourism development in Iran's free trade zones. He said ministry officials met this week with the heads of the free zones and reached agreements to cooperate on developing tourism infrastructure and creating incentives to attract visitors to islands and free trade areas.

10% Decline in Domestic Air Passengers; Ticket Prices Unchanged



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - The secretary of the Association of Iranian Airlines announced a 10 percent decline in domestic air passengers and a 20 percent drop in international flight passengers from the beginning of the current year through the end of the month of Dey, stating that airline ticket prices have not changed.

In an interview with the economic correspondent of Islamic Republic News Agency, Maqsood Asadi Samani responded to criticism from some members of parliament regarding alleged airfare increases toward the end of the year. Rejecting the claims, he said ticket prices continue to be set in accordance with the Supreme Aviation Council's resolution at \$48 per seat and have remained unchanged.

The airline association official noted that in recent months the exchange rate has risen by 90 percent, while jet fuel prices have increased sharply from 600 toman per liter to 20,122 toman per liter.

He added that 70 percent of airline companies' costs are denominated in foreign currency, while the remaining 30 percent have also been affected by domestic inflation, leading to higher overall operating expenses.

Asadi Samani said demand for flights is currently weak, even on high-traffic domestic routes, where ticket prices range between 2 to 3 million toman.

For example, he stated that for flights on the Tehran-Mashhad route on the first of Esfand, nine airlines are offering tickets below 3 million toman. Similarly, four airlines are selling Kish-Tehran tickets for the 11th of Esfand at prices under 3 million toman. He noted that 17 percent of ticket prices consist of taxes and value-added tax.

The head of the Association of Iranian Airlines emphasized that the country's aviation industry is facing economic difficulties and unfavorable conditions due to weak market demand and sluggish ticket sales.

Iran Records \$45b in Non-Oil Exports in 10 Months, Narrows Trade Deficit

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's foreign trade posted two notable improvements in the first 10 months of the current Iranian year (1404), with non-oil exports reaching \$45 billion and the country's trade deficit narrowing significantly despite ongoing political pressures and regional tensions.

According to figures released by the Trade Promotion Organization of Iran, citing data from the Islamic Republic of Iran Customs Administration, Iran's trade balance improved from a negative \$10 billion in the same period last year to a negative \$4 billion this year—an overall \$6 billion reduction in the deficit.

The report notes that the improvement comes despite what officials described as political pressures, including a brief 12-day conflict and efforts by European parties to activate the "snapback" sanctions mechanism. Nevertheless, non-oil exports remained broadly stable while imports declined in value.

During the 10-month period, Iran exported 130.036 million tons of non-oil goods worth \$45.015 billion. In the corresponding period last year, exports totaled 128.191 million tons valued at \$48.043 billion. This represents a 1.33 percent increase in export volume, with only a 6.3 percent decline in dollar value year-on-year.

On the import side, 33.177 million tons of goods valued at approximately \$49.107 billion were cleared through customs during the same period. In the previous year's 10-month span, imports stood at 31.720 million tons worth \$57.148 billion. While import volume rose by 4.6 percent, the total dollar value of imports dropped by 15.55 percent, contributing significantly to the reduced trade deficit.

Officials noted that approximately \$3 billion of total imports were allocated to gold bullion, marking a roughly 6 percent increase compared to last year. Excluding gold imports, the trade balance would show further improvement. If current trends continue,



projections suggest the trade balance could turn positive by the end of the year.

China remained Iran's largest export destination during the 10-month period, accounting for \$10.918 billion, or 24.25 percent of total export value. Iraq ranked second with \$7.917 billion (17.59 percent), followed by the United Arab Emirates with \$6.448 billion (14.32 percent), Turkey with \$5.660 billion (12.57 percent), and Afghanistan with \$2.088 billion (4.64 percent).

The United Arab Emirates was Iran's largest source of imports, supplying goods worth approximately \$14 billion and accounting for 30.22 percent of total import value. China followed with \$13.439 billion (27.37 percent), Turkey with \$7.921 billion (16.13 percent), India with \$1.547 billion (3.15 percent), and Germany with \$1.436 billion (2.92 percent).

