

12/9/21 Thursday

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US' Ethiopia Envoy Visits Addis' Mideast Supporters as UN Pulls Food Aid Amid TPLF Looting Claims

By - Morgan Artyukhina

The US' chief envoy to the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, has embarked on a tour of three Middle Eastern nations to build an international consensus on their approach to the conflict in Ethiopia, now in its 13th month. This comes a day after the UN pulled its food aid in response to the looting of its warehouses by Tigrayan forces.

Feltman is to visit Turkey, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt in the coming days "to discuss what it is that the international community seeks when it comes to Ethiopia," State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday. "And that is chiefly a negotiated resolution to the conflict."

Each of the three nations is a strong supporter of Abiy's government in the conflict, [with Turkey](#) and the UAE selling Ethiopia Bayraktar TB2 and Chinese-built Winged Loong drones, respectively, along [with other weapons](#). Egypt isn't necessarily friendly with Abiy, but seems to at least prefer stability over chaos.

Maj. Gen. Mohammed Ali Bilal, former deputy chief of staff of the Egyptian armed forces, told [Al-Monitor last month](#) that Cairo's major concern is the future of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), an Ethiopian hydroelectric facility on the Blue Nile to which the downstream nations of Sudan and Egypt [have strongly objected](#).

"We are not sure if the TPLF agrees with us on the mechanisms to operate the dam," Bilal said, adding that "Cairo wants stability in Addis Ababa so it can negotiate with a stable government."

Elusive Ceasefire

Feltman's newest assignment [comes after talks](#) with the government of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed last month by himself and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that failed to yield a path to peace with the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF).

The government implemented a [unilateral ceasefire](#) in June, when the conflict was still confined to the northern Tigray state, which the rebel group did not respect, launching a new offensive into neighboring Afar and Amhara states and beginning a southerly advance on the capital. The US has demanded an immediate and universal ceasefire by all parties and [sanctioned both Abiy's](#) government and its Eritrean allies for supposedly exacerbating the conflict.

More recently, Ethiopian Foreign Ministry spokesman [Dina Mufti told reporters](#) last month the government's terms for a ceasefire included the TPLF's withdrawal from Amhara and Afar, cessation of attacks against government forces, and recognizing the legitimacy of Abiy's government.

"In order for there to be a peaceful solution, they say it takes two to tango," Dina said at the time.

The TPLF rejected those terms outright, with little surprise: [as Sputnik reported](#) at the time, American and European diplomats have been secretly meeting with TPLF leaders, voicing their support for the group's rapid advance and speaking of a "transition government" after the anticipated capture of Addis Ababa and the collapse of Abiy's government.

That outcome seems less possible now thanks to a [government counteroffensive](#) that has pushed the TPLF back on its heels, pushing them [hundreds of kilometers](#) back from the capital and totally out of Afar.

Food Aid Ended Amid TPLF Withdrawal

The UN World Food Program (WFP) [announced on Wednesday](#) it was suspending the distribution of food aid in Kombolcha and Dessie, two cities in eastern Amhara that the Ethiopian National Defense Forces (ENDF) retook from the TPLF in recent days.

According to UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric, WFP staff there faced "extreme intimidation" by TPLF soldiers, who seized the two cities, which are just 7 miles apart, in late October.

"The small-scale theft of food escalated into mass looting of warehouses across Kombolcha in recent days, reportedly by elements of the Tigrayan forces and some members of the local population," Dujarric told reporters.

"Such harassment of humanitarian staff by armed forces is unacceptable. It undermines the ability of the United Nations and all of our humanitarian partners to deliver assistance when it is most needed," he added.

It's unclear why the UN decided to end food aid in Dessie, a city of 600,000, in a region where the international body [estimates 9.4 million people](#) are in need of food aid, after the infringing party has lost control of the city. However, Ethiopians have in the past accused the US Agency for International Development (USAID) of "[weaponizing aid](#)" after its funding for food relief in Ethiopia was partially pulled over the summer in some of the first concrete measures Washington took against Abiy's government.

A similar tale of looting and terror has been told in other towns [also recently liberated](#) by the government counteroffensive.

In Lalibela, a historic town to the north where ancient Orthodox Christian churches were cut from the living rock, residents described widespread looting by the TPLF, especially in the days before their withdrawal. Targeted sites included the hospital and the airport, the latter of which is key to Lalibela's tourism industry.

"You couldn't ask to get anything back. There were guns, they said they would kill us," Belaynew Mengeshaw, a tour operator, told [Agence France-Presse](#) about the TPLF seizing mobile phones and food. "One of them asked me, 'Do you want Abiy to come save you?'"

Doctors and social workers in the city told AFP they had 290 malnourished children there, six of whom had died, because of inadequate food for the people.

"We couldn't treat them because the supplements had been looted by the TPLF," Temesgen Muche, a social worker at the hospital, told AFP.

They also described smuggling medicine in from towns still controlled by the government, bringing them in on donkeys under cover of darkness.

Revolt by Old US Partner

The TPLF's revolt began in November 2020 when they attacked ENDF forces in Tigray after their regional elections, held in defiance of a national postponement due to the COVID-19 pandemic, were declared illegal. However, their dispute with Abiy began when he, an Oromo,

was chosen to lead the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) political alliance in 2018 instead of a Tigrayan, as had been the case since 1991. After becoming prime minister, he set about weakening the TPLF's once-dominant position in the government, rejecting their ethnic federalist model in favor of a more centralized party and state.

The TPLF had ruled Ethiopia for 27 years and were close partners of the US War on Terror and US Africa Command's expansion in the early 21st century. While Abiy's government has continued that cooperation, his 2019 rapprochement with Eritrea, which earned him a Nobel Peace Prize, helped earn lasting enmity in Washington, as the Red Sea state is the only African nation outside AFRICOM's orbit.

The conflict has created a massive humanitarian crisis, with [more than 70,000](#) people fleeing across the border into neighboring Sudan and an [estimated 4 million](#) more internally displaced, according to United Nations data. There is no reliable death toll for the conflict.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House Brands Russia Troop Movement Inside Own Country as 'Aggression' Against Ukraine

By - Morgan Artyukhina

White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Thursday that the internal movement of Russian troops into the country's south was "aggression" against Ukraine and the origin of the present crisis.

"The aggression here is on the Russian side, the military buildup is on the Russian side," Psaki told reporters at the White House on Thursday. She was asked about comments by Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier in the day that the situation in Ukraine's eastern Donbass region, where Kiev has fought a seven-year war against several autonomous Russian-speaking cities, resembled a genocide.

"The Russians are known for their rhetorical escalations, as they are also known for their ways of providing misinformation around the world and within eastern flank countries," Psaki also said.

The presser came just moments after US President Joe Biden finished a phone call with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, a followup to Biden's [Monday phone call](#) with Putin that focused on the deployment of Russian forces in southern Russia.

A White House readout of the call released later on Thursday said Biden "made clear that the US and our Allies would respond with strong economic and other measures in the event of a further military intervention" and "reaffirmed the United States' unwavering commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

"President Biden made clear that the United States and its allies and partners are committed to the principle of 'no decisions or discussions about Ukraine without Ukraine,'" the statement continued. "The leaders called on Russia to de-escalate tensions and agreed that diplomacy is the best way to make meaningful progress on conflict resolution."

After his call with Zelenskyy, Biden also spoke with leaders of the Bucharest Nine, a group of former Soviet republics and former allies in Eastern Europe who are now part of the NATO alliance. Ukraine is not part of NATO, but Zelenskyy has pushed for Brussels to tighten their relationship and cast Kiev's eventual membership as the only peaceful solution to the war in the Donbass.

A readout of the call noted that Biden expressed to the B9 "the United States' commitment to Transatlantic security and our sacred commitment to NATO's Article 5," the clause that mandates collective self-defense of all member states.

"The leaders discussed Russia's destabilizing military buildup along Ukraine's border and the need for a united, ready, and resolute NATO stance for the collective defense of Allies.

President Biden stressed the US commitment to continued close consultation and coordination with all our Transatlantic Allies and partners as we work towards de-escalation of the current crisis through deterrence, defense, and dialogue," the readout said of the B9 call.

The US, Ukraine, and Western press have characterized the deployments as a prelude to an invasion of Ukraine, but similarly to another deployment in April about which the same claims were made, Moscow has rejected claims it's preparing to attack its western neighbor. The troops are not immediately on the Ukrainian border, as commonly claimed, but [more than 140 miles](#) from the border.

Biden has pledged full support for Ukraine's sovereignty and promised to levy economic sanctions against Russia sufficient to make it an international pariah if it does attack Ukraine. He rejected ["red lines" on Ukraine](#) drawn by Putin, which include the stationing of offensive NATO forces in Ukraine and the further expansion of NATO eastward.

According to Zelenskyy's office, Biden pledged to continue giving Ukraine enough weapons that it could "fight back at any time." They also discussed ways for the US to provide security, financial and political support for Kiev to combat the "ongoing hybrid aggression."

Biden and Zelenskyy further discussed the Minsk Protocol, a 2014 agreement between Ukraine, Russia, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) intended to resolve the Donbass conflict, and ways to overcome the deadlock that has persisted despite periodic attempts to revive it. Zelenskyy reportedly told Biden that he does not support freezing the conflict.

NATO began a new buildup along its eastern flank in 2014, after right-wing nationalist government seized power in Kiev in a US-backed coup and began laying out a program for reducing the country's substantial Russian-speaking minority to second-class status. The Russian-speaking Donbass cities rebelled against the move and Russian-speaking Crimea declared independence, then voted in a referendum to join the Russian Federation. Kiev, the EU and NATO refused to recognize the referendum and have continued to claim Russia illegally and aggressively seized the peninsula. They also claim Russia is giving help to the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics in the Donbass - allegations Moscow has denied.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Nicaragua Ends Diplomatic Relations With Taiwan, Recognizes 'There Is Only One China'

By - Morgan Artyukhina

Managua announced on Thursday it was ending its policy of recognizing Taiwan, also called the Republic of China (ROC), and would begin solely recognizing the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Beijing as the representative of all of China.

"The government of the Republic of Nicaragua declares that it recognizes there is only one China existing in the world," Nicaraguan Foreign Minister Denis Moncada said on Thursday. "The People's Republic of China is the only legitimate government, which represents all of China, and Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory," he added. "Today, the government of the Republic of Nicaragua breaks diplomatic relations with Taiwan and will cease all official contact or relations."

Hua Chunying, a spokesperson for China's foreign ministry, soon noted on Twitter that the Chinese and Nicaraguan governments were engaged in talks in the city of Tianjin.

Taiwan's de facto foreign ministry expressed its "pain and regret" at Nicaragua's decision in a Thursday statement, adding that it has always been a loyal and reliable friend of Nicaragua. With Nicaragua's decision, just 14 nations continue to formally recognize the ROC as the legitimate Chinese government, most of which are either small Pacific island nations or Caribbean nations, and all of which fall under the domineering hand of Washington. The US switched its recognition in 1979, but has continued to provide open but informal military and political support for the ROC sufficient to maintain its autonomy from Beijing.

The government in Taipei is all that survives of the Chinese republic founded in 1912 when the Xuantong Emperor resigned amid a mass uprising by liberal political forces. The ROC never totally reunified China, however, and after joining up with the Communist Party of China to fend off the invasion by imperial Japan during World War II, steadily lost ground to the communists until the PRC was declared in 1949 and established control over the entire mainland, as well as Hainan.

However, another is likely to soon switch sides, as Honduras' president-elect, [Xiomara Castro](#), has also expressed her intent to establish relations with Beijing as a gateway to economic development.

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega, who in the 1980s sided with the Soviet Union against China in what at the time was a fiercely territorial split in the global communist movement, [maintained his policy](#) of dealing with Taiwan after returning to office in 2007, expressing indignance that Beijing had made relations with it conditional upon rejection of Taipei.

However, times are different in 2021: with China and Russia no longer at odds, and the US clamping down with [new economic sanctions](#) after Ortega's reelection victory last month, which Washington called fraudulent, Ortega's decision makes considerably more sense. It could also win Chinese financial support for a [proposed second](#) transcontinental canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans via the San Juan River and Lake Nicaragua.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia's Preparation for Security Guarantees Talks With West in Advanced Stage - Ryabkov

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia's internal preparation for discussing security guarantees with the West is in an advanced stage, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Friday.

"Our internal preparation for the launch of work on security guarantees is at an advanced stage. Formats, directions — all of this is in the process of formation," Ryabkov said at a press conference at the Rossiya Segodnya news agency.

In the near future, Moscow will present to colleagues on the other side its vision of directions, subjects, formats and sites for joint work, he added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia Urges NATO Not to Dismiss Bilateral Moratorium on Missiles in Europe - Ryabkov

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia calls on the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) not to brush aside the proposal to introduce a bilateral moratorium on the deployment of missiles in Europe and make it verifiable, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

"Let's, colleagues, NATO countries, seriously deal with the issue of how to make the current unilateral moratorium of Russia on the deployment of such systems [missiles] bilateral, mutual, and verifiable. Our proposals are on the table, we should not brush them aside," Ryabkov said during a press conference at the Rossiya Segodnya news agency.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Ignoring Russian Warnings, NATO Infrastructure as Close to Russia as Possible - Ryabkov

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The United States ignores Russian warnings as NATO military infrastructure is as close as possible to Russian borders, the Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Ryabkov, told Sputnik on Friday.

"Unfortunately, [we] see that our warnings, messages are being ignored, the military infrastructure of NATO is as close as possible to us," Ryabkov said during a press conference at Rossiya Segodnya's press center.

The deputy minister added that it is the reason why Russian President Vladimir Putin has commissioned to seek long-standing legal security guarantees on western frontiers, which are to be documented in the format of treaties.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Warsaw to Back NATO-Russia Council Revitalization as OSCE Chair - Foreign Ministry

WARSAW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Poland, as chair of the OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe), is ready to support the revitalization of the NATO-Russia Council, Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau said on Friday.

