

INTERNATIONAL



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ANURA KUMARA
DISSANAYAKE
President of Sri Lanka

Iran VP fired over Antarctica trip



AFP, Tehran

Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian yesterday dismissed his deputy for parliamentary affairs over a costly trip to Antarctica, as the country grapples with hyperinflation amid a biting economic crisis.

A photo shared on social media in recent days showed the now former vice-president, Shahram Dabiri, alongside a woman identified as his wife, posing near the Plancius cruise ship.

The Dutch-flagged vessel has offered luxury expeditions to Antarctica since 2009, with one agency pricing an eight-day trip at 3,885 euros per person.

"In a context where economic pressure on the population remains high... expensive leisure trips by officials, even if paid out of their own pocket, are neither defensible nor justifiable," the Iranian president wrote in a letter published Saturday by the official IRNA news agency, which noted that Dabiri was dismissed.

Dabiri, a 64-year-old physician by profession and a close confidant of Pezeshkian, had been appointed to the post in August.

The government faced strong criticism after the photo was published, and several of Pezeshkian's supporters urged him to remove the official.

IRNA, late last month cited a source in Dabiri's office as saying that he had made the trip before he held a governmental position.

The controversy is another major blow for Pezeshkian, who was elected last year on a promise to revive the economy and improve the daily lives of his fellow citizens.

Ukraine still hitting energy sites: Russia

REUTERS

Russia's defence ministry yesterday said Ukraine had increased its attacks on Russian energy infrastructure, hitting targets 14 times in the last 24 hours, despite a US-brokered moratorium.

In a statement published on Telegram, the ministry said Ukraine "multiplied the number of unilateral attacks using drones and artillery shells on the energy infrastructure of Russian regions."

It said the strikes had caused damage in Russia's Bryansk, Belgorod, Smolensk, Lipetsk and Voronezh regions, as well as the Ukrainian regions of Luhansk and Kherson, parts of which Russia controls.

Russia and Ukraine agreed last month to a U.S. proposal for a 30-day moratorium on striking each other's energy infrastructure. Both sides have since repeatedly accused each other of violating the deal.



Far-right protesters attend a rally to support South Korean ousted President Yoon Suk Yeol in Seoul, South Korea, yesterday. Yoon Suk Yeol was ousted on Friday by the Constitutional Court, ushering in an election after it upheld parliament's impeachment over his imposition of martial law that sparked the nation's worst political crisis in decades.

PHOTO: REUTERS

Modi clinches defence, energy deals in Lanka

Colombo confers country's highest civilian honour to Indian PM

AFP, Colombo

India secured defence and energy deals with neighbouring Sri Lanka yesterday during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit, seen as a move to counter rival China's growing influence in the region.

Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake rolled out the red carpet for Modi and conferred on him the country's highest civilian honour for "the deep personal friendship" shown to the smaller neighbour.

"We believe that our security interests are aligned," Modi said during a televised ceremony from Dissanayake's office in the capital.

"Our security is interdependent and interconnected."

A five-year defence cooperation agreement provides training of Sri Lankan military personnel in India as well as information and technology sharing.

Dissanayake applauded what he called "India's rise as a world power, not just a regional power".

"I have reiterated our position to Prime Minister Modi that Sri Lankan territory will not be allowed to be used by anyone to undermine India's security," he added.

India has previously objected to Chinese submarines and research vessels which have called at the main seaport in Colombo.

Sri Lanka has not allowed Chinese submarines to dock since 2014, after India raised concerns over two such visits.

Last year, Colombo imposed



a ban on foreign research vessels following New Delhi's accusations that Chinese ships were being used to spy on India.

Yesterday, Dissanayake welcomed Modi – the first foreign dignitary to visit Colombo since the leftist leader swept to power last year – with a 19-gun salute.

The two leaders also celebrated the start of construction of a 120-megawatt solar power project, developed as a joint venture between the two nations.

The solar plant had been stalled for years but was reinvigorated with New Delhi's backing.

Modi's visit comes as Colombo grapples with the competing interests of New Delhi and Beijing.

India has become concerned about China's influence in Sri Lanka, which it sees as falling within its sphere of interest.

Dissanayake's first foreign visit was to New Delhi in December, but he followed it with a visit to

Beijing in January, underscoring Sri Lanka's delicate balancing act.

China has emerged as Sri Lanka's largest single bilateral creditor, accounting for more than half of its \$14 billion bilateral debt at the time the island defaulted on its sovereign debt in 2022.

Beijing was also the first to restructure its loans to Sri Lanka, a move that helped pave the way for the island to emerge from its worst economic meltdown.

In January, Colombo announced it had signed an agreement with a Chinese state-owned company to invest \$3.7 billion in an oil refinery in the island's south.

The deal would mark Sri Lanka's largest single foreign investment and is seen as crucial for its economic recovery.

Modi's visit to Sri Lanka followed a summit in Thailand and a string of meetings with leaders of neighbouring nations as he sought to shore up India's regional ties.

MYANMAR QUAKE UN calls for help as toll hits 3,354

REUTERS, Bangkok

The United Nations yesterday called for the world to rally behind quake-hit Myanmar as the death toll rose to 3,354, while a former USAID official said a UN aid team had received notice they were losing their jobs after arriving in the disaster zone.

In addition to those killed by the March 28 earthquake, 4,850 people were injured and another 220 are missing, state media said.

During a visit to Myanmar's second-biggest city, Mandalay, which was near the epicentre of the 7.7 magnitude quake, UN aid chief Tom Fletcher appealed for international support.

"The destruction is staggering. Lives lost. Homes destroyed. Livelihoods shattered. But the resilience is incredible," he said in a post on X. "The world must rally behind the people of Myanmar."



Myanmar's neighbours, such as China, India and Southeast Asian nations, are among those that dispatched relief supplies and rescuers to aid the recovery effort in quake-hit areas that are home to about 28 million people over the past week.

Meanwhile, the leader of the military government, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, reaffirmed to Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi the junta's plans to hold "free and fair" elections in December when the two met in Bangkok, Myanmar state media said yesterday.

The United States, which was until recently the world's top humanitarian donor, had pledged at least \$9 million to Myanmar to support earthquake-affected communities, but current and former US officials say the dismantling of its foreign aid program has affected its response.

PROTEST AGAINST TRUMP POLICIES

Thousands join rallies across US



Thousands of demonstrators march during the "Hands Off Massachusetts! Rally" in Boston, Massachusetts yesterday.

PHOTO: AFP

Thousands of people descended yesterday on Washington's National Mall and other cities across the United States in opposition to the policies of Donald Trump, in the largest protests since he returned to the presidency.

A big "HANDS OFF" banner stretched across the stage of an outdoor theatre just a few blocks from the White House, with protesters holding signs that read "Not My President!", "Fascism has Arrived," "Stop Evil," and "Hands Off Our Social Security."

Jane Ellen Saums, 66, said she was dismayed to see the Trump administration dismantling America's long-standing democratic institutions.

"It's extremely concerning to see what is happening to our government, and all of the checks and balances that have been put in place that are being totally run over – everything from the environment to personal rights," said the real estate worker who showed up at the protest dressed as Mother Nature, wrapped in ivy and holding a globe.

At a time of spreading global resentment against the Republican president, rallies took place earlier in international capitals, including Paris, Rome and London.

A loose US coalition of dozens of left-leaning groups like MoveOn and Women's March organised "Hands Off" events in more than 1,000 towns and cities and in every congressional district, the groups say.

The unifying theme: the growing resentment of what the group Indivisible has called "the most brazen power grab in modern history," led by Trump, his advisor Elon Musk and their billionaire cronies."