Iran's external transit volume reached 17.6 million tons during the 10-month period, representing a 4.63 percent decline compared to the previous year. However, this marks a significant improvement from earlier in the year, when transit volumes had fallen by as much as 15 percent following regional instability in late spring and early summer.

Government measures—including revised transit procedures and implementation of a national transit facilitation directive approved by the Cabinet—have helped moderate the downturn. Incentives such as reducing the frequency of container inspections and resealing at multiple customs checkpoints have improved efficiency.

Although transit volumes remain slightly below last year's levels, the pace of decline has steadily eased in recent months, signaling gradual recovery in Iran's role as a regional transit corridor.

Iran and Brazil Aim to Strengthen Trade Through Specialized Committees

IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Efforts to strengthen trade and investment ties between Iran and Brazil are gaining momentum, with the head of the Iran-Brazil Joint Chamber of Commerce calling for the activation of specialized committees to address technical and operational challenges. At a recent meeting held at Iran's Chamber of Commerce, Fakhruddin Ameryaen, president of the Iran-Brazil Joint Chamber, met with former Iranian Ambassador to Brazil Hossein Ghorabi and a representative from the Planning and Budget Organization to discuss ways to enhance bilateral relations and optimize the Iran-Brazil Joint Commission.

Ameryaen emphasized that the establishment of active specialized committees, including those focused on agriculture, transportation, banking, and currency, could allow technical and operational issues to be resolved at the expert level, reducing the need for high-level governmental intervention. "If challenges are addressed efficiently within these committees, there may be no necessity to wait for full commission sessions or changes in government to advance bilateral cooperation," he stated.

Highlighting the historical significance of trade ties, Ameryaen pointed out that during Ambassador Ghorabi's tenure, trade between Iran and Brazil reached approximately \$1.3 billion. Despite regional and international fluctuations, trade has maintained a substantial role, with Brazil proving especially supportive during periods of international sanctions, providing key logistical assistance through ports and maritime transport for Iranian goods.

One of the most promising avenues for bilateral cooperation, Ameryaen said, is overseas cultivation. Proposals in Brazil have offered up to one million hectares of land to Iranian investors, with 15–20% of investment capital provided by the Iranian side and the remainder financed through long-term loans spanning 15–20 years with interest rates of 5–6%. High productivity levels, combined with Brazil's favorable climate and rainfall patterns, allow multiple harvests annually—up to five crops in two years for products such as corn or rice in some regions—making these projects economically viable and attractive for investors.

Despite these opportunities, currency restrictions and Central Bank regulations present significant challenges. Iranian investors face strict limitations when transferring capital abroad or using export revenues for overseas investments. Ameryaen stressed that revising these regulations could unlock substantial investment potential and facilitate broader engagement in foreign agricultural projects.

Another persistent issue is the repatriation of export earnings. Exporters, including those of carpets and other goods, are obligated to return foreign currency within three months, a process often delayed by banking and trade procedures. These delays can prevent exporters from accessing foreign exchange allocations on time, limiting their ability to reinvest or expand operations, and further complicating trade with Brazil.



Former Ambassador Hossein Ghorabi highlighted Brazil's continued importance as a strategic trading partner for Iran. He noted that Brazil currently accounts for approximately 7–8% of Iran's total foreign trade, equivalent to nearly \$8 billion of Iran's \$50 billion total foreign trade. He emphasized that activating specialized committees under the Iran-Brazil Joint Commission, particularly in agriculture, could facilitate tangible progress without

waiting for full commission-level sessions.

Ghorabi further highlighted the unique governance structure in Brazil, where agricultural execution is largely managed at the state rather than the federal level. This decentralization necessitates engagement with state authorities and governors, who hold substantial executive powers, for the successful implementation of projects. As a result, interactions solely with the central government are insufficient to advance agricultural initiatives effectively.