Poland will chair the OSCE in 2022.

"We will willingly support the revitalization of the Russia-NATO dialogue... But it seems that Russia is not interested in this revival. The difference is that NATO is a defensive alliance, and Russia does not consider this a priority of its policy," Rau said after a meeting with the German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock in Warsaw.

On November 6, NATO announced its decision to expel eight members of the Russian mission to NATO in Brussels for allegedly working as intelligence officers, cutting their number to 10 in total. Russia, in response, shut down the NATO liaison office in Moscow, effectively scuppering the Russia-NATO Council. Russia, according to President Vladimir Putin, is worried about the military activity buildup by Ukraine and NATO and is interested in obtaining reliable, legally documented guarantees that NATO would not expand eastward.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia Can Discuss Security Guarantees During Strategic Stability Talks With US - Ryabkov

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Moscow proceeds from the assumption that security guarantees can be discussed within the framework of the strategic stability dialogue with the United States, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

"We proceed from this. There is an area of work in the group on stability, which is officially called 'actions having a strategic effect,'" Ryabkov said at a press conference at the Rossiya Segodnya news agency.

Attempts at military and military-technical development of territories near Russia's borders and Moscow's response, as well as Russian constructive proposals to provide security guarantees through the non-advancement of NATO to the east in a hostile manner are all actions having a strategic effect, he said.

"Right there, in the format of this group, we will first of all work out the relevant stories and urge our colleagues in advance to take into account this prospect: the situation has changed, we will no longer put up with what is happening, they must proceed from this," Ryabkov added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Lockheed Martin Signs Contract for 64 F-35 Fighters With Finland - Finnish Cabinet

HELSINKI, December 9 (Sputnik) - Finland has concluded the largest defense contract in its history with Lockheed Martin for the delivery of 64 F-35 fighters, the Finnish Cabinet announced on Friday.

In October 2020, the US Congress was notified about a possible deal with Finland on F-35s and related weapons and equipment. Apart from the F-35s, the Finnish Defense Ministry also considered four other options, including the Boeing F/A-18 Super Hornet, Dassault Rafale, Eurofighter Typhoon, and Saab Gripen.

"The Government of Finland has 10 December 2021 authorised the Finnish Defence Forces Logistics Command to sign a procurement contract with the Government of the United States on Finland's next multi-role fighter. The fighter replacing the Hornet fleet's capability is the Lockheed Martin F-35A Lightning II," the cabinet said in a statement.

The deal entails the procurement of 64 F-35 fighters, various tailored weaponry, training and servicing solutions, and other related systems and maintenance services until the end of 2030. Finland will allocate over \$10 billion toward the contract. The fighters are expected to be delivered in 2025-2030.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Did Not Address Crimea Issue in Conversation With Putin - Ryabkov

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden did not touch upon the issue of Crimea in the recent phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said in an interview with Sputnik.

"My short answer - no," Ryabkov said when asked a relevant question.

However, if Biden had raised the topic of Crimea in talks with Putin, he would have received a "statement of facts that cannot be denied," the diplomat added, citing the issue of Alaska's affiliation, which Moscow never touches upon despite its history.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Assange Extradition Ruling 'Black Mark' on History of Press Freedom – NGO

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - A London High Court's decision to overturn an earlier ruling that WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange cannot be extradited to the United States is a black day for press freedom in America and around the world, San Francisco-based nonprofit Freedom of the Press Foundation said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the London court ruled in favor of a US appeal to extradite Assange, dismissing concerns raised about the journalist's health and the inhumane conditions he could face in the American prison system. The case will now be remitted to the Westminster

Magistrates' Court with direction that a district judge will send the case to the secretary of state, who will decide on extradition.

"These proceedings, and today's ruling, are a black mark on the history of press freedom. That United States prosecutors continued to push for this outcome is a betrayal of the journalistic principles the Biden administration has taken credit for celebrating," Trevor Timm, executive director of the Freedom of the Press Foundation, said in a statement.

He called prosecutorial actions against the whistleblower an abuse of the Espionage Act and "an embarrassment to basic ideals of justice and to core First Amendment values."

Freedom of the Press Foundation further urged the US Department of Justice to terminate its pursuit of prosecution of Assange and commit to not using the Espionage Act against journalists and their sources.

The whistleblower is wanted by the United States on espionage charges after WikiLeaks published thousands of classified documents that shed light on war crimes committed by American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. If put on trial and convicted in the US, the Australian journalist faces up to 175 years in prison.

Assange has been on remand at Belmarsh high-security prison in southeast London since October 2020, after serving an 11-month sentence for breaking bail after staying in the Ecuadorean embassy in London for seven years.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia Offers US, NATO Alternative Way to Prevent New Cuban Missile Crisis - Ryabkov

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia offers the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization an alternative way to prevent a recurrence of the Caribbean crisis, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik.

"We offer an alternative to this - non-deployment of such weapons near our borders, withdrawal of destabilizing forces and assets further, wavier of provocative measures, including various exercises. But we need guarantees, but guarantees must be legal," Ryabkov said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia Ready to Continue Constructive Dialogue With US on Ukraine - Ryabkov

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia is ready to re-engage in a constructive dialogue with the United States on the Ukraine issue, which remains one of the priority topics in the interaction between the two countries, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Friday.

"The situation in Ukraine is in the focus of attention, the presidents [Russia's Vladimir Putin and US's Joe Biden] gave a lot of time to this topic during their conversation via the video link on

December 7," Ryabkov told a press conference in the Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency.

The presidents also touched upon the situation in Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, the Iranian nuclear program, and climate issues, among others, he recalled, adding that Moscow expects to continue a constructive dialogue with Washington.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

New Round of Russia-US Strategic Stability Talks to Begin in January - Ryabkov

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The Russian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Sergey Ryabkov, told Sputnik on Friday that the new round of Russia-US consultations on strategic stability will be held during January.

"There are no specific dates yet. I suppose these [talks] will be held during January," Ryabkov said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

NATO Chief Says Stance on Ukraine's Accession Unchanged

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - NATO has not revised its policy on Ukraine's potential membership in the alliance, which depends on Kiev and the allies, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Friday.

"Every nation in Europe has the right to choose its own path, and that includes Ukraine. We stand by our decisions and nothing has changed in NATO's approach towards Ukraine's membership and it is [up] to Ukraine to decide its own path, to decide whether or not to aspire to membership," he told a press conference after talks with French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian and Minister of Armed Forces Florence Parly in Paris.

The issue of Ukraine's accession to NATO also depends on the will of all allies, and no one else has anything to do with the matter, he added.

The top French diplomat stressed that the parties are constantly exchanging views on the Ukraine issue.

"Today we discussed two key issues with the Secretary General. Firstly, the issue of European security... and secondly, we exchanged views on the situation in Ukraine, about which we have already talked a lot in Riga," Le Drian said.

He added that he will discuss Ukraine, among other topics, with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken at the G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' meeting in Liverpool later on Friday. Tensions have been on the rise as the West and Kiev maintain that Russia is mobilizing troops at the border with Ukraine to launch an offensive. US President Joe Biden warned against a potential Russian invasion of Ukraine in a virtual conversation with Russian President Vladimir

Putin, adding that Washington would impose economic sanctions if Moscow allows the situation to escalate.

Putin, in turn, reiterated that the responsibility should not fall entirely on Russia, since it is NATO that is increasing its military presence near Russian borders.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Poland Renews Claims for War Damages as New German Cabinet Takes Over

WARSAW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Polish Foreign Minister Zbigniew Rau pressed the new German government on Friday to take up negotiations on war damages, even as Germany repeatedly rejected any further claims.

"We must return to this topic. We expect the new German government to address its liability issues, including in the form of compensation for damage done," Rau said at a news conference.

He spoke in Warsaw after meeting his German counterpart, Annalena Baerbock, who is on her first tour of Europe since taking office on Wednesday.

Ties between Poland and Germany have been strained by Warsaw's continued claims to hundreds of billions of euros in WWII-related damages, depending on who is counting. Germany argues that Poland relinquished demands for more reparations under their 1953 deal.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia to Send Security Proposals to US in Coming Weeks - Ryabkov

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia will send its proposals on the security structure to the US in the coming weeks, and does not exclude the participation of a number of NATO states in the discussion, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said.

"I hope that these proposals will be put on paper and presented to opponents, primarily the United States, but possibly, some other NATO countries as well. This is all being worked out," Ryabkov said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Moscow Working Out Retaliatory Measures to Possible US Sanctions- Russian Foreign Ministry

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Moscow working out retaliatory measures to possible US sanctions, senior Russian diplomat Dmitry Birichevsky said on Friday.

"The sanctions issue has not gone anywhere, it is firmly entrenched, unfortunately. We are working on countermeasures ... but there is only one principle — not to harm our economy, not to harm our producers and create conditions so that ... there remains a window for constructive interaction," Birichevsky told a international forum in Moscow.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

EU Rules COVID-19 Certificate by Cabo Verde, Lebanon, UAE Equivalent to EU Digital Ones

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - European Commission ruled on Friday that COVID-19 certificates issued by Cabo Verde, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates are equivalent to the EU digital COVID-19 certificates.

"Today, the Commission adopted three new equivalence decisions certifying that COVID-19 certificates issued by Cabo Verde, Lebanon and UAE are equivalent to the EU Digital COVID-19 Certificate," EU Commission said in a statement.

The statement also said that Cabo Verde, Lebanon and the UAE would be connected to the EU's system with vaccination certificates being confirmed under the same terms as the ones issued by the EU. The three countries consented to accept the EU digital COVID-19 certificates for the EU residents traveling to these countries.

"The EU Digital COVID-19 Certificate is unique and that is why 55 countries and territories in five continents have joined the system so far with more than 750 million certificates issued. Even if we have a difficult time with COVID-19 variants, we need the certificate; it has served in the past and will continue to serve in the future to help people to travel safely," Commissioner for Justice, Didier Reynders said.

Since July 1, the EU has made available its COVID-19 passport for all EU residents, as well as for specific categories of travelers from third countries.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia Plans to Begin Certification of PD-35 Jet Engine in 2027 – Industry Minister

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia plans to begin certification of the domestic PD-35 high-thrust jet engine in 2027, Russian Minister of Industry and Trade Denis Manturov said on Friday.

"We initially proceed from the premise that 2027 is the beginning of PD-35 certification," Manturov said on the sidelines of the Made in Russia forum.

The minister also said that Russia will probably create the PD-24 jet engine, using the PD-35 generator.

"This is 24 tonnes of thrust for a transport aircraft. This decision will be made next summer," the minister added.

The prospective PD-35 twin-engine model looks to take Russia's domestic civilian aircraft capacities to a new level. It was drawn up primarily to power the Russian-Chinese CR929 long-range aircraft which is set to be delivered no earlier than 2028. The first phase of tests was undertaken in the second half of 2020.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russian Political Scientist Barred From Entering Moldova - Foreign Ministry

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Natalia Narochnitskaya, a well-known Russian political scientist and historian, was not allowed to enter Moldova and was de facto deported, Maria Zakharova, spokeswoman of the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

"Natalia Alekseevna Narochnitskaya, Russian scientist and politologist, who flew to Moldova, was de facto deported by this country's authorities. At night she stood in front of the local border officers for two hours, not understanding what was going on. Natalia Narochnitskaya is not a student standing in front of the admission board, but a PhD, an expert with a worldwide reputation. Then, they guided her to the same plane on which she flew in, without explaining anything," Zakharova said on her official Telegram channel.

Narochnitskaya, the author of a range of works on Russian history, foreign policy and international relations, linked her deportation to the forthcoming presidential election in the self-proclaimed republic of Transnistria, which is planned for Sunday.

"Without explaining anything, they guarded me on board the plane as if I were a terrorist. At arrival, I was met by an ill-bred man, most probably an intelligence officer, not a border agent," Narochnitskaya told Sputnik.

Transnistria is a breakaway region with a predominantly ethnic Russian and Ukrainian population. Following the region's secession in 1990 due to fears of a possible reunion of Moldova with Romania and Moldova's attempt to return the territory by military means, Chisinau lost control of Transnistria. Moldova and Transnistria are taking part in the negotiation process on settling the conflict in the "5+2" format with Russia, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and Ukraine as mediators, as well as the EU and US as observers. The new presidential elections are to play a crucial role in the protracted dispute.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

EU States Discuss Support to Migrants at Bloc's Border With Belarus - German Minister

WARSAW, December 9 (Sputnik) - EU countries are discussing providing aid to migrants on the border of Belarus with Poland, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said on Friday.

"We discussed intensively how we can provide funds so that these people ... can now get help. They are not to blame for their plight, especially many children," Baerbock told reporters.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

'Don't Extradite' Campaign Head Calls for Releasing Assange on Bail to Await Appeal Trial

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange should be released on bail while awaiting appeal trial since he has not been convicted of any crime in the United Kingdom, John Rees, head of the Don't Extradite Campaign, told Sputnik on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the London court upheld the US appeal on Assange's extradition, dismissing concerns raised about the journalist's health and lack of proper assurances from the US Department of Justice regarding his safety.

"I'm sure that the lawyers are considering another bail application, whether or not it will be successful, previous ones haven't been, I don't know. They certainly ought to be because what's happening now is punishment by process. This is somebody who has been convicted of no crime in this country, he is a remand prisoner, and he should be released on bail," Rees said. He also confirmed that the extradition decision will be appealed to the Supreme Court.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

One Armenian Soldier Killed in Shootout at Azerbaijani Border - Armenian Defense Ministry

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - One Armenian soldier died as a result of a shooting at the border with Azerbaijan, the Armenian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

"On December 10, at around noon [08:00 GMT], as a result of a shootout caused by the aggressive actions of the Azerbaijani armed forces, one person from the Armenian side was killed, several soldiers were wounded," the ministry said in a statement.

Further information about the incident will be released later, the ministry noted.

