

Iran pledges funding discipline as Fajr Int'l Theater Festival closes in Tehran



Artists, officials and guests gather on stage during the closing ceremony of the 44th Fajr International Theater Festival in the Iranian capital Tehran on February 1, 2026 with festival insignia and national flags displayed behind them as the audience looks on.

● AMIN JALALI/IRNA

Arts & Culture Desk

Iran's Culture and Islamic Guidance Minister Abbas Salehi said the government had honored its financial commitments to theater groups despite tight resources, as the 44th Fajr International Theater

Festival wrapped up on Sunday in Tehran, signaling a cautious effort to sustain the country's cultural economy under fiscal strain, he

said. Salehi said theater had "moved alongside society through every phase of Iran's history" and described the festival, held under the slogan "Solidarity with Hope", as part of a broader push to keep cultural production alive amid economic constraints, dolat.ir reported.

"Our resources are not high, nor even average," Salehi said. "Yet this year we ensured that all payments promised to theater groups were settled in full, on schedule, and with a slight increase on earlier commitments."

He added that the ministry had sought to remain "faithful to its undertakings in both substance and timing".

The annual festival, a flagship state-backed cultural event, is closely watched by Iran's artistic community as a barometer of public funding and policy priorities. Salehi said the ministry had operated "within existing capacity", un-

derscoring budget discipline while attempting to shield performing arts from deeper cutbacks.

He said the closing ceremony effectively marked the starting point for preparations for the 45th edition, framing continuity as a policy goal. "Theater has always accompanied life and will continue to do so," he said.

Salehi also addressed institutional reforms, saying spending on a permanent secretariat for the Fajr festivals had been aimed at establishing a stable, long-term administrative base rather than a one-year structure. "The level of expenditure reflects a permanent and sustainable secretariat," he said, noting the absence of such an entity in previous years.

On music and broader festival policy, Salehi said authorities were seeking a calibrated approach. "We do not want festivals to be defined by excessive cheerfulness, nor to drift away from the natural course of music," he said, adding that cul-

tural events should reflect prevailing national conditions without creating a "heavy and restrictive atmosphere" for artists and audiences.

He described the target as a "balanced, acceptable middle ground". The ceremony, attended by senior cultural officials, artists and provincial representatives, formally closed the 10-day event, which featured stage and street performances in Tehran and several regional centers, including Kerman. Festival secretary Vahid Fakhr Mousavi described the event as "the new year moment of Iranian theater", saying the festival's only expectation was "to continue, to remain, and to keep the stage alive".

The Fajr International Theater Festival is part of a broader cluster of cultural events held annually to mark the anniversary of Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution, carrying both artistic and policy significance for a sector operating under prolonged economic pressure.

Iran registers ownership of 16 wetlands as government steps up conservation drive

Social Desk

Iran has issued state ownership deeds for 16 nationally significant wetlands, Vice President and Head of the Department of Environment (DoE) Shina Ansari said on Monday in Tehran, marking a legal push to shore up protection of fragile ecosystems under mounting climatic and structural pressure. Speaking at a World Wetlands Day ceremony attended by First Vice President Mohammad Reza Aref, Ansari said official documentation had been completed for wetlands including Hoz-e Soltan, Quri Gol, Salehiyeh, Parishan and Arjan, Alagol and Ajigol, and Baram Alwan, with title deeds registered in the name

of the Islamic Republic of Iran, IRNA reported.

She credited inter-agency coordination, notably with the State Organization for Registration of Deeds and Properties, for accelerating the process. "Iran is the birthplace of global wetland conservation, yet our wetlands are under severe stress," Ansari said, citing constrained resources, engineering-led approaches and neglect of ecological water needs. She described wetlands as among the country's most contested environmental challenges. Ansari said the government had launched corrective measures, with the National Wetland Management Coordination Headquarters meeting regularly and following up decisions

"with seriousness".

Ensuring environmental water rights, restoring degraded sites and documenting indigenous and traditional knowledge form the backbone of the strategy, which she called "an investment in the future". Local communities, she said, had historically preserved wetlands even during prolonged droughts by relying on native knowledge, prompting the department to blend traditional practices with modern management. Tehran is also pursuing cross-sectoral reforms to overhaul decision-making structures and enforce an integrated approach to river basin governance, with provincial committees chaired by governors convening on a continuous

basis. Over the past year, Iran secured Ramsar Site status for the Gandoman wetland and introduced three "wetland cities" internationally. Ansari said Iran had also retained the regional Ramsar Convention Centre, which supports 15 countries, after plans to relocate it to an Arab state were reversed, extending its presence in Iran for another three years.