In terms of export opportunities, petrochemical products remain a key sector. Currently, Iran exports approximately 1.8 million tons of petrochemicals to Brazil annually, although Brazil has the capacity to absorb nearly three million tons. Despite the growth potential, exports have largely stagnated in recent years. Ghorabi suggested that negotiating preferential or tariff agreements with Brazil could improve Iran's market share and competitiveness. He cited China's experience, where trade with Brazil increased from \$3 billion to \$170 billion over 25 years, as a model for potential expansion.

The meeting also reviewed the structure of the Iran-Brazil Joint Commission, which includes five main working groups: trade, industry and mining, finance and insurance, energy (including water, electricity, oil, gas, and petrochemicals), agriculture, and technology and education. These committees focus on practical objectives, such as improving air and maritime transportation, facilitating barter and oil-to-chemical exchanges, promoting overseas cultivation, and ensuring access to key agricultural inputs. The Planning and Budget Organization stressed the importance of increasing private-sector participation in these efforts, with government institutions taking on a supportive rather than directive role.

Alireza Pirouzan, head of the Americas Department at Iran's Chamber of Commerce, noted the limitations of relying on international platforms such as BRICS, describing it as an alliance rather than a fully coordinated organization. Recent disagreements between Russia and South Africa, he said, illustrate the instability of expectations in such frameworks, underscoring the need for strong bilateral mechanisms to manage trade and investment efficiently.

Overall, the meeting emphasized that overcoming internal regulatory, banking, and currency barriers is crucial to unlocking the full potential of Iran-Brazil trade. Activating specialized committees and promoting state-level collaboration in Brazil could enable both nations to expand trade volumes, improve investment opportunities, and create a more sustainable framework for long-term economic cooperation.

Mining Investment Between Iran and U.S. Emerges as Key Economic Opportunity



IRAN NEWS ECONOMIC DESK

TEHRAN - Iran's rich mineral reserves and strategic geopolitical location offer the potential to make the country a leading mining hub in the region. However, experts stress that realizing this potential requires leveraging opportunities beyond national borders, including international knowledge exchange, joint financing, regional and global market development, and the adoption of advanced technologies in exploration and mining operations.

Farshid Shokrhodaee, Head of the Investment and Finance Commission at the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines, and Agriculture, highlighted the emerging opportunities in the context of ongoing discussions between Iran and the United States. Speaking to ILNA, Shokrhodaee noted that a recent clause on "shared interests in oil, gas, mining investments, and even aircraft procurement" had been included in the negotiations, aiming to allow the U.S. to benefit from high-return sectors while ensuring the sustainability of any potential agreement. However, he emphasized that the details of this clause remain unspecified and that the opportunities for U.S. investors do not necessarily conflict with Iran's ongoing cooperation with China.

Shokrhodaee pointed out that Iran possesses about 4% of the world's mineral reserves on just 1% of its land area, making it one of the resource-rich nations globally. He explained that investment needs are not limited to new mines; significant capital is required to upgrade existing operations, enhance productivity, and modernize mining machinery and equipment. This represents a broad spectrum of opportunities for investors looking to enter Iran's mining sector.

Maritime Tourism Route to Be Launched Connecting Southern Ports



IRAN NEWS NATIONAL DESK

TEHRAN - The Director General of Maritime Affairs at the Ports and Maritime Organization announced that 17.6 million sea voyages were conducted during the first 10 months of the year 1404, marking a 3 percent increase compared to the same period last year. He also said the organization is pursuing plans to launch a maritime tourism route linking the country's southern ports.

According to a report by Islamic Republic News Agency citing the Ports and Maritime Organization, Allahmorad Afifipour stated that the proposed tourism line would operate using a large vessel capable of connecting major southern ports.

He noted that a well-equipped passenger terminal is currently operational at Port of Khorramshahr, while a modern and fully equipped passenger terminal has also been constructed at Port of Bushehr. In addition, all agencies responsible for handling international travel formalities are stationed at the passenger terminal of Port of Chabahar.

Afifipour described Khor Azini as a scenic and tourist-friendly destination, adding that the Ports and Maritime Organization has established a marine tourism pier at the site.