Earlier on Friday, the Armenian military said it repelled an assault by Azerbaijani troops on its military bases at their common border. The resulting shootout stopped at 09:30 GMT, the ministry said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Amnesty International Calls Assange's Extradition Ruling 'Travesty of justice'

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Amnesty International on Friday denounced the London court's decision to allow the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States as "travesty of justice."

"This is a travesty of justice. By allowing this appeal, the High Court has chosen to accept the deeply flawed diplomatic assurances given by the US that Assange would not be held in solitary confinement in a maximum security prison. The fact that the US has reserved the right to change its mind at any time means that these assurances are not worth the paper they are written on," the organization said in a statement.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

IFJ Urges Biden to End 'Politically Motivated' Persecution After Court Ruling on Assange

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) condemned on Friday the London court's decision to allow the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States, calling on US President to end politically motivated persecution. The watchdog said it "strongly opposes this decision, and will support any effort Assange's legal team may take to appeal the ruling."

"We urge, once again, US president @POTUS to end the years of politically motivated prosecution of Julian Assange by dropping the charges against him. The criminalisation of whistleblowers and investigative journalists like Assange has no place in a democracy @POTUS #FreeAssange," the IFJ tweeted.

Commenting on the matter to Sputnik, the IFJ said that "the criminalisation of whistleblowers and investigative journalists like Assange has no place in a democracy."

"Extraditing Assange to the US would endanger his life but also fundamental principles of press freedom. The IFJ supports any effort Assange's legal team may take to appeal the ruling," the watchdog added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Armenian Defense Ministry Says Repelled Azerbaijan's Attack at Border

YEREVAN, December 9 (Sputnik) - The Armenian army has repelled an assault by Azerbaijani troops on its military bases at their common border, the Armenian Defense Ministry said on Friday.

"On December 10, at around noon [08:00 GMT], units of the Azerbaijani armed forces attacked Armenian combat positions stationed in the eastern area of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border. As a result of the retaliatory actions of the Armenian side, the enemy suffered losses and was thrown back to its original positions," the ministry said in a statement.

Shooting on the border is ongoing, it added.

There have been several recent episodes of border tension flaring up despite the recent agreement between the parties to work towards border demarcation and demilitarization. Armenian President Ilham Aliyev, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, and Russian

President Vladimir Putin met in Russia's Sochi on November 26, where they discussed steps for the normalization of Yerevan-Baku ties, including stability and security of the border.

The meeting followed border clashes that erupted in mid-November, which claimed dozens of lives from both sides.

The escalation of a long-lasting conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan in the disputed region of Nagorno-Karabakh erupted in September 2020 and ended with a trilateral ceasefire agreement, signed in November of the same year.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Turkish Satellite Turksat 5B to Launch on December 19 - Transport Minister

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Turkish fifth-generation Turksat 5B communications satellite will be launched into orbit on December 19, Transport Minister Adil Karaismailoglu said on Friday.

"#Turksat5B. The countdown has begun. December 19, 2021," Karaismailoglu tweeted.

The satellite will be launched on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from the Cape Canaveral base in the US state of Florida.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia Yet to Prepare Document on Security Guarantees that Putin, Biden Discuss - Kremlin

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia is working on formulations of security guarantees, which Russian President Vladimir Putin talked about with US President Joe Biden, but the document is not yet ready, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday.

"As of now, we are working on formulating our understanding of the conceptual vision of what the two presidents talked about. And Putin just told Biden that we would be very quick, within literally a week, we would prepare such a document and hand it over," Peskov told reporters.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kerch Strait Incident Proves Potential Harm, Danger of Such Provocative Actions - Kremlin

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The incident with the Ukrainian Navy's command ship "Donbass" in the Kerch Strait has once again showed the potential harm and danger of such provocative actions, any minor provocation can lead to serious consequences, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday.

Russia's Federal Security Service said late on Thursday that the Ukrainian Navy's command ship "Donbass" moved toward the Kerch Strait, ignoring demands to change the course. Later, the ship turned back, still ignoring any requests.

"What happened once again shows the potential harm and potential danger that can arise from such provocative actions. That is, any insignificant provocation can lead to very, very serious consequences," Peskov told reporters.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

London Court Upholds US Appeal for Assange's Extradition

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The London Administrative Court on Friday upheld the US' appeal for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's extradition.

In January, UK district judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled against extraditing Assange to the US, citing his fragile mental health and the risk of suicide if sent to a US prison, but the US Department of Justice appealed her decision to the London High Court.

The court reviewed the arguments of both sides and rejected criticisms submitted by Assange's defense, saying that the DOJ's safety assurances were sufficient to meet the relevant health concerns.

"The court therefore allowed the appeal and ordered that the case must be remitted to Westminster Magistrates' Court with a direction that a DJ [district judge] send the case to the Secretary of State, who will decide whether Mr Assange should be extradited to the USA," the ruling said.

Assange's fiancée, Stella Moris, denounced the decision as "Grave miscarriage of justice," as quoted by Wikileaks on Twitter. Moris also said the extradition decision will be appealed in the Supreme Court.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Global Health Regulators Call for Rapid Development of Medicines for COVID-19 Patients

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The European Medicines Agency (EMA) on Friday joined the international health regulator coalition (ICMRA) to call for a faster development of therapeutics to treat and prevent COVID-19 in patients around the world.

"While vaccines remain the main weapon in our fight against the pandemic, we also need safe, effective and high-quality medicines to treat and prevent COVID-19, in all its manifestations and in all populations, including children and pregnant women," Emer Cooke, chair of ICMRA and EMA's executive director, said in a statement.

The regulators also pledged to take necessary steps to streamline regulatory requirements for COVID-19 medicines to improve the accessibility of COVID-19 medicines to complement vaccination, with a focus on low- and middle-income countries.

The call comes following a series of consultations between regulators on requirements to enable rapid development, approval and global roll-out of safe and efficient medicines against COVID-19.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

EU Envoy Sees Afghan Human Potential as Frozen Asset Taliban Can Unfreeze

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Special Envoy of the European Union for Afghanistan Tomas Niklasson on Friday expressed concern about the country's frozen financial assets, while stating that the interim government can unfreeze a lot of development opportunities by ensuring the rights of girls, women, NGOs and businesses.

"I am deeply concerned about #Afghanistan's frozen financial assets. But girls not going to school, women not being allowed to work, to provide services through NGOs, or to create and lead businesses providing jobs are another frozen asset. The interim government can unfreeze it," Niklasson wrote on Twitter.

In November, the United Nations Development Program released a new report on the situation in Afghan banking and financial system. The UN noted that the bank-run problem in the country must be resolved quickly to prevent the system from collapsing. In turn, Amrullah Saleh, who declared himself the acting Afghan president, said that the banking sector of the country had already collapsed.

Since the takeover in mid-August by the Taliban (under UN sanctions over terrorist activities), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have suspended financial aid which previously accounted for nearly 75% of Afghanistan's public expenditure, while the US froze billions of dollars in assets belonging to the Afghan Central Bank.

The population of the country is currently battered by the deepening economic, humanitarian, and security crises. The challenges faced by the Afghan people include the COVID-19 pandemic, education problems, food security, displacement, gender-based and other kinds of human rights abuses.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Putin-Macron Phone Call Not Scheduled Yet But Can Be Held Very Quickly - Kremlin

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - There is no phone conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron scheduled yet, but it can be organized very quickly, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday.

Macron said earlier this week that he plans to hold a phone conversation with Putin next week to discuss the situation in Ukraine.

"So far, he ... has not been scheduled [to hold phone talks], but this can happen very, very quickly," Peskov told reporters.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Solomon Islands Lift Curfew After Protests Subsided - Government

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The Solomon Islands government on Friday lifted the curfew imposed in the capital of Honiara after mass riots in late November demanding the resignation of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare.

"The Preservation of Public Security (No.2) Regulations 2021 (LN 334 of 2021) comes into force today and effectively declares a curfew revoked in Honiara commencing today 10 December 2021 by the Governor-General," the government said in a statement.

The long-standing animosity of the most populous and rebel province of Malaita toward the central government on the Guadalcanal island escalated in 2019 when the Sogavare government switched diplomatic recognition from Taipei to Beijing. Tensions rose further as the country plunged into the pandemic crisis and Malaita people accused the government of neglect and failure to curb unemployment.

Last month, thousands of people, many of whom traveled from Malaita, tried to storm Sogavare's residence in Honiara and demanded that he must step down. Over 100 people were arrested and three died during the unrest.

The situation stabilized after the arrival of troops from Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea. Sogavare continues in his position as the head of the executive government after surviving a no-confidence motion in the parliament.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russian Foreign Ministry Says UK Court's Decision to Extradite Assange to US 'Shameful'

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The London court's decision to allow the extradition of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States is shameful, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Friday.

"This shameful verdict in the political case against the journalist and activist is yet another manifestation of the cannibalistic worldview of the Anglo-Saxon tandem. The West has had a worthy commemoration of the Human Rights Day and the end of their Summit for Democracy," Zakharova wrote on Telegram.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kremlin Positively Assesses Implementation of Putin-Biden Agreement on Cybersecurity

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Moscow positively assesses the implementation of the agreement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden on cybersecurity, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday.

"This is a very sensitive topic, and here, unfortunately, we cannot disclose substantive issues related to the work that is being carried out, the working mechanism has been established, and it, in fact, performs its functions. In this regard, we can rather give a positive assessment of how the Geneva agreements are being implemented in this part," Peskov told reporters when asked whether the US transferred data on cybercriminals to Russia.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Energy Transition Constitutes Major Challenge to Russian Economy – Kudrin

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The energy transition poses a major challenge to the Russian economy, the Chairman of Russia's Accounts Chamber Aleksei Kudrin said on Friday. The energy transition is the global energy transformation from fossil to renewable energy. It strongly intersects with the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and building up a low-carbon economy.

"The major challenge to Russia's economy is the energy transition... as, to a larger extent, the export of power supplies needs to be replaced by manufactured goods and services," Kudrin said at the International Export Forum "Made in Russia."

Kudrin stressed that the situation with oil demand at the global market is changing and by 2030 it may diminish by 19.35% under net zero carbon emission pledge. Whilst Russia's economic well-being and import opportunities are largely secured through oil exports rather than competitiveness in technology and provision of services.

The energy transition may take decades, but it is crucial for Russia to seek the opportunities for export diversification, he added.

Governor of the Bank of Russia Elvira Nabiullina speaking at the forum, supported the argument that implementing the energy transition in the Russian economy will not be easy, but she also claimed that the climate agenda offers more opportunities for innovative businesses to access funding on more favorable terms.

According to Russian Custom Service, in 2020 power supplies accounted for 53% of Russian exports, which was a decrease comparing to 66% in 2019.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Senior Russian, Top Libyan Diplomats Discuss Russian Diplomatic Missions Reopening-
Moscow

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The head of a Russian delegation and the country's ambassador to Libya, Ivan Molotkov, discussed with Najla Mangoush, the foreign minister of Libya's Government of National Unity (GNU), the reopening of Russian diplomatic missions in Tripoli and Benghazi, the Russian foreign ministry said on Friday.

The meeting took place on Wednesday in Tripoli.

"They also discussed promising areas of Russian-Libyan mutually beneficial ... cooperation, including the practical study of issues of resuming the activities of diplomatic and consular missions of Russia, respectively, in Tripoli and Benghazi," the ministry said in a statement.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

EU Commission Discusses Travel, Adapted Vaccine Amid Omicron Concerns - Von der Leyen
MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The European Commission on Friday deliberated on possible review of travel measures and issues related to the development of adapted vaccines to combat the Omicron strain.

"Today's meeting of Commissioners on COVID-19 discussed protection from Omicron with vaccination and boosters, developing adapted vaccines if necessary, ensuring long-term supply of vaccines with HERA [European Health Emergency preparedness and Response Authority], update on travel measures, speeding up delivery of donated vaccines," President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen said on Twitter.

The new strain was first detected in South Africa in late November. Since then, over 330 cases of Omicron variant have been detected across the EU, the majority of which are linked to people who made trips to southern African countries where the Omicron strain was first detected.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Assange's Fiancee Says London Court's Decision Will Be Challenged at Earliest - WikiLeaks

LONDON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The fiancee of founder Julian Assange, Stella Moris, announced the intention to challenge the London court's decision to extradite the journalist to the US at the earliest, WikiLeaks said on Friday.

"We will appeal this decision at the earliest possible moment," the fiancee was quoted as saying.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Reporters Without Borders Condemns London Court Ruling to Extradite Assange to US

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Reporters Without Borders (RSF) condemns the London court's decision to extradite WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the United States, the organization's head, Christophe Deloire, said on Friday.

"We condemn today's UK High Court decision to allow the extradition of Julian Assange to the US, which will prove historic for all the wrong reasons. We fully believe that Julian Assange has been targeted for his contributions to journalism," Deloire tweeted.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Lukashenko Calls for Combining EAEU Development Plans With Chinese Belt, Road Initiative
MINSK, December 9 (Sputnik) - It is necessary to combine the development plans of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Chinese Belt and Road initiative, Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko said on Friday.

"Our joint work outside [the EAEU] and the activities of the [Eurasian Economic] Commission should be focused on solving practical problems — the development of the export of goods and services. And China occupies a special place here. I consider it necessary to focus on interaction with this country within the framework of the integration of the EAEU development plans, the Belt and Road initiative and the agreement on trade and economic cooperation of 2018," Lukashenko told a virtual EAEU summit.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Moscow Doubts West Not Being Hypocritical Noting Importance of Fulfilling Minsk Deal

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Moscow doubts that the West is not being hypocritical, noting the importance of fulfilling the Minsk agreements, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Friday.

"There is a way out — the Minsk agreements, but this is exactly what the Kiev regime does not want, and there are great doubts that the Western world is not hypocritical when it speaks of the primacy of the Minsk agreements," Zakharova told the Channel One broadcaster.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

London Court Upholds US Appeal for Assange's Extradition

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The London Administrative Court upheld on Friday the US' appeal for WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange's extradition.