Roughly 36% of Iran's dam reservoir capacity still held despite dry conditions

Social Desk

Iran's dam reservoirs are operating at just 36% of capacity, with 64% left empty, as water inflows decline and storage levels fall sharply in the current water year that began on September 23. From the start of the water year to February 1, total inflows to dams nationwide reached 7.34 billion cubic meters, down 4% from 7.64 billion cubic meters over the same period last year. Total outflows also dropped markedly, falling 26% year on year, reflecting tighter water management amid shrinking reserves, IRNA reported.

The figures underline mounting stress on Iran's water system, already strained by prolonged drought, uneven rainfall and structurally high demand from agriculture and large urban centers. Lower inflows and reduced releases have translated into a sharp erosion of stored water, raising concerns ahead of the peak irrigation and summer consumption seasons.

The total volume of water currently held in dam reservoirs stands at 18.77 billion cubic meters, a 16% decline from 22.34 billion cubic meters recorded a year earlier.

Despite the cut in outflows, storage levels have continued to slide, highlighting the limited buffering capacity of existing infrastructure under persistently weak hydrological conditions.



'Guardians of the Sun' caught between childhood, adolescence

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O P I N I O N

The animated feature 'Guardians of the Sun', directed by Emad Rahmani and Mehrdad Mehrabi, stumbles less because of technical shortcomings or production constraints than because it falls victim to a fundamental confusion about its intended audience. The film opened the 44th edition of the Fajr Film Festival on January 31. The film appears to be made for children and teenagers, yet in practice it neither aligns with their mental world nor employs a language, humor, or narrative structure calibrated to that age group. The result is a work suspended awkwardly between childhood and a veneer of adulthood, ultimately satisfying neither. 'Guardians of the Sun' tells the story of a teenage boy named Bahram who, together with his friend Jano, embarks on a perilous journey to find the legendary sword of Khashayar. The sword is said to possess the power to alter destiny, and various forces are competing to seize it. Along this quest, Bahram and Jano en-

counter obstacles, enemies, and situations meant to transform them from ordinary adolescents into responsible heroes. Yet this heroic arc rests less on dramatic logic than on hurried, and at times unjustified, plot progression. One of the film's most serious flaws is its use of certain expressions and verbal jokes that, while they may add a layer of humor, are clearly inappropriate for the target audience of children and teenagers. These jokes do not grow organically out of the situations, nor do they serve the narrative. They feel more like attempts to amuse adults who may not even be the film's primary viewers. This tonal duality prevents the film from forging a sustained connection with its audience. 'Guardians of the Sun' presents an image of adolescence that bears little resemblance to today's Iranian youth and instead recalls dated, fossilized clichés. The characters' concerns, reactions, and even their manner of speaking seem to belong to decades past. The film makes no real effort to grasp the lived world of contemporary children and teenagers, with its more complex relationships, different sense of humor, and sharper critical outlook. This gap makes it difficult for younger viewers to see themselves

reflected in Bahram or Jano. The screenplay is crowded with plot threads that are introduced but never properly resolved. Subplots, secondary characters, and even certain dramatic motivations are left underdeveloped and abandoned midway. The film is constantly pushing forward, but this movement resembles a cursory passing through stations rather than a heroic journey grounded in narrative logic. The lack of focus on a coherent storyline causes the narrative to lose cohesion, with haste replacing suspense. Rahmani and Mehrabi, who have previously worked mainly in short animation and commissioned or television projects, face a serious challenge here in handling feature-length storytelling. Their background in short-form work is plainly visible: The structure is more episodic than cinematic. The film lacks clear peaks and valleys, and turning points arrive one after another without sufficient buildup. Visually, the film remains within the average standards of Iranian animation. The problem, however, is that the imagery does not serve the story. The design of spaces and characters does little to deepen the film's world and

functions largely as a neutral backdrop. When the narrative falters, the visuals cannot step in to save it. 'Guardians of the Sun' is, above all, an example of a project that urgently needed serious reconsideration at the screenplay stage and a clearer understanding of its audience. It is neither childlike enough to appeal to today's children nor mature enough to fully engage teenagers. Abandoned plotlines, an uneven tone, and distance from the contemporary world of its viewers turn this animation into a confused work. More than a failed experiment, 'Guardians of the Sun' serves as a warning about the necessity of taking audience awareness seriously in animation for children and young people.

The article first appeared on IRNA in Persian.