He further noted that the Oman-Chabahar maritime route has already been launched and is currently operational. The organization is also planning to introduce another international maritime line at the Port of Chabahar.

U.S. Forces Kill Three in Latest Strike in Eastern Pacific

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) – U.S. forces launched a strike against alleged drug traffickers in the Eastern Pacific, killing three people, the military said.

“Joint Task Force Southern Spear conducted a lethal kinetic strike on a vessel operated by Designated Terrorist Organizations” along an apparent narco-trafficking route, the US Southern Command posted on X, adding that “three male narco-terrorists were killed during this action.”

The post included black and white video of the strike that showed an aerial view of a boat before it is bombed and engulfed in flames.



Merz Vows to Keep Out Far-Right as He Warns of a Changed World



STUTT GART (Dispatches) - Chancellor Friedrich Merz vowed on Friday not to let the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD) party “ruin” Germany and told his fellow conservatives to prepare for a raw new climate of great-power competition.

Merz’s message to the Christian Democrat (CDU) party’s conference in Stuttgart reiterated points he made at last weekend’s Munich Security Conference, saying the “rules based order we knew no longer exists”. He also made calls for economic reform, and a rejection of anti-Semitism and the AfD, which is aiming to win its first state election this year.

“We will not allow these people from the so-called Alternative for Germany to ruin our country,” he told party delegates, who welcomed former chancellor Angela Merkel with a storm of applause on her first visit to the conference since stepping down in 2021.

Merz, trailing badly in the polls ahead of a string of state elections this year, said he accepted criticism that the reforms he announced during last year’s election campaign had been slower than initially communicated.

“I will freely admit that perhaps, after the change of government, we did not make it clear quickly enough that we would not be able to achieve this enormous reform effort overnight,” he said.

Police Battle Opposition Protesters in Albanian Capital



TIRANA (Dispatches) - Albanian police on Friday fired water cannon and tear gas to break up new anti-corruption protests by opposition right-wing demonstrators who hurled fireworks and homemade petrol bombs.

Thousands of followers of the Democratic Party (PD) of former prime minister Sali Berisha first gathered outside the government headquarters demanding that socialist Prime Minister Edi Rama quit.

“We will save Albania from Edi Rama, who has plunged the country into poverty and corruption,” Berisha, 81, told the crowd. “He is just a political corpse.”

But Berisha had to end his speech soon after when some protesters launched fireworks and petrol bombs at the government building. Police fired tear gas and water cannon to force the crowd away.

Berisha then led the demonstrators toward the parliament building where they were confronted by police including anti-riot forces.

Police and demonstrators battled each other for about two hours in the streets around parliament, an AFP journalist witnessed.

Police said about 30 people were arrested. The Democratic Party said about 40 of its followers had been detained.

Hamas Demands Halt to Israeli Aggression

GAZA CITY (Dispatches) - Hamas said any discussions on Gaza must begin with a total halt to Israeli “aggression” as Donald Trump’s “Board of Peace” maps out the territory’s future, with Israel insisting on the militants’ disarmament before reconstruction starts.

Trump’s board met for its inaugural session in Washington on Thursday, with a number of countries pledging money and personnel for rebuilding, more than four months into a fragile ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.

But the board meeting offered no timeline for Hamas to lay down its weapons or for Israel’s army to withdraw from the shattered enclave.

“Any political process or any arrangement under discussion concerning the Gaza Strip and the future of our Palestinian people must start with the total halt of aggression,” Hamas said in a statement late Thursday.

The Palestinian group also said arrangements for Gaza’s future must start with the “lifting of the blockade, and the guarantee of our people’s legitimate national rights, first and foremost their right to freedom and self-determination”.

During the Board of Peace meeting, it was announced that a handful of countries—Albania, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo and Morocco—would commit troops to a nascent International Stabilization Force (ISF) for Gaza.

Hamas spokesman Hazem Qassem told AFP that the Palestinian Islamist movement was open to international forces in the territory, but with caveats.

“We want peacekeeping forces that monitor the ceasefire, ensure its implementation, and act as a buffer between the occupation army and our people in the Gaza Strip, without interfering in Gaza’s internal affairs,” Qassem said.