Assange's fiancée, Stella Moris, denounced the decision as "Grave miscarriage of justice," as quoted by Wikileaks on Twitter.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

France to Open Algerian War Archives 15 Years Earlier - Culture Minister

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Paris will declassify archives relating to the war in Algeria 15 years ahead of schedule, French Culture Minister Roselyne Bachelot said on Friday.

"It takes courage to admit the historical truth and that's why ... I announce that the archives containing investigations by the police and National Gendarmerie into the war in Algeria will be opened 15 years earlier," Bachelot said as aired by French broadcaster BFMTV.

This step is in line with the French state policy of recent years, which is aimed at facilitating the preservation of historic truth. On March 9, French President Emmanuel Macron decided to streamline access to classified information that dates back 50 years and earlier and include documents on the Algerian war.

The Algerian War between the French government and supporters of Algerian independence lasted from 1954 to 1962 and was marked by widespread guerrilla warfare waged by the Algerian nationalist forces as well as a brutal counterinsurgency response mounted by the French.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Auction Sells Exam Papers Assessed by Elon Musk for Nearly \$8,000

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - PR Auction, based in Boston and specializing in selling rare documents and autographs, sold two university paperworks graded by Tesla and SpaceX founder Elon Musk in the 1990s when he was a teaching assistant for \$7,753.

"Two pieces of coursework annotated and initialed by Elon Musk as a teaching assistant in an entrepreneurship class (MGMT 231) taught by Myles Bass at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School in 1995," the auction wrote in the description of the lot.

The first paper is a written test, and the second is a study, both commented on and graded by Musk. The auction did not name the buyer. The previous owner is the paperwork author Brian Thomas, a former student at the University of Pennsylvania.

On November 1, Musk topped the Forbes Billionaires ranking as the value of his assets hovers over \$300 billion.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ex-Kazakh President Considers Inviting Azerbaijan to Become EAEU Observer if Possible

ALMATY, December 9 (Sputnik) - The former Kazakh President and the Honorary Chairman of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council (SEEC), Nursultan Nazarbayev, believes that it possible to invite Azerbaijan to become an observer state in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the politician said on Friday.

"I heartily welcome the establishment of relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan after a long-standing spat. I think we all think so. At the same time, as we said earlier, I consider it possible to hold negotiations with the Republic of Azerbaijan so that it also becomes an observer," he said during the SEEC meeting via video link.

According to Nazarbayev, Uzbekistan, which became the EAEU observer and gained a lot from this, can set an example for Azerbaijan and inspire the country to do the same.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Estonian President Says Biden Pledged Support to Eastern NATO Flank 'If Necessary'

HELSINKI, December 9 (Sputnik) - Estonian President Alar Karis said on Friday that United States' President Joe Biden assured the countries of the eastern NATO flank that the US would deploy additional troops "if necessary."

On Thursday, Biden had a telephone conversation with the leaders of the Bucharest Nine (B9) group of countries, including Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Slovakia. They discussed Russia's allegedly destabilizing military buildup along Ukrainian border and the necessity for a united and ready NATO stance for the collective defense.

"And Biden noted this: there are economic, financial levers, if necessary, then military ones. If the situation requires, additional NATO troops will be deployed in the states. And where the troops will be deployed will be the decision of the NATO Allies. But today, tomorrow or in a month, of course, it was not mentioned in a telephone conversation," Estonian broadcasting portal ERR quotes Karis as saying.

Karis said, citing the US president, that every Russian step would be followed by a counter step and that the US was committed to NATO's Article 5.

Article 5 provides for collective defense if a NATO ally is the victim of a military attack, every other member of the alliance will consider such as act of violence against all members and will take the necessary actions.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russian Foreign Ministry Slams Ukrainian Vessel's Action in Strait of Kerch as Provocation

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The actions of the Ukrainian Navy's command ship "Donbass" that moved toward the Kerch Strait are nothing but provocation, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Friday.

Russia's Federal Security Service said late on Thursday that the Ukrainian Navy's command ship "Donbass" moved toward the Kerch Strait, ignoring demands to change the course. Later, the ship turned back, still ignoring any requests.

"In my opinion, everyone has already understood everything a long time ago, based on the statements made by the Russian law enforcement structures. In my opinion, this is obvious, this is another provocation," Zakharova told the Channel One broadcaster, adding that this case "is not unique ... it is a complex of provocative actions that are carried out around our borders."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Needs Consultations With EU, Russia Before Approving NATO Meetings Format - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The US needs additional consultations with the EU and Russia before approving the format of any meetings between leading NATO states and Moscow, The Wall Street Journal reported, citing a senior official from the Biden administration.

Earlier on Friday, US President Joe Biden and the leaders of the Bucharest Nine group of countries representing NATO "eastern flank" discussed Ukraine and how to work together to de-escalate its border crisis with Russia.

"Within the next couple of days we are obviously going to continue talking to our European partners. We are going to continue talking with our Russian partners and finding a way forward," the official told the newspaper, adding that the US is "prepared to talk to the Russians about this full set of issues."

It is clear that Moscow wants a sustained dialogue on the areas of influence, called by Putin "red lines," such as NATO expansion and infrastructure in eastern Europe, according to Thomas Graham, former Russia adviser to President George Bush, the newspaper said.

"It is clearly a minefield for Biden and the other Western leaders to encourage Putin to choose diplomacy over military coercion where there is no easy resolution for the issues Russia is likely to raise," Alexander Vershbow, a former US ambassador to Russia and to NATO, was quoted as saying by the WSJ.

Following talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Biden said on Wednesday that he expected to announce by the end of the week a high-level meeting between Russia, the US and four other key NATO countries to address Moscow's concerns about the alliance's activities in eastern Europe.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Australia to Replace European Military Helicopters With US Black Hawks - Defense Minister

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Australia will replace European MRH-90 Taipan military helicopters with multi-role American Black Hawks, Australian Defence Minister Peter Dutton said on Friday.

"For the interoperability with the US and Australia which is increasingly important for us given the instability in our region, the Black Hawk made perfect sense. They are much cheaper to fly than what the Taipans were," the minister told Australia's Nine News.

According to the minister, the 41 Taipan helicopters were unreliable and did not live up to the expectations. In their stead, Australia will purchase up to 40 Black Hawk helicopters from the United States.

Earlier on Friday, Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison also said that the Taipans "weren't doing their job". The purchase of American helicopters, he said, complies with obligations under the AUKUS partnership with the United States and the United Kingdom.

According to Nine News, replacement of the helicopters will cost taxpayers 7 billion Australian dollars (\$5 billion).

The Australian government's decision drew criticism from the opposition. Deputy Labor Leader Richard Marles said the country's military programs raised questions amid the recent refusal of the Australian authorities to honor the \$90 billion submarine contract with France in favor of the US nuclear submarines.

"We are seeing a whole lot of defense programs being scrapped. When we see defense programs being turned over like this, it is billions of dollars wasted," Marles said, as quoted by Nine News.

Labor front bencher Bill Shorten Bill Shorten, on the contrary, urged the Australian government to take hard decision to replace the helicopter fleet.

In January, Australia banned the use of 30 out of the 33 Black Hawk helicopters already purchased due to technical problems. Three helicopters continued to be used only because they were operating outside Australia, in East Timor.

The Black Hawk helicopters are designed and built by the US Sikorsky Aircraft manufacturer. Taipan aircraft are produced by the European NHIndustries consortium.

According to the Australian Defence Magazine, Taipan helicopters are used in Australia by aviation regiments in the suburbs of Townsville and Holsworthy. They were put into service in 2007 to replace the outdated S-70A-9 Black Hawks helicopters.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ukraine's Provocations in Sea of Azov Complicate Situation in Region - Russian Diplomat

VIENNA, December 9 (Sputnik) - Ukraine's provocations, such as the incident in the Sea of Azov, complicate the situation in the region, Konstantin Gavrilo, who heads the Russian delegation at the arms control negotiations in Vienna, told Sputnik on Friday.

Russia's Federal Security Service said late on Thursday that the Ukrainian Navy's command ship "Donbass" moved toward the Kerch Strait, ignoring demands to change the course. Later, the ship turned back, still ignoring any requests.

The current procedure for the passage of the Kerch-Yenikalsky Canal by ships is effective and allows for high throughput capacity. A request is sent for the passage, after which the vessel is inspected, which takes about 40-45 minutes, while this procedure is valid for all vessels, including Russian and Ukrainian, the diplomat.

"Unfortunately, in addition to yesterday's provocation and earlier, Ukraine made attempts to undermine the existing regime, which, first of all, reduces the channel's throughput capacity and causes economic damage to ship carriers. As time has shown, this does not bring any political dividends but only complicates the already difficult situation in the region," Gavrilo said.

Kiev needs to abandon the tactics of making minor violations, he said, noting that behind these provocations, there is a task to postpone the solution of really difficult issues.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Paris May Ask European Commission to Launch Legal Proceedings Against UK Over Fishing Row

PARIS, December 9 (Sputnik) - France will ask the European Commission to initiate legal proceedings against the United Kingdom if London does not change its position in the dispute over fishing licenses, French Secretary of State Clement Beaune said on Friday.

"If they [the British] maintain their position, we will ask the European Commission this weekend to announce a legal procedure against the British. This is a legal procedure that the European Commission did not want to resort to till the last. But we will ask to start this procedure, which means, that all Europeans recognize that the British do not respect the agreement and will demand that it be respected," Beaune told the Franceinfo broadcaster.

The United Kingdom should issue around 100 more fishing licenses for French fishermen, the diplomat said, recalling that last week London issued 40 such documents for EU fishing boats.

"I do not know exactly how many [licenses] are left [to be issued] but probably about 100. If the British now said that they could issue several dozen additional licenses as a gesture of goodwill to show that the dialogue has borne fruit, that there is interest in continuing it, we would

appreciate this step together with the EU Commission and, probably, we would continue it," Beaufort explained.

Late last month, France set December 10 as the final deadline for the settlement of the fisheries dispute after which Beaufort said it would quit the talks.

Tensions flared last month when Paris announced a new set of sanctions against London after the French forces detained a British vessel in their waters in late October. The parties engaged in talks and the sanctions were postponed, but so far there has been no breakthrough as London continues to deny Paris's claim about the insufficient number of licenses issued by the UK for French boats.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russian Central Bank Says Cryptocurrencies Volatile, Used in Criminal Schemes

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Cryptocurrencies cannot become regular means of payment due to their high volatility and attractiveness for money laundering schemes, Russian Central Bank said on Friday as Moscow mulls introducing new regulations for operations with cryptocurrency.

The usage of cryptocurrency as a payment method on the Russian territory is illegal. On Wednesday, the Federation Council created a working group to discuss further development and regulation of cryptocurrencies in Russia.

"Private cryptocurrencies cannot perform the function of a means of payment due to high volatility, and they also have not been recognized by global regulators due to the emerging risks of their use in money laundering schemes. In addition, these assets are unsafe due to an increased interest in them from cybercriminals," the regulator said in a report on the main trends in financial markets for 2022-2024.

Global regulators also tend to tighten regulation on cryptocurrencies, the Central Bank noted. In 2021 alone, regulators in China, India, the European Union, Brazil, the United States, South Korea, Hong Kong, Canada, Turkey and a number of other countries have announced additional requirements and restrictions on the circulation and use of cryptocurrencies.

The Bank of Russia has consistently opposed the use of cryptocurrencies for settlements within the country, since they are not backed by the state. Russian law prohibits companies and individuals from using digital currency to pay for goods and services, though they can be owned as digital financial assets.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Needs Consultations With EU, Russia Before Approving NATO Meetings Format - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The US needs additional consultations with the EU and Russia before approving the format of any meetings between leading NATO states and Moscow, The Wall Street Journal reported, citing a senior official from the Biden administration.

"Within the next couple of days we are obviously going to continue talking to our European partners. We are going to continue talking with our Russian partners and finding a way forward," the official told the newspaper, adding that the US is "prepared to talk to the Russians about this full set of issues."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Diplomat Affected By 'Havana Syndrome' Sues State Department – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - A US State Department officer has filed a lawsuit against the agency and State Secretary Antony Blinken, accusing them of discriminating against the victims of so-called Havana syndrome on the grounds of disability, US media reported on Friday.

"Havana syndrome" is a set of inexplicable medical symptoms first detected in US diplomatic personnel in Cuba in 2016. The reported symptoms included physical and psychological abnormalities such as hearing loss, headaches, anxiety and depression. Subsequently, similar symptoms were documented in the US diplomatic missions in China and Europe.

A member of the diplomatic security services in China's Guangzhou, Mark Lenzi, alleged that since 2017 he and his family have suffered severe symptoms of the syndrome such as "sudden and unexplained mental and physical symptoms, including headaches, lightheadedness, nausea, nosebleeds, sleeplessness, and memory loss," CNN reported citing the suit documents.

According to Lenzi, the State Department downplayed the problem and undermined his efforts to investigate the causes of his condition. After attempting to warn his colleagues about "the potential danger" Lenzi was ordered to undergo psychiatric examination.

Eventually, Lenzi's symptoms were medically attested back in the United States, but he continued "to face retaliation and discrimination by the State Department." The suit contains allegations of the State Department hindering his career advancement and creating administrative hurdles to his treatment.

The damages being sought by Lenzi's against the State Department were not revealed to the media.

The State Department's dismissive stance on "Havana syndrome" earlier came under harsh criticism, in response to which, on November 5, Blinken delivered the remarks claiming that the State Department will "spare no resources to protect the personnel" and will ensure that every employee receives medical care and assistance they need.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Gazprom Neft Expects Oil Supply-Demand Balance to Stabilize Shortly

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The demand for oil in the world is slightly exceeding the supply, but the situation will stabilize in the foreseeable future, otherwise OPEC+ has all the tools to adjust the market, the chairman of the management board of Gazprom Neft Alexander Dyukov said on Friday.

"The demand [for oil] at the moment is slightly exceeding the supply, and according to the OPEC+ agreement, the signatories are going to continue increasing the production, so that it will expand the oil supply," Dyukov said in an interview with the Russia-24 TV channel.

Dyukov also said that the interaction of the parties to the OPEC+ deal brought positive results to the oil market, and it would be logical to keep this stabilizing tool after 2022.

In May 2020, OPEC+ reduced crude production by 9.7 million barrels per day due to a drop in oil demand caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Now the organization is enhancing production by 400,000 barrels per day on a monthly basis, hoping to ease the pressure on prices as economies around the world recover after the lockdowns.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik)

BIDEN-ZELENSKY PHONE CALL

* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and his US counterpart, Joe Biden, have coordinated their positions on settling the military conflict on Donbas, the press service of the Ukrainian presidential office said.

* During the call, Biden underscored the United States' readiness to support confidence-building measures to advance the implementation of the Minsk agreement to resolve tensions between Russia and Ukraine, the White House said.

* Biden explained to Zelenskyy that he told Russian President Vladimir Putin diplomacy is an option, a senior administration official told reporters.

BUCHAREST NINE LEADERS

* Biden's call with the leaders of the Bucharest Nine group to discuss the alleged Russian escalation near the Ukraine border lasted 40 minutes, the White House press pool said.

* Biden told leaders of the Bucharest Nine group of countries that his administration will pursue a diplomatic path regarding the Ukraine-Russia situation in full consultation with allies and partners, a senior Biden administration official said.

* Biden and the leaders of the Bucharest Nine group of countries representing NATO "eastern flank" discussed Ukraine and how to work together to de-escalate its border crisis with Russia, the White House announced in a readout of the conversation.

CHINA-NICARAGUA RELATIONS

* China has officially established diplomatic relations with Nicaragua following the latter's decision to sever ties with Taiwan and recognize the island as a part of the People's Republic of China, the China Central Television reported on Friday.

* China highly appreciates Nicaragua's decision to cut ties with Taiwan and make "the right choice," by restoring diplomatic relations with Beijing, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

* The decision of the Nicaraguan government led by President Daniel Ortega to sever the relations with Taiwan is not reflecting the will of the Nicaraguan people and the Latin American nation will lose a steadfast partner, US Department of State spokesperson Ned Price said.

* Taiwan deeply regrets Nicaragua's decision to cut off ties with the island and disregard the long-standing friendship between the countries in favor of establishing relations with mainland China, the Taiwan Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

FISHING DISPUTE

* France will ask the European Commission to initiate legal proceedings against the United Kingdom if London does not change its position in the dispute over fishing licenses, French Secretary of State Clement Beaune said on Friday.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Minsk Intends to Offset Losses From Western Sanctions by Exports to Russia, Asia, Africa

MINSK, December 9 (Sputnik) - Belarus plans to compensate damage from Western sanctions by boosting exports to the markets of Russia, Asia, and Africa, Belarusian Prime Minister Roman Golovchenko said on Friday.

"We have estimated the losses in the Western direction from the sanctions, we will compensate them by increasing our presence in the markets of Russia, Asia, and Africa. Russia and China remain strategic partners to us," Golovchenko was quoted as saying by the Belta news agency during a meeting with lawmakers discussing budget issues.

Minsk intends to raise exports to those markets by some 6% and actively work to "expand the geography of supplies," he added.

Another package of sanctions against Belarus has been adopted by the European Union jointly with the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada on December 2, targeting several Belarusian officials, entities, and organizations. The new preventive round came in response to the ongoing migration crisis at the Belarusian-Polish border, which the West blames on Minsk. The latter denies the accusations.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Australia Battling Fire on One Coast, Floods on Another - Reports

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Australia is battling two natural disasters, as its west coast is being battered by forest fires, while major floods are hitting the east coast of the country, media reported on Friday.

According to 9News, after several weeks of heat, bushfires flared up on the west coast. Heavy smoke is observed in the Augusta-Margaret River region. Firefighters are on the ground trying to prevent the spread of fire.

All tourists and residents in the Leeuwin-Naturaliste National Park are being evacuated, according to media reports. The Bussell Highway has been closed to traffic.

Over 5,000 hectares of forest have been destroyed, the report said. No damage to buildings, injuries or other deaths have been reported so far, but a man is currently considered missing due to the disaster.

At the same time, the other side of the continent is hit by storms. Several cities on the Australian east coast, including its capital, Sydney, have been lashed by terrible rains resulting in the massive floods.

Storms and high winds have damaged roofs, downed trees and knocked out power.

According to Nine News, over the past two day, two women have died in flooding waters in the region.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia Confirms 30,873 New COVID-19 Cases Over Past 24 Hours - Response Center

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia has confirmed 30,873 new COVID-19 cases over the past 24 hours, bringing the cumulative total to 9,956,679, the federal response center said on Friday.

"Over the past 24 hours, 30,873 COVID-19 cases have been confirmed in 85 regions in Russia, including 2,261 cases (7.3%) without clinical symptoms," the center said, adding that the rate of increase stands at 0.31%.

Moscow registered 3,477 new COVID-19 cases over the given period, followed by Saint Petersburg with 2,267 new cases, and the Moscow region with 1,712 new cases.

The response center also reported 1,176 deaths linked to the coronavirus, bringing the country's death toll to 287,180.

In the same 24 hours, 35,657 COVID-19 patients were discharged from hospitals across the country, bringing the total of recoveries to 8,673,518.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

South African President Invites Scientists From BRICS Countries to Study COVID-19 - Office

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - South African President Cyril Ramaphosa has invited scientists from the BRICS member states to visit his nation and study the coronavirus and its mutations with local specialists, his office said on Friday.

"President Cyril Ramaphosa has invited scientists from fellow BRICS countries – Brazil, Russia, India and China – to work alongside South African scientists in further researching the various characteristics of the COVID-19 virus and its mutations," the office said in a statement.

"This cooperation takes place within the context of the establishment of the BRICS Vaccine Research and Development Centre in a virtual format," the statement read.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Paris May Ask European Commission to Launch Legal Proceedings Against UK Over Fishing Row

PARIS, December 9 (Sputnik) - France will ask the European Commission to initiate legal proceedings against the United Kingdom if London does not change its position in the dispute over fishing licenses, French Secretary of State Clement Beaune said on Friday.

"If they [the British] maintain their position, we will ask the European Commission this weekend to announce a legal procedure against the British. This is a legal procedure that the European Commission did not want to resort to till the last. But we will ask to start this procedure, which means, that all Europeans recognize that the British do not respect the agreement and will demand that it be respected," Beaune told the Franceinfo broadcaster.

Late last month, France set December 10 as the final deadline for the settlement of the fisheries dispute after which Beaune said it would quit the talks.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Elon Musk Says Thinking of Quitting Jobs to Become Full-Time Influencer

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The founder of SpaceX and Tesla, billionaire Elon Musk, said on Friday he was considering quitting his multiple executive positions and becoming a full-time influencer instead.

"Thinking of quitting my jobs and becoming an influencer full-time, what do you think?" Musk wrote on Twitter.

Elon Musk, 50, is a business magnate, leading Tesla, SpaceX, Neuralink and The Boring Company. As the co-founder and CEO of Tesla, the billionaire manages product design, engineering and global manufacturing of the company's electric vehicles, battery and solar energy products.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kazakhstan Yet to Confirm Astana Troika's Foreign Minister Meeting on Syria in Nur-Sultan

NUR-SULTAN, December 9 (Sputnik) - The Kazakh Foreign Ministry has yet to confirm that Russian, Turkish and Iranian foreign ministers will meet in Nur-Sultan as part of the next round of talks on Syria, scheduled from December 21-22.

Kazakh Foreign Minister Mukhtar Tleuberdi previously said that the meeting of the top diplomats of the Astana format was under consideration.

"The meeting of the guarantor states' foreign ministers has not yet been confirmed. But the next round of Syrian talks will be held, as had been announced, from December 21 - 22 at the deputy foreign minister level," Kazakh Foreign Ministry spokesman Aibek Smadiyarov told Sputnik. Negotiations to resolve the Syrian war, which broke out in 2011, have been ongoing in Nur-Sultan since 2017 with the mediation of guarantor-states of the Astana format (after the former name of the Kazakh capital). In January 2018, the Russian city of Sochi hosted a congress of the Syrian national dialogue, the first such attempt since the beginning of the conflict to bring together Syrian main political forces. The main result of the Congress was the decision to create a Constitutional Committee, which operates in Geneva and whose main task is to prepare constitutional reform in Syria.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Secretary of State Discusses Iran, Middle East With Israeli Defense Minister

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met in Washington on Thursday with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz to discuss regional and security issues, including Iran and Middle East, US Foreign Ministry spokesman Ned Price said on Thursday.

The meeting between Blinken and Gantz took place amid the resumption of the seventh round of the Vienna-hosted talks on the restoration of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, from which the United States withdrew during the presidency of Donald Trump.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken met with Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz today. They discussed a range of regional and security topics, including Iran and the U.S. commitment to Israel's security," Price said in a statement.

Both senior officials also discussed the unresolved Palestinian problem.

"Secretary Blinken reiterated the Administration's belief that Israelis and Palestinians deserve to live safely and securely and enjoy equal measures of freedom, prosperity, and democracy," Price added.

Earlier on Thursday, Gantz met with US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin at the Pentagon. The top defense chiefs discussed alleged "nuclear provocations" and other threatening activities by Iran.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Four Versions of Omicron COVID Strain Detected in Tourists in Russia - Vector Center

ST. PETERSBURG, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia has detected four independent versions of the Omicron coronavirus strain in different tourists returning from other countries, Rinat Maksyutov, the director of the Russian State Research Center of Virology and Biotechnology Vector, said on Friday.

"To date, four independent whole genome strains from different patients, different tourists who returned from other countries have been sequenced in the Vector center," Maksyutov told an international scientific conference.

There two cases of the Omicron variant in Russia so far.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Taiwan Regrets Nicaragua's Decision to Cut Off Ties With Island - Foreign Ministry

BEIJING, December 9 (Sputnik) - Taiwan deeply regrets Nicaragua's decision to cut off ties with the island and disregard the long-standing friendship between the countries in favor of establishing relations with mainland China, the Taiwan Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

On Thursday, the Nicaraguan government announced its decision to cut off relations with Taiwan. On Friday, China and Nicaragua signed a Joint Communiqué on the Resumption of Diplomatic Relations.

"The Taiwan government deeply regrets this decision. To safeguard national sovereignty and dignity, Taiwan has decided to terminate diplomatic relations with Nicaragua with immediate effect, end all bilateral cooperation projects and aid programs, and recall staff of its Embassy and Technical Mission in Nicaragua," the ministry said in a statement.

The ministry also noted that Taiwan has always been a good friend of Nicaragua and has worked with the country's authorities to improve the living conditions of the Nicaraguan people and contribute to the country's development.

"Taiwan deeply regrets that the [Nicaraguan President Daniel] Ortega government has decided to disregard the long-standing and close friendship between the people of Taiwan and Nicaragua," the ministry added.

Nicaragua established relations with Taiwan in 1930, when the island was part of the Japanese Empire. The Consulate of Taiwan in Managua received the status of embassy in 1967. The first time bilateral relations were broken was after Daniel Ortega came to power in Nicaragua in 1985. In the same year, he established diplomatic relations with Beijing. However, Ortega's

successor Violeta Barrios de Chamorro revised the country's foreign policy, re-recognized Taiwan and cut relations with Beijing.

Taiwan has been governed independently from mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan — a territory with its own democratically-elected government — maintains that it is an autonomous country but stops short of declaring independence.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Germany's Scholz Too Weak to Defend Russia Ties Against Allied Pressure - Lawmaker

ST. PETERSBURG, December 9 (Sputnik) - German Chancellor Olaf Scholz does not have the political muscle of his predecessor to stand up to allies when it comes to working with Russia in his country's national interest, Eugen Schmidt, a lawmaker with the right-wing AfD party, told Sputnik.

"With regard to relations with Russia... I would only cautiously note that most likely Germany will be less independent in pursuing its foreign policy goals, acting more in the interests of NATO and the EU," he said.

Scholz took over from Angela Merkel after a vote in parliament on Wednesday, bringing down the curtain on her 16-year rule. Before that, the chief Social Democrat languished in Merkel's shadow for years, serving as vice president and finance minister since 2018.

"Just by looking at his insignificant political weight in the international arena, Scholz's ability to rally Europe around Germany like Merkel did in the past, as well as his overall influence on international politics, are rather questionable," Schmidt said.

He suggested that Scholz would have problems protecting German interests even from his minority coalition partners. A case in point is the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which was frequently criticized by Greens leader Annalena Baerbock, now the top German diplomat, during the election campaign.

The AfD legislator argued further that financial scandals that marred Scholz's tenure betrayed his campaign pledge of seeking "respect for all." He said the former finance chief "has respect exclusively for big money."

Scholz's ministry was rattled by accusations in September that its anti-money laundering unit had hushed up suspected wrongdoings, less than a year after another financial auditor under the ministry's auspices was raided in the probe into an accounting fraud by the German blue-chip firm Wirecard.

"Most likely, Scholz will be the chancellor of banks and concerns, and not the people of Germany," Schmidt said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

China Highly Appreciates Nicaragua's Decision to Restore Diplomatic Ties With Beijing

BEIJING, December 9 (Sputnik) - China highly appreciates Nicaragua's decision to cut ties with Taiwan and make "the right choice," by restoring diplomatic relations with Beijing, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

On Thursday, the Nicaraguan government announced its decision to cut off relations with Taiwan in favor of developing ties with China. On Friday, China and Nicaragua signed the Joint Communiqué on the Resumption of Diplomatic Relations.

"The Government of Nicaragua recognizes and commits to abide by the one-China principle, severs the so-called 'diplomatic relations' with Taiwan, resumes diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, and undertakes that it shall no longer develop any official relations or official exchanges with Taiwan. This is the right choice that is in line with the global trend and has people's support. China highly appreciates this decision," the Chinese ministry said in a statement.