The ISF aims to have 20,000 soldiers, as well as a new police force. Muslim-majority Indonesia has said it is ready to send up to 8,000 troops.

The Board of Peace was established after the Trump administration, with longtime mediators Qatar and Egypt, negotiated a ceasefire in October to halt two years of devastating war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza.

The next phase of the Trump plan provides for the disarmament of Hamas, the gradual withdrawal of the Israeli military and



the deployment of the ISF, with a transitional Palestinian technocratic committee overseeing day-to-day governance.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has insisted that Hamas must disarm before any reconstruction begins.

But Hamas refuses to lay down its arms under the conditions set by Israel.

Both sides have frequently accused each other of violating the terms of the ceasefire, which came into effect last October after two years of devastating war.

At the Board of Peace meeting on Thursday, Trump said several countries, mostly in the Gulf, had pledged more than seven billion dollars to rebuild the territory.

Palestinians who spoke to AFP in the southern Gaza city of Khan Yunis swayed between hope and suspicion about the Washington meeting.

“Trump is merely a military force imposing his views on the world, and this security council, which he boasts about, is another gateway to the occupation of Palestine, another face of the Zionist occupation,” said Farid Abu Odeh, referring to the board.

Another Palestinian, Mohammed al-Saqqa, said he was praying Trump’s board would lead to “security and peace, and to something better than what we have gone through”.

But many experts and some US allies have indicated scepticism at the board due to concerns it may sideline the United Nations.

Hugh Lovatt, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, told AFP he found what was emerging from the board “seriously disturbing”.

Lovatt said many of its ideas for Gaza’s reconstruction originated from Israeli-friendly partners, while Palestinian voices were excluded.

He said signs pointed to “a colonial project in terms of trying to impose a foreign economic project on a territory”.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said the European Commission should not have sent a representative to the meeting as it did not have a mandate to represent member states.

Former US ambassador to Israel Dan Shapiro said the lack of Palestinian input and the grand reconstruction plans contingent on Hamas’s disarmament made it “hard to take the Board of Peace seriously”.

Trump Slaps New 10% Tariff After U.S. Supreme Court Ruling

WASHINGTON (Dispatches) - President Donald Trump imposed yesterday an additional 10 per cent tariff on imports into the United States after the Supreme Court struck down many of his sweeping and often arbitrary duties, delivering a stinging rebuke to his signature economic policy.

Trump signed the tariff order in the Oval Office—saying on social media it was “effective almost immediately”—after he spent the past year imposing various rates spontaneously to cajole and punish countries, both friend and foe.

The conservative-majority high court ruled six to three Friday that a 1977 law Trump has relied on to slap sudden rates on individual countries, upending global trade, “does not authorize the President to impose tariffs.”

Trump, who had nominated two of the justices who repudiated him, responded furiously, alleging without any evidence that the court was influenced by foreign interests.

“I’m ashamed of certain members of the court, absolutely ashamed, for not having the courage to do what’s right for our country,” Trump told reporters.

“To protect our country, a president can actually charge more tariffs than I was charging in the past,” Trump said, insisting that the ruling left him “more powerful.”

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, addressing the Economic Club of Dallas, said the alternative method “will result in virtually unchanged tariff revenue in 2026.”

The ruling did not impact sector-specific duties Trump separately imposed on steel, aluminum and various other goods. Government probes still underway could lead to additional sectoral tariffs.

Still, it marked Trump’s biggest defeat at the Supreme Court since returning to the White House 13 months ago.

The court has generally expanded his power. In a controversial decision



before the 2024 election it ruled in Trump v. United States that he was immune from prosecution for “official acts” during his first term, when he refused to accept defeat.

The justices ruled yesterday that “had Congress intended to convey the distinct and extraordinary power to impose tariffs” through the 1977 law, the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, “it would have done so expressly, as it consistently has in other tariff statutes.”

“IEEPA contains no reference to tariffs or duties,” Chief Justice John Roberts said in his opinion.