Beijing also stressed that there is only one China in the world and that Taiwan is an indivisible part of the country. The ministry noted that the Chinese government is the only legitimate government representing the state.

"These facts are grounded in history and law, and represent a universally agreed norm governing international relations," the statement added.

The ministry also expressed its readiness to develop cooperation with Nicaragua in various fields based on the principles of peaceful coexistence and for the benefit of the countries' peoples.

Nicaragua established relations with Taiwan in 1930, when the island was part of the Japanese Empire. The Consulate of Taiwan in Managua received the status of embassy in 1967. The first time bilateral relations were broken was when Daniel Ortega came to power in Nicaragua in 1985. In the same year, he established diplomatic relations with Beijing. However, Ortega's successor Violeta Barrios de Chamorro revised the country's foreign policy, re-recognized Taiwan and cut relations with Beijing.

Taiwan has been governed independently from mainland China since 1949. Beijing views the island as its province, while Taiwan — a territory with its own democratically-elected government — maintains that it is an autonomous country but stops short of declaring independence.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Launch of Proton-M Rocket With Satellites Rescheduled for Dec 13 - Russian Space Agency

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The launch of the Proton-M carrier rocket with Express-AMU3 and Express-AMU7 communication satellites is rescheduled for December 13, Russian state space agency Roscosmos told Sputnik on Friday.

The satellites were initially set to be launched from the Baikonur cosmodrome in November. The launch was postponed due to technical issues.

"The launch of the Proton-M carrier rocket with Express-AMU3 and Express-AMU7 communication satellites is planned for December 13," the agency said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Central Bank Digital Currencies to Complement Crypto - Binance CEO

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Central-bank-backed digital currencies will complement rather than compete with or replace cryptocurrencies, Binance CEO Changpeng Zhao predicted in an interview with Sputnik.

"Even though central bank digital currencies may come out, fundamentally they are very different from native cryptocurrencies. I don't think they will replace Bitcoin," Zhao said. Several countries have been considering issuing their own digital tokens, a virtual form of a their fiat currencies, after the crypto market took off.

The founder of the world's largest crypto exchange said that state-backed tokens would provide novice users with security and confidence of a centralized currency, while educating them about digital coins.

"It is a very strong validation of the blockchain technology that central banks are using it. It also serves as a very strong educational portal, now that governments are educating the users about crypto," he explained.

Zhao added that central bank digital currencies could potentially serve as a medium of exchange, providing another option for exchanges to integrate.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi to Visit UK for G7 Summit - Reports

TOKYO, December 9 (Sputnik) - Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi will pay a visit to the United Kingdom to attend the G7 ministerial meeting, national media reported on Friday. Hayashi will visit Liverpool from December 10-13 where the G7 foreign ministers summit will be held. The trip will be the first visit abroad after Hayashi assumed office as his country's top diplomat. The official previously served as the minister of education, culture, sports, science and technology.

In the course of the G7 meeting, the ministers will discuss the issues concerning the fight against COVID-19, the emergence of the new Omicron variant, human rights issues, as well as the positions of different countries regarding the "diplomatic boycott" of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, which has already been announced by the United States and the United Kingdom. Japan has not yet arrived at a decision.

As part of the trip, the Japanese minister will also hold a number of bilateral meetings with his counterparts.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Binance CEO Says 2021 Saw Fivefold Jump in Crypto Investors

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The number of investors wishing to put their money into cryptocurrencies rose five times within a year, Binance CEO Changpeng Zhao told Sputnik. "I think there is probably a five-X jump in the number of institutions from this year versus last one, from now versus the beginning of this year. This year, we've seen tremendous growth," he said in an interview.

Zhao, who founded the world's largest digital coin exchange Binance four years ago, said the growing popularity of cryptocurrencies was best reflected by Bitcoin. Its price rose to an all-time high of over \$68,000 during a buying spree in November.

"It is further evidenced from the price of Bitcoin, which I believe is a very accurate indicator of the overall market," Zhao said.

He said there were different kinds of investors joining the crypto market — from family offices that are more interested in wealth preservation to hedge funds that are trading very actively to make money to market makers and equity and crypto project investors.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Navigation in Kerch-Yenikalsky Canal Carried Out in Normal Mode - Crimean Ministry

SIMFEROPOL, December 9 (Sputnik) - The navigation in the Kerch-Yenikalsky Canal is carried out in the normal mode following the incident with the Ukrainian Navy's vessel, the Crimean Ministry of Transport told Sputnik on Friday.

"The Kerch-Yenikalsky Canal is operating in the normal mode," the ministry said.

Russia's Federal Security Service said late on Thursday that the Ukrainian Navy's command ship "Donbass" moved toward the Kerch Strait, ignoring demands to change the course. Later, the ship turned back, still ignoring any requests.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

PREVIEW - UK High Court Due to Hand Down Verdict on Julian Assange's Extradition Case

LONDON, December 9 (Sputnik) – Two judges from the London High Court are due to hand down on Friday their decision on a US government appeal against a previous ruling by a district magistrate not to extradite WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange to the US.

The hearing, marked as "Judgement hand down" by the London Administrative Court, is scheduled for 10:15 GMT, and the parties will not be attending in person.

In January, UK district judge Vanessa Baraitser ruled against extraditing Assange to the US, citing his fragile mental health and the risk of suicide if sent to a US prison, but the US Department of Justice appealed her decision to the London High Court.

The whistleblower is wanted by the United States on espionage charges after WikiLeaks published thousands of classified documents that shed light on war crimes committed by American troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. If put on trial and convicted in the US, the Australian journalist faces up to 175 years in prison.

Assange has been on remand at the Belmarsh high-security prison in southeast London since October 2020, since he served an 11-month sentence for breach of bail after staying in the Ecuadorean embassy in London for seven years.

Whatever the judgment is, the decision is likely to be subject to further appeal by the losing side. As in previous hearings, Assange's supporters will gather on Friday outside the Royal Court of Justice in central London in solidarity with the WikiLeaks founder.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

RPT - US Court Sentences Russian National Koshkin to 4 Years for Cybercrimes - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - A US judge sentenced Russian national Oleg Koshkin to four years in prison for cybercrimes, Justice Department spokesperson Tom Carson told Sputnik.

Koshkin will serve 48 months in prison after being convicted in June of running a so-called "crypting" service used to conceal malware from antivirus software. He was arrested by authorities in California in September 2019.

Koshkin, 41, formerly of Estonia, operated the websites "Crypt4U.com," "fud.bz" and others, the Justice Department said in a statement. The websites promised to render malicious software fully undetectable by nearly every major provider of antivirus software, the release said.

The Justice Department also said he worked with Peter Levashov, the operator of the Kelihos botnet, to develop a system that would allow Levashov to crypt the Kelihos malware multiple times each day.

In September 2018, Levashov pleaded guilty to various computer crime-related offenses.

His co-defendant, Pavel Tsurkan, pleaded guilty on June 16 to one count of causing damage to a protected computer, the Justice Department said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

RPT: ANALYSIS - US Intel, Media May Sabotage Putin-Biden Moves to Avoid Conflict

WASHINGTON, December 9 (Sputnik) - The American establishment, intelligence services and mainstream media may work to undermine US-Russian efforts to avoid war in Ukraine, including initiatives emanating from this week's presidential virtual talks, analysts told Sputnik.

In their two hour virtual summit earlier this week, Russian President Vladimir Putin and US President Joe Biden exchanged warnings and red lines over the situation in Ukraine, but they also outlined some plans to address the crisis and acknowledged the importance of partnering on other issues such as strategic stability and Iran.

However, following these hopeful exchanges, the US threatened to lead efforts to isolate Russia from the global financial system, among other actions, should Moscow order an invasion of Ukraine.

SABOTEURS FROM WITHIN

Similar rhetoric preceded, and had been used to justify, other military excursions by the United States and its allies - such as the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011. However, these escalating threats, some experts say, do not reflect what is in the US best interests.

"I doubt that Biden really wants a further escalation of the conflict. His main target is China and it is not in his interest to push Russia further in an alliance with China," University of Louvain Professor of Political Philosophy Jean Bricmont told Sputnik. "But he faces a completely crazy US media plus of course some equally crazy Ukrainian nationalists."

Hence, Bricmont suspects there is a lot of posturing and "appeasing gestures" toward the media in Biden's war-mongering rhetoric. Moreover, he added, nobody can think seriously that the threat of further sanctions will influence Russia's policies.

Political commentator Professor John Walsh believes the hysterical hostility toward Russia reflected the dangerous attitudes of the "crazed and cruel" US elite. He said the United States wants a war with Russia, "but not just yet."

The US hopes, he added, that such a war would be limited to Europe and Russia with the United States protected by its oceans and nuclear deterrent. Although the US is not ready to deliberately start a conflict with Russia, Walsh warned that the extremist rhetoric from Washington already represented a dire threat to world peace.

World Beyond War Executive Director and Nobel Peace Prize nominee David Swanson said US media outlets were playing an irresponsible role in whipping up superpower tensions even while Putin and Biden were trying to reduce them. Swanson indicated that it was probably for the better that US media were not allowed in the room during the virtual talks.

"Given the belligerence of the US media the last time these two met, anything that keeps CNN, MSNBC, the Washington Post, etc., out of the room has got to increase our limited prospects for peace," Swanson said.

University of Rhode Island Professor of Political Science Nicolai Petro said while the rhetoric might be all well and good for American domestic politics it invariably leads to brinkmanship since it blinds Americans to the "red lines" other states regard as vital to their own survival.

"Just as they did during the Cold War, government officials like to pretend that they are in total control of the situation, when in fact it can spiral out of control at any moment," Petro told Sputnik. "Lots of political spectacle here, to be sure: Only this time with unforeseeable consequences for the audience."

A reduction in tensions, Petro added, depends less on what Biden and Putin agree on, and more on how the intelligence community (IC) responds, including what alleged assessments they choose to unveil.

"We shall see soon enough from the type of 'revelations' that they [IC] leak to the press," he said.

ELUSIVE SETTLEMENT

US and European leaders, the analysts pointed out, downplayed the continual expansion of NATO that violated assurances given to the Soviet Union and Russia after the Cold War.

Petro, however, said it was still not too late for Washington and its allies to seek a deal with Russia to resolve conflicts across Europe, Asia and the Middle East.

"The solution that suggests itself is to stop playing games, and to engage in sweeping and comprehensive negotiations," he said. "Our objective should be to reach a true post-Cold War settlement."

The first post-Cold War generation failed at this because it could not imagine an international order in which Russia might play a central role, Petro recalled.

"This is still the fundamental choice before us - either Russia will be on the inside, defending European security, or on the outside, undermining it," Petro said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

One Soldier Killed, Two More Injured in Rebel Attack in Colombia - Military Forces

MEXICO CITY, December 9 (Sputnik) - One soldier was killed and two others were wounded as a result of the attack organized in the Colombian department of Caqueta by rebels from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) guerilla group led by Gentil Duarte, the Military Forces of Colombia said on Friday.

"We pray for the eternal rest of our #HeroForever of the Joint Task Force OMEGA, who was assassinated by the GAO-r [Residual Organized. Armed Groups], the structure of the criminal Gentil Duarte, in the Urban Area of the municipality of Cartagena del Chaira, Caqueta, the incident also resulted in the injury of a non-commissioned officer and another marine," the military forces wrote on Twitter.

FARC was founded in 1964 as a military wing of a local communist party. It was supposed to fight for the creation of a "New Colombia", which was meant to be a society of social justice and equality. The Colombian government and the rebels signed a peace agreement in 2016 after lengthy peace negotiations.

Miguel Botache Santillana, nicknamed Gentil Duarte, is the head of several dissident guerilla groups of FARC and GAO-R in the south and east of Colombia. Duarte refused to join the peace process with the Colombian government. He continues to organize insurgency and drug trafficking at the head of the Southern Bloc of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia with about 2,700 members.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Belarus Denies NYT Report on Situation Surrounding Ryanair Plane Landing in Minsk

MINSK, December 9 (Sputnik) - The US article citing a Belarusian airport dispatcher who purportedly was on duty during the May emergency landing of a Ryanair plane in Minsk is "deliberately false," Artem Sikorsky, the head of aviation at the Belarusian Transport Ministry, said on Thursday.

The New York Times reported on Thursday, citing EU security forces, that the former Minsk airport operator fled to Poland and told the local authorities his own version of events which, the newspaper said, could be used by the Polish government to sue Belarus. The ex-dispatcher was cited as saying that the emergency landing operation was managed by a Belarusian State Security Committee officer, who was in the control room the entire time and constantly reported developments to someone on the phone.

"[The article] is intended for ordinary people who are not aware of the specifics of civil aviation," Sikorsky was quoted as saying by the state-run Belta news agency.

Sikorsky said that "this knowingly false information" appeared just when Minsk requested that Poland and the International Civil Aviation Organization provide monitoring data. The requested data included "the talks of the operator in Vilnius with the pilot and talks of the crew members in the cabin," according to the Belarusian official.

He suggested that the ex-dispatcher might have agreed to "some deals" under pressure, pointing out that the article contained only "the interpretation of his words by the Polish special services, but not his own words."

On May 23, Belarus diverted a Ryanair plane flying from Athens to Vilnius to Minsk over a bomb threat that turned out to be false. Two passengers aboard the aircraft, Roman Protasevich, co-founder of the Nexta Telegram channel (labeled as extremist in Belarus), and his girlfriend, Sofia Sapega, who is suspected of publishing the private data of Belarusian security services officers, were detained during the stopover at the airport.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Lithuanian Prime Minister Receives Letter of Resignation From Transport Minister (Adds background about issue behind resignation in paras 3-5)

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Lithuanian Transport Minister Marius Skuodis has resigned over a scandal involving the transit of Belaruskali fertilizers via the Baltic country, Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte said on Thursday.

"Yes, [I received the letter of resignation] from the transport minister," the prime minister told reporters, as quoted by the LRT broadcaster.

US sanctions on Minsk require that US allies curtail operations with Belarusian fertilizer producer Belaruskali by December 8. Lithuanian Railways, however, said it will continue carrying Belarusian fertilizers in December as they have already been paid for.

The head of Lithuanian Railways, Mantas Bartuska, told LRT that the company requires a legal decision of the national institutions to suspend operations with Belaruskali, otherwise it must fulfill international agreements. Bartuska pointed out that the company had consulted with the state treasury, which confirmed that the actions of Lithuanian Railways were legally correct. He noted that US sanctions cannot be the reason for the railway to suspend agreements on a unilateral basis.

Bartuska confirmed that the Lithuanian foreign minister and the minister of transport and communications were informed of the situation. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis denied this information.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

New Zealand Police Postpone Use of Facial Recognition Technology - Reports

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - New Zealand Police have postponed the implementation of live facial recognition technology (FRT) until its implications are fully studied and understood, media reported on Thursday.

"Police will not use live automated FRT until the impact from a security, privacy, legal, and ethical perspective is fully understood," New Zealand Deputy Chief Executive Mark Evans was quoted as saying by Radio NZ.

The use of the technology is halted following a police-commissioned review conducted by two independent law critics, Nessa Lynch and Andrew Chen, who had found "no evidence" of the police utilizing the technology live, but warned that "monitoring of protests or community events with live automated FRT could have a chilling effect on rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly."

FRT is the technology using an image of a person's face to provide the identification of that person.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

EMA Calls on Vaccine Makers to Share Data on Omicron Tests

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The European Medicines Agency (EMA) requires COVID-19 vaccine developers to share data of their tests on determining neutralization level against the Omicron coronavirus variant, Dr. Marco Cavaleri, the head of Biological Health Threats and Vaccines Strategy at the EMA, said on Thursday.

"The companies producing the vaccines are required to submit the results of their laboratory tests to determine the level of neutralization of omicron and discuss options with us," Cavaleri said during a briefing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

France to Initiate Nationwide Disaster 'White Plan' Amid 5th COVID Wave - Health Minister

PARIS, December 9 (Sputnik) - France will put its health care system on a so-called "white plan" emergency footing in the coming days to mobilize resources as the country battles the fifth wave of the pandemic, Health Minister Olivier Veran said on Thursday.

The capital region of Ile-de-France became the seventh department to announce the move on Wednesday after the COVID-19 incidence rate rose to 446 cases per 100,000 inhabitants.

"The white plan will probably be introduced nationwide in the coming days because it has been adopted in a region after region," Veran told the France 2 television channel.

The measure will mobilize healthcare workers, including by tapping the private sector, and increase the number of emergency care beds available to coronavirus patients. Veran said a person was admitted to ICU every six minutes, down from 10 minutes a week ago.

The minister ruled out new coronavirus restrictions on public life, saying citizens knew what measures protect them from the infection. The French government will instead focus on vaccination and administering booster doses, he added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Heavy Snowfall Causes Power Outages in Austria - Reports

VIENNA, December 9 (Sputnik) - Heavy snowfall hit many parts of Austria on Thursday night, causing power outages and road accidents in several parts of the country, national media reported on Thursday.

The Austrian Meteorological Center on Thursday morning announced red warning levels in most parts of the country. According to the Kurier newspaper, the heaviest snowfall was in Vorarlberg, Tyrol and Carinthia Regions with up to 20 inches of snow. In the eastern and central parts of the country, snow may continue to fall in the second half of Thursday.

In Carinthia, where between 10 and 15 inches of snow fell over the past night, several hundred households were affected by power outages in the areas of Sankt Veit an der Glan, Spittal an der Drau and Villach-Land, resulting in several road accidents, Kurier reported.

According to the newspaper, the Austrian capital city of Vienna was also effected by the snowfall with 4 inches of snow during the night, and the same amount is predicted by noon. More than 300 vehicles and 1,400 people are involved in snow removal. Some parts of Austria are experiencing the worst snowfall in almost ten years.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Greek Seamen to Start 48-Hour Strike Over Salaries on Friday - Reports

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The Panhellenic Seamen's Federation (PNO), the union of Greek maritime workers, will start a 48-hour nationwide strike for all categories of ships on December 10 to try to negotiate better pay and working conditions, Greek media reported on Thursday.

The Kathimerini newspaper said, citing the PNO, that the industrial action will start at 00:01 local time on Friday (22:01 GMT on Thursday) and continue until Saturday midnight.

Greek maritime workers organized the strike to force employers to increase wages and salaries in collective agreements, as well as to address the problems related to social insurance, welfare payments, education and unemployment, according to the report.

Seamen have complained that employers impede the creation of workers' unions while refusing to increase wages.

Greek port and ferry services are expected to be heavily disrupted by the strike.

The strike may be extended if negotiations between employers and workers come to nothing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Moscow Says Plans to Send New Batch of Humanitarian Aid to Afghanistan Until End of Year

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia intends to send another batch of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan by the end of the year, Russian foreign ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Thursday.

The first batch was delivered in November, the second one in early December.

"Another batch of humanitarian aid is planned to be sent by the end of the year," Zakharova told a briefing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Kiev Deploys Heavy Weapons Near Donbas Contact Line - Russian Foreign Ministry

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Kiev is deploying heavy weapons near the contact line in Donbas, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) confirms it, Maria Zakharova, the Russian Foreign Ministry's spokeswoman, said on Thursday.

"The OSCE Special Monitoring Mission records the transfer of heavy weapons by Kiev to the east of the country, including large-caliber artillery and armored vehicles, the use of drones continues," Zakharova told a briefing.

The spokeswoman added that the West attempts to shift the responsibility for conflict resolution on Moscow but Russia only acts as a mediator.

"Amid existence of nationalist movements [in Ukraine], the information, shared by Prosecutor General's Office of Ukraine itself, that there are 5 million units of unaccounted firearms in circulation in the country, is really alarming," Zakharova added.

The spokeswoman also said that the European Union has joined the process of militarization of Ukraine.

"Recently, the European Union joined the process of militarizing Ukraine. On December 2, the EU Council decided to allocate 31 million euros for military-technical assistance to the Ukrainian Air Force. This technical assistance does not contribute to peace in Donbas in any way. Negotiations on a peaceful settlement have actually reached an impasse amid this development," Zakharova added.

Russia calls on Ukraine "to stop sabotaging Minsk agreements" and expects the West to encourage Kiev to implement them, the spokeswoman said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Nearly 100 Former British Council Staff Still Hiding in Afghanistan – Reports

LONDON, December 9 (Sputnik) - Nearly 100 former Afghan employees of the British Council are still in hiding in Afghanistan after having been refused the right to emigrate to the UK, The Guardian newspaper reported on Thursday.

According to the media outlet, which cited former British Council Afghanistan English manager Joseph Seaton as a source, the staff employed to teach British values and the English language had applied to go to the UK under the government's Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy set up earlier this year, but their applications remain unprocessed and without response months after they were submitted.

Seaton claimed that those left behind are living in constant fear of their lives as they were hired by the British government to teach values such as diversity, inclusion and equality, which the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) oppose.

The report comes after a former British diplomat turned whistleblower said that the government's chaotic evacuation from Afghanistan led to people being left to die at the hands of the Taliban.

In a written statement to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee, Raphael Marshall, who was deployed by the Foreign Ministry in Kabul, wrote that "fewer than 5%" of the 75,000 to 150,000 Afghans who applied for evacuation before the Taliban takeover in August received help from the British government.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Polish Border Guard Says Illegal Migrants Continue Attempts to Cross From Belarus

WARSAW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Illegal migrants are continuing their attempts to storm the Polish border with Belarus, the Polish Border Guard said on Thursday.

"Yesterday 80 attempts to illegally cross the Polish-Belarusian border were recorded. Law enforcement officers issued orders to expel 23 people from the territory of Poland. In the guarded areas of Dubicze Cerkiewne and Czeremcha, large groups cut through the border," the Border Guard said on Twitter.

The Polish defense ministry posted a video showing unknown people shouting and throwing various objects in the direction of Polish soldiers guarding the border.

Police in the Podlaskie Voivodeship region said a 35-year-old Ukrainian citizen was arrested after he was spotted driving nine Iraqis who entered Poland illegally.

Since the beginning of the year, the Polish border guard has recorded about 40,000 attempts of illegal border crossing, which is several dozen times more than last year. The monthly number grew from 3,500 in August to 7,700 in September and 17,400 in October, before decreasing to 8,900 in November.

Thousands of migrants have gathered at Belarus' borders with Poland and other neighboring EU countries since early summer. Poland enhanced its border controls, mobilized extra military and began construction of border fences. The Polish authorities accuse Belarus of manufacturing the crisis, which Minsk has denied.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ethiopia Will Be on Agenda of Foreign Affairs Council on Monday - EU Spokesperson

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The EU will hold a meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council on December 13, with the agenda including the situation in Ethiopia, European Commission spokeswoman for foreign affairs and security policy Nabila Massrali said on Thursday.

"There is a Foreign Affairs Council happening on Monday, the situation on Ethiopia will be discussed during the Foreign Affairs Council, and we discussed it also at the last Foreign Affairs Council, where the members have exchanged views to address also the outcomes of the UN human rights reports. Of course, we remain ready to use all of our foreign policy tools, including restrictive measures, to promote peace and human rights law and help the end of the conflict," Massrali told a briefing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

All Belarusian Banks Connected to Russia's Alternative to SWIFT Payment System - Regulator

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - All banks in Belarus have connected to the Financial Messaging System of the Bank of Russia (SPFS), developed by the country's regulator as an alternative to the SWIFT interbank payment system to mitigate possible disconnection risks, SPFS department head Denis Baryshkov said on Thursday.

"To date, all Belarusian banks are connected to the Financial Messaging System," Baryshkov said at the Russian payments forum.

SWIFT is an international bank information transfer and payment system used by over 11,000 largest organizations in almost all countries. Russia reportedly could be cut off from SWIFT as a part of Western sanctions against Moscow. On Monday, the Biden administration said it was reviewing the possibility of disconnecting Russia from the payment system to deter Moscow from "invading" Ukraine.

In response, Russia has been developing its own financial messaging system in order to prevent risks caused by the possible disconnection of its banks from SWIFT. Currently, 335 users are connected to the SPFS, including 38 foreign organizations from nine countries, according to Baryshkov.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Putin to Participate in Supreme Eurasian Economic Council Meeting on Friday - Kremlin

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin will participate in the meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council which will be held online on Friday, the Kremlin said on Thursday.

"On December 10, Russian President Putin will take part in a meeting of the Supreme Eurasian Economic Council, which will be held in a videoconference format," the Kremlin said in a statement.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UK Defense Ministry Says Will Send 140 Military Engineers to Poland Over Migration Crisis

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The UK will send 140 military engineers to Poland to help the country suffering from irregular migration at the border with Belarus," the Ministry of Defence said on Thursday,

"[A total of] 140 military engineers are deploying to Poland to provide specialist support in response to the pressures from irregular migration at the Belarus border," the ministry said in a statement.

"Specialists from the 32 Engineer Regiment, the Royal Engineers, will provide bilateral support to Poland, a NATO ally and key European partner. Personnel will support Polish troops with specific engineering tasks along the border including infrastructure support and repairing access roads, as well as planning support," the statement read.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Lithuanian Prime Minister Receives Letter of Resignation From Transport Minister
MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Lithuanian Transport Minister Marius Skuodis has resigned over the scandal with the transit of Belaruskali fertilizers via the Baltic country, Prime Minister Ingrida Simonyte said on Thursday.

"Yes, [I received the letter of resignation] from the transport minister," the prime minister told reporters, as quoted by the LRT broadcaster.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Ukraine Plans to Reduce National Debt to 47% of GDP by 2024 From Current 57% - Cabinet

KIEV, December 9 (Sputnik) - The Ukrainian cabinet approved on Thursday a strategy for national debt management, according to which it is planned to reduce it to 47% of GDP in 2024 from the current 57%, as broadcast on the cabinet's YouTube channel.

"The key point of the strategy is a decrease in public debt in 2024, it should not exceed 47% of GDP, while at the end of 2021 it is expected to amount to 57% of GDP," Prime Minister Denis Shmyhal told a cabinet meeting.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UK Conservative Party Fined for Failing to Report Donation Used to Remodel Johnson's Home

LONDON, December 9 (Sputnik) – The UK Electoral Commission on Thursday announced that the ruling Conservative Party has been fined £17,800 (\$23,472) for failing to "accurately report" a donation which was largely used last year to finance the refurbishment of the Downing Street apartment where Prime Minister Boris Johnson lives with his family.

"Our investigation into the Conservative Party found that the laws around the reporting and recording of donations were not followed," Louise Edwards, director of Regulation at the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK, said.

The commission said that the party failed to fully report a donation of £67,801.72 (\$90,000) made by a private donor in October 2020, a large part of which was connected to the costs of refurbishment to Johnson's apartment.

The full value of the donation was not reported as required in the party's Q4 2020 donation report, the election watchdog said.

In April, before the investigation began, Johnson claimed that he had paid for the revamp of his Downing Street residence from his own pocket.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UK Labour Party Records Largest Lead Over Ruling Conservatives Since 2019 – Poll

LONDON, December 9 (Sputnik) – The UK Labour Party has recorded its largest lead over the ruling Conservative Party since 2019 general election, largely because most voters seem to take a serious view of allegations that Prime Minister Boris Johnson's staff held a Christmas party in Number 10 Downing Street last year, at a time when COVID-19 restrictions forbade such gatherings, according to data from poll released on Thursday.

The survey conducted by the global market research and political polling company Redfield & Wilton Strategies showed that 38% of the people sampled on Wednesday said they would vote Labour if there was an election, compared to 34% who would vote Conservative.

"The poll's results mark Labour's third lead in the past month and its largest lead since our firm began tracking voting intention following the 2019 General Elections," Redfield & Wilton said.

The polling firm claimed that the scandal surrounding the alleged Christmas party at Downing Street last year has taken its toll on the support for the Conservative Party, as 69% of respondents said the Metropolitan Police should investigate the allegations and a further 63% believed Johnson should resign if it is confirmed that the gathering took place.