Wall Street saw share prices rise modestly after the decision, which had been expected.

Business groups largely cheered the ruling, with the National Retail Federation saying this “provides much-needed certainty” for companies.

The Trump administration in court arguments said companies would receive refunds if the tariffs were deemed unlawful. But the ruling did not address the issue.

Trump said he expected years of litigation on whether to provide refunds. Justice Brett Kavanaugh, the one Trump nominee to side with him, noted the refund process could be a “mess.”

The University of Pennsylvania’s Penn Wharton Budget Model projected that the court decision on tariffs would generate up to US\$175 billion in refunds.

California Governor Gavin Newsom, who is widely expected to seek the Democratic presidential nomination in 2028, said Americans deserved refunds from the “illegal cash grab.”

“Every dollar unlawfully taken must be refunded immediately - with interest. Cough up!”

But Elizabeth Warren, the top Democrat on the Senate Banking Committee, cautioned there remained “no legal mechanism for consumers and many small businesses to recoup the money they have already paid.”

The Budget Lab at Yale University estimates consumers face an average effective tariff rate of 9.1 per cent with Friday’s decision, down from 16.9 per cent.

The rate “remains the highest since 1946,” excluding 2025, it said.

Close US trading partners including the European Union and Britain said they were studying the decision.

Trump, in response to a question, suggested trade deals negotiated with individual countries would remain in place, specifically mentioning India.

Canada, which has faced repeated tariff threats as Trump questioned the sovereignty of the northern neighbor, said the Supreme Court showed the levies were “unjustified,” but the country braced for more turbulence.

“Canada should prepare for new, blunter mechanisms to be used to reassert trade pressure, potentially with broader and more disruptive effects,” said Candace Laing, president of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.

Zelensky Says Ukraine Is Not Losing the War

KYIV (Dispatches) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky told AFP that his country is not losing its war against Russia, has taken hundreds of square kilometres in a new counteroffensive, and that European troops should deploy right on the front line after any ceasefire.

Ukraine’s leader was speaking to AFP in an exclusive interview ahead of the four-year anniversary of the Russian invasion, with the outcome of the war -- or the shape of any deal to end the fighting -- still hanging in the balance.

His assessment of the grinding conflict comes as US President Donald Trump is pushing Kyiv to agree a deal with Moscow, and during one of the most difficult winters for Ukraine’s exhausted population and stretched military.

“You can’t say that we’re losing the war. Honestly, we’re definitely not losing it, definitely. The question is whether we will win,” Zelensky told AFP journalists at the presidential palace in the Ukrainian capital.

“That is the question -- but it’s a very costly question,” Zelensky added.

Europe’s deadliest war since World War II -- unleashed when Vladimir Putin ordered Russian troops to pour over the Ukrainian border on February 24, 2022 -- has seen tens of thousands of civilians and hundreds of thousands of military personnel killed on both sides.

Russian forces this winter have dramatically escalated a campaign of systematic strikes on Ukrainian energy sites, attacks that have left millions in the cold and dark for weeks in freezing temperatures.



And now Washington and Moscow are both exerting pressure on Kyiv to give up the embattled Donbas region to the Kremlin in any deal to end the four-year war.

“Both the Americans and the Russians say that if you want the war to end tomorrow, get out of Donbas,” Zelensky said about the eastern region that Russia has claimed as its own.

US-mediated talks in Geneva earlier this week failed to make progress on the key issue of territory in any deal to end the conflict.

Moscow has vowed it will capture the entire Donbas by force if Kyiv does not withdraw, with Putin showing no signs of compromise on his hardline demands to end his four-year invasion.

Ukraine however still controls around one-fifth of the heavily industrialised and fortified Donetsk region, while Russia has seized roughly the entire Lugansk region. The two are together referred to as the Donbas.

Ukraine has repeatedly ruled out pulling its troops out of the region, saying such a move would only embolden Russia.

The demand to cede territory to Russia comes as Kyiv’s forces are, according to Zelensky, gaining ground in counterattacks along the southern front line.

“I won’t go into too many details,” Zelensky said of the advances, “but today I can congratulate our army first and foremost -- all the defence forces -- because as of today, 300 (square) kilometres have been liberated.”



Alcaraz Digs Deep to Topple Rublev and Reach Qatar Final

DOHA (Dispatches) - World no. 1 Carlos Alcaraz needed six match points before finally toppling defending champion Andrey Rublev 7-6 (7/3), 6-4 to reach the final of the Qatar Open.

Playing his first tournament since completing his career Grand Slam at the Australian Open earlier in February, Alcaraz will face Arthur Fils in the final.

The 21-year-old Frenchman was a 6-4, 7-6 (7/4) winner over sixth seed Jakub Mensik, who defeated Jannik Sinner in the last eight.

After two hours, two minutes on court, Alcaraz extended his perfect winning record to 11 matches this season.

"The way that I am approaching every match, I'm just really proud about it," said the seven-time Grand Slam winner.

"It's something I am trying to be better at and it's paying off. I'm proud of myself (for) getting better and maturing."

The Spaniard twice failed to serve out the opening set and saw a 3-0 lead in the second quickly wiped out. He then missed three match points on serve at 5-3 when Rublev staged another fightback.

But Alcaraz held his nerve and after failing with two other match points sealed the match on his

sixth to reach the Qatar final for the first time.

"If you want to find a solution to a problem, you should find it in a calm place," said Alcaraz who needed three sets to get past former champion Karen Khachanov in the quarter-finals.

"It's something I am working on. When I am playing and getting mad, seeing I'm not at my best, I just get frustrated. That is not the place you will find solutions."

"In these matches, I have been really calm, thinking clearly and being positive. It's in those places where you can find the solutions to a problem."

Fils secured a place in his first tour-level final since lifting the ATP 500 trophy in Tokyo in 2024 with an impressive straight sets win over 2024 finalist Mensik.

The Czech was outstanding in his quarter-final win over world no.2 Sinner but could not hit the same heights against Fils.

"It's been a tough journey," said Fils, who is playing just his third event since returning after eight months on the sidelines with a back injury.

"Eight months without playing tennis, just watching the other guys battling... Staying in my bed and doing recovery was very long."

Canada to Face U.S. in Olympic Ice Hockey Final

MILAN (Dispatches) - Canada and the United States set up a showdown in the men's ice hockey final at the Winter Olympics by beating Finland and Slovakia in Friday's semi-finals.

Tournament favourites Canada and the USA will face off for gold at Milan's Santagiulia Arena on Sunday, while Finland and Slovakia will battle for bronze.

Nathan MacKinnon scored Canada's winner in the final seconds to complete a thrilling comeback from two goals down in a 3-2 win against Finland, while the Americans breezed to a 6-2 victory over the Slovaks.

"It's everything. It's the gold medal at an Olympic Games. We are very lucky to be here and it's a great opportunity. We have got to be ready," MacKinnon said.

Eyeing their record 10th Olympic title and the first since Sochi 2014, Canada outshot Finland 39-17, but it was outgoing Olympic champions Finland who were more efficient early in the



game.

Mikko Rantanen gave the Finns the lead on 17 minutes with a wrist shot on a power play and Eric Haula made it 2-0 on 24 minutes with a shorthanded goal, a neat backhand finish on a break.

That was a wake-up call for Canada and Sam Reinhart brought them within a goal with just under six minutes remaining in the second period, tipping in Cale Makar's shot on a power play.

Defenseman Shea Theodore made it 2-2 at 50:34 with a slapshot after Brad Marchand had thrown Saros off with a tackle as Canada kept pushing.

MacKinnon then finished the comeback as Finnish defenseman Niko Mikkola was sin-binned for hitting him with a high stick.

"We had a lot of good opportunities, a lot of good battles to get the puck back," said MacKinnon.

Australia End Dismal T20 World Cup by Thrashing Oman

KANDY (Dispatches) - Captain Mitchell Marsh crashed a belligerent 64 off 33 balls as Australia finished their dismal T20 World Cup with a nine-wicket romp past Oman in Kandy on Friday.