On Wednesday, the prime minister "unreservedly" apologized in Parliament after a video clip showed his staff joking about the alleged Christmas party and pledged to take disciplinary action if rules were broken, after stressing that he had been repeatedly assured that no such gatherings had taken place.

Later on, Johnson's former spokesperson Allegra Stratton, who is one of the persons seen joking in the leaked footage, announced her resignation and offered her "profound apologies."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Hong Kong Scientists Develop World's First Anti-Coronavirus Steel - Report

BEIJING, December 9 (Sputnik) - Scientists from the University of Hong Kong have developed the world's first stainless steel capable of eliminating the SARS-Cov-2 virus on its surface, the university's press office said Thursday.

The scientists managed to produce antiviral properties by adjusting the chemical composition and microstructure of regular stainless steel, according to the project's leader, professor Mingxin Huang.

"The project team... has made significant breakthroughs in producing the first anti-COVID-19 stainless steel that kills the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-Cov-2) on its surface. The anti-COVID-19 stainless steel can also inactivate the H1N1 virus and E.coli on its surface," the statement reads.

Regular stainless steel is widely used in public places, but it does not have antibacterial properties. The new alloy has much higher copper content, which facilitates the rapid inactivation of the virus and gives it antibacterial properties, the research said.

The team has filed a patent for the findings and is in negotiations with industrial partners for the pilot production of public products made from the new material, such as lift buttons, doorknobs, and handrails, the university said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Food Crisis in Mali Leaves 1.2 Million People Facing Hunger - NGOs

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The severity of the food crisis in Mali has increased threefold over the year, with 1.2 million people now facing hunger, the highest since 2012, a coalition of 22 humanitarian organizations working in the country said on Thursday.

"Food security is threatened on many fronts in Mali. The situation will go from bad to worse for millions of vulnerable people if we do not act now, with projections indicating a further 58% increase in the number of food insecure people next year," ReliefWeb quotes Adeline Benita, Director of the Humanitarian Working Group of the International NGOs Forum in Mali (FONGIM), as saying.

Mali has suffered from devastating droughts which have led to the loss of more than 868 square miles of fields, compelling 400,000 people to flee their homes, according to the NGOs. Ten years of conflict have severely weakened the country, such as by strengthening the influence of militias, who have prevented families from receiving aid or accessing their livestock, fields, grazing areas, and surrounding markets. The food crisis has deteriorated due to a lack of commitment from donor states to provide for emerging needs.

The humanitarian response in Mali has received only 38% of the funds needed for the year (\$214 million of the \$562 million).

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

New Zealand Parliament Passes Bill Easing Change of Sex on Birth Certificates

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - New Zealand's parliament has unanimously adopted a law allowing for changing one's sex on a birth certificate without court intervention, lawmaker and Minister of Internal Affairs Jan Tinetti said on Thursday.

The self-identification bill was introduced in 2017.

"The passing of the Births, Deaths, Marriages, and Relationship Registration (BDMRR) Bill brings with it a more accessible and inclusive process for people to change the sex recorded on their birth certificate," Tinetti, who was in charge of the bill, wrote on Facebook.

The BDMRR facilitates the amendment of sex on birth certificates by ruling out the disclosure of personal medical information before the Family Court as previously. The former practice required those seeking to amend their sex in documents to present evidence of relevant medical treatment to confirm their gender identity.

According to Tinetti, the new law will "make a real difference" for representatives of sexual minorities, including the transgender, non-binary and intersex communities, among others.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

So Far No Clarity on Format of Russia-US talks on Key Issues - Kremlin

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - So far there is no clarity on the format of negotiations between Russia and the United States on key issues and on who will represent both sides, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

Peskov mentioned that Russia is focusing on preparing the main points of its position in negotiations with the US.

"So far there is no clear configuration of this structure, there is still no clear understanding of who exactly will be involved in the negotiations, therefore, these are all issues that required clarification in the near future," Peskov told reporters.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Putin, Biden Note Need to Coordinate Important Issues With NATO Members - Kremlin

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin, US President Joe Biden pointed to the need to coordinate important issues with NATO member states, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday, commenting on the US leader's statement about meeting of Russia with the US and other NATO members.

"Indeed, they mentioned the topic related to other NATO members during a telephone conversation, and, in fact, both sides noted the need to agree on such conceptually important issues, including those that were discussed, but with other countries too," Peskov told reporters.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Mirror Response Envisioned to Any Sanctions - Kremlin

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia always responds in a similar and asymmetric way to restrictive measures, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday, when asked how will Moscow act if Washington imposes new sanctions.

"Response to any sanctions, naturally, is in a similar way and asymmetric, in a way to protect our own interests," Peskov told reporters.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia to Launch Third Angara-A5 Heavy Rocket on December 23

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russian heavy-lift rocket Angara-A5 will be launched from the Plesetsk Cosmodrome in the country's northwest on December 23, marking the third of 17 such launches scheduled to take place before 2028, a source in the rocket and space industry told Sputnik.

"The launch of Angara-A5 will take place on December 23 at 18:00 [Moscow time, 15:00 GMT]," the source said.

The reserve date for the launch is December 24, the source added.

The first two launches of the Angara heavy rocket took place at the Plesetsk Cosmodrome on December 23, 2014 and December 14, 2020 .

In October, the Russian Defense Ministry announced plans to carry out 17 launches of the new Angara-A5 heavy-lift rocket from the Plesetsk Cosmodrome before the end of 2027, including one in 2021 and two in 2022.

Angara is a family of Russian environmentally friendly carrier rockets ranging from light to heavy class.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Italy's Antitrust Agency Fines Amazon \$1.3Bln for Abusing Dominant Market Position

ROME, December 9 (Sputnik) - The Italian Competition Authority, a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization, fined the online retailer Amazon 1.1 billion euros (\$1.3 billion) for abusing its dominant market position, the authority said on Thursday.

"The Authority imposed behavioural measures on Amazon that will be subject to review by a monitoring trustee. The Authority fined Amazon Europe Core S.à r.l., Amazon Services Europe S.à r.l., Amazon EU S.à r.l., Amazon Italia Services S.r.l. e Amazon Italia Logistica S.r.l. € 1,128

billion for a breach of Art. 102 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union," the organization said in a statement.

According to the regulator, Amazon took advantage of its dominant position in the Italian market, which allowed it to develop and promote its own logistics services. This allegedly damaged competitors in the market for e-commerce logistics services.

Italy's antitrust body believes that Amazon's subsidiaries linked its own logistics services to the access to special benefits essential for gaining visibility. Such benefits include the Prime loyalty program, which makes it easier to sell to regular consumers who buy goods by subscription, the authority said. The Prime program also allows sellers to participate in Amazon's sales and increases the likelihood that their specific offers will be selected as featured.

That way, Amazon allegedly prevented third-party sellers from associating the Prime label with offerings not covered by its own logistics service.

In addition, sellers using Amazon's logistics services are not subject to its rating system, a violation of which can lead to a freeze of non-compliant sellers' profile, the regulator added.

"In so doing, Amazon harmed competing e-commerce logistics operators, preventing them from presenting themselves to online sellers as providers of services of comparable quality to Amazon's FBA and thus capable of ensuring high visibility on Amazon.it. Such a conduct widened the gap between Amazon's market power and its competitors' also in the delivery of e-commerce parcels," the statement said.

According to the authority, the large amount of the fine was chosen due to the duration of the abusive practices and the size of the Amazon group itself. Remedying of violations will take place under special supervision of the antitrust service.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Record Number of Media Workers Jailed Worldwide in 2021 - Report

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The number of journalists arrested worldwide reached 293 this year, setting a new record when compared to previous years, the US-based international non-governmental organization The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) said on Thursday. "The number of journalists behind bars reached a record high in 2021, with 293 behind bars as political upheaval and media crackdowns reflect increasing intolerance for independent reporting around the world," CPJ said in the report published on its website.

The top three countries where journalists are most likely to face jail time are China, with 50 journalists behind bars amid preparations to host Winter Olympics in February 2022, Myanmar, with 26 journalists jailed in the wake of February 1 military coup, and Egypt, whose authorities imprisoned 25 journalists this year. The organization also notes that in addition to imprisonment, targeted killings of journalists persists with Mexico ranking among the deadliest.

"This is the sixth year in a row that CPJ has documented record numbers of journalists imprisoned around the world. The number reflects two inextricable challenges — governments are determined to control and manage information, and they are increasingly brazen in their efforts to do so," CPJ Executive Director, Joel Simon said.

Despite the gloomy findings, CPJ said it continues to tackle illegal censorship practices and stressed that the organization helped free at least 100 journalists around the world this year.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Philippine Supreme Court Rules Parts of Anti-Terrorism Law Unconstitutional
MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The Philippine Supreme Court has recognized two parts of the country's Anti-Terrorism Act, also known as Republic Act 11479, as being in breach of constitution because of violating freedom of expression, Philippine media reported on Wednesday.

The court ruled that the two unconstitutional parts were "overbroad and violative of freedom of expression," the Inquirer newspaper said, citing an advisory by the court's Public Information Office.

Nevertheless, the main and most contested part of the Act — broader definition of terrorism and longer detention without warrant — was found not unconstitutional by the court, the advisory was cited as saying.

Since the Anti-Terrorism Act was signed by Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte in July 2020, the Supreme Court has received 37 petitions requesting legal scrutiny on compliance with constitution. Local and international rights activists argued that the law's "anti-democratic provisions" violated at least 15 fundamental human rights.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia, US Yet to Appoint Representatives to Work Out Putin-Biden Talks Decisions- Ryabkov

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia and the US have not yet appointed representatives to work out the decisions of the recent virtual talks between the countries' leaders, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Thursday.

"We did not so far," Ryabkov told reporters.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

NATO Pledges to Help Estonia if Security Crisis Escalates in Region

HELSINKI, December 9 (Sputnik) - NATO is ready to defend Estonia and other allies in the event of an escalation of the volatile security situation in the region, the press service of the Estonian Defense Ministry said on Thursday, citing the US European Command (EUCOM).

EUCOM Commander Gen. Tod Wolters arrived in Tallinn earlier in the week and met on Wednesday with Estonian Defense Minister Kalle Laanet to discuss security issues in the region. In an interview with Bloomberg, Laanet said that the escalation of the situation around Ukraine is causing the biggest rise of tensions in the Baltic countries for the past 30 years. "We are witnessing the most volatile security crisis on NATO's eastern borders in decades. With Russia's continuing military build-up in and around Ukraine, supplemented by Belarussian hybrid attack against our regional Allies, it is necessary to demonstrate the Alliance's readiness to defend any Ally," the ministry quoted Laanet in a statement.

Wolters, in turn, expressed NATO's readiness "to defend each and every Ally" and noted that the bloc's Enhanced Forward Presence and the Baltic Air Policing mission in Estonia are "a clear demonstration of Allied commitment and solidarity," according to the ministry.

The Enhanced Forward Presence is the Alliance's program to increase its presence in Eastern Europe to counter Russia. The allied forces are stationed on the territory of the four eastern NATO members — Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland. Estonia has hosted 1,200 NATO combat troops since April 2017.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Putin Thanks Merkel for Many Years of Cooperation - Kremlin

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin held a phone conversation with former German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Thursday and thanked her for many years of cooperation, the Kremlin said.

According to the Kremlin, Merkel expressed gratitude to Putin for joint work and "wished him success in establishing a dialogue" with new German Chancellor Olaf Scholz.

"Vladimir Putin warmly thanked Angela Merkel for many years of fruitful cooperation, emphasizing her significant contribution to the development of Russian-German relations ... Vladimir Putin also said that Russia will be always happy to host Angela Merkel," the Kremlin said in a statement.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Russia, US to Work Out Format of Security Guarantees Meeting - Russian Diplomat

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Russia and the US will develop a format to discuss security guarantees for the Russian "red lines," Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Thursday.

"I proceed from the fact that the formats for continuing the discussion of those red lines that our leadership has been talking about in recent days, as well as the receipt by Russia of the most

reliable legal legally binding security guarantees, are subject to further discussion," Ryabkov told reporters.

There is a whole series of platforms where such issues can be discussed, he said.

"Nothing has been decided yet. The US announcements, which are made unilaterally, do not create a new reality for us, they are simply a reminder that these issues have to be closely tackled," the diplomat added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Misleads Public on Progress in Resolving Diplomatic Crisis With Russia - Moscow

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - The United States deliberately misleads the public when it says that there is progress in resolving the Washington-Moscow diplomatic crisis, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Thursday.

"The fragmentary aspects of the voluminous visa dossier, on which it is possible to find mutual understanding, do not change the overall very negative and increasingly alarming picture. My conclusion: the State Department has been deliberately misleading the public of the Russian Federation and the United States for several days, pretending that there has been some serious progress," Ryabkov told reporters.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Moscow Not Aware of Biden's Proposal to Hold Meeting on Ukraine - Russian Diplomat

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Moscow is not aware of the idea of US President Joe Biden to hold a meeting on Ukraine, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Thursday.

"I do not know about any meeting. I saw the US president's remark on the matter," Ryabkov told reporters.

Biden's remarks on some meetings on Ukraine between the representatives of the US, NATO states and Russia are unilateral, the Russian diplomat added.

The US president told reporters on Wednesday that a meeting of the US and leading NATO countries with Russia is being prepared. Biden said a high-level meeting of the US and at least four major NATO allies with Russia would be announced by Friday.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Says Ready to Resign, Awaits Prime Minister's Decision

MOSCOW, December 9 (Sputnik) - Lithuanian Foreign Minister Gabrielius Landsbergis said on Thursday that he is ready to resign over the scandal with the ongoing transit of Belaruskali fertilizers via the Baltic country.

"Last night I told the prime minister that I was ready to resign and waiting for the decision ... I understand that there is reputational damage to Lithuania," Landsbergis told reporters, as quoted by the LRT broadcaster.