Marsh reached his fifty inside the six-over power play and hit four sixes and seven fours in all as Australia, having bowled out Oman for 104, raced to 108-1 with more than 10 overs to spare.

Fellow opener Travis Head made 32 and Josh Inglis 12 not out but the win against a 20th-ranked Oman side will be scant consolation after a chaotic campaign in Sri Lanka.

A depleted Australia failed to make the second phase for only the second time in the event's history after defeats to Zimbabwe and co-hosts Sri Lanka.

"As I've said a few times, it's a bitterly disappointed change room," said Marsh.



"Like every team, we built towards this for two years. Unfortunately, in a couple of key games, we just didn't play our best cricket."

Australia arrived after being drubbed 3-0 in Pakistan and without injured fast bowlers Pat Cummins and Josh Hazlewood.

They then lost Marsh for the first two games after he was hit during practice and suffered testicular bleeding.

Australia's acerbic media did not hold back in their criticism after their fate was sealed when Zimbabwe's match against Ireland was washed out on Tuesday, citing selection "stuff-ups".

Chief among those was sticking with the woefully out-of-form Cameron Green and promoting Tim David to number four as a "power hitter" when he had not played since December because of a hamstring injury.

Svitolina Edges Gauff to Set Up Pegula Final in Dubai



DUBAI (Dispatches) - Elina Svitolina reached her first WTA 1000 final since 2018 with a marathon 6-4, 6-7 (13/15), 6-4 victory over third-seeded American Coco Gauff at the Dubai Championships.

In a rematch of their Australian Open quarter-final last month, Svitolina repeated her success against Gauff, this time after a gruelling three-hour duel, to book a final showdown with another American, Jessica Pegula.

Earlier on centre court, Pegula maintained her perfect record against Amanda Anisimova and triumphed 1-6, 6-4, 6-3 in an all-American battle to reach her first final in Dubai.

Svitolina has been in fine form so far this season, amassing a 15-2 win-loss record. The Ukrainian seventh seed started her year by winning a title in Auckland, before reaching the semi-finals at the Australian Open and now advancing to the third Dubai final of her career.

She returned to the top 10 in the world rankings earlier this month, for the first time since 2021, and the first time as a mother.

"To be honest I'm speechless after that fight," said the two-time Dubai champion, who needed six match points to close out the win.

"I was really trying to put myself out there and was playing like there is no tomorrow, in a way. It's really, really special to be in a final here and have the chance again to lift that beautiful trophy."

Gauff once again faced issues with her serve and finished the match with 12 double faults.

"I've been doing everything you've wanted for six months [and I haven't gotten] any better," Gauff said, looking towards her box.

The 21-year-old hired a biomechanics coach Gavin MacMillan to help rework her serve and fix the problems with it, but Gauff continues to struggle with that shot, and struck 16 double faults in her third-round match earlier this week.

Aston Martin in Disarray as Leclerc Tops F1 Testing Timesheets



SAKHIR (Dispatches) - Ferrari's Charles Leclerc topped the timesheets on the final day of pre-season testing at the Sakhir circuit in Bahrain while Aston Martin's plans to make an impact in the new Formula One season crumbled into chaos.

The new Adrian Newey-designed Aston Martin car is radically different to the others on the grid, although all have undergone major changes as teams adapt to new regulations on chassis and engines.

The eye-catching Aston Martin ran into problems with its Honda power unit on Thursday when Fernando Alonso suffered a battery failure.

The team were also short of spare parts and Lance Stroll only completed six laps on Friday - two in the morning and four in the afternoon - before Aston Martin called time on testing two hours before the scheduled close.

"Overall, we are not happy with our performance and our reliability at the moment," said Honda's trackside general manager and chief engineer Shintaro Orihara in a press release.

"We collected data successfully; however, we didn't achieve the accumulated mileage that we were targeting."

Alonso and Stroll completed a total of just 128 laps over the three days - the equivalent of what many teams did in one day.

"It's been a challenging couple of weeks here in Bahrain, and today's limited running wasn't the way we wanted to finish the second test," said Stroll.