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1/20/23 Friday

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‘Toadzilla’: Australian Rangers Euthanize ‘Monster’ Cane Toad as Big as a ChildBy
By - Fantine Gardinier

Cane toads have been widely introduced in plantations in the Pacific and Caribbean to control pests, especially around the sugar cane stalks that give them their name. However, they have become invasive species and authorities who once championed them are now rushing to eradicate them.
A massive cane toad was recently found by park rangers in the northern Australian state of Queensland, that may have broken records with its size.
According to local media reports, rangers in Queensland's Conway National Park stumbled upon a 6-pound cane toad last week while investigating a snake they had spotted.
"I reached down and grabbed the cane toad and couldn't believe how big and heavy it was," said ranger Kylee Gray.
"A cane toad that size will eat anything it can fit into its mouth, and that includes insects, reptiles, and small mammals," she said, adding that its size meant it was likely a female. Female cane toads can lay tens of thousands of eggs at a time.
Other media have dubbed the creature “Toadzilla.”
Gray said it had clearly “been around a long time," noting they can live up to 15 years in the wild.
However, rather than let the titanic toad go on its way, the rangers were forced to euthanize it.
In its native habitat in Central and South America, the toxic toad has numerous predators in the air, on land and in the water that are able to tolerate or avoid its poisons. However, in Australia and on various Pacific islands, few creatures can kill it, and many that mistake it for other species of toad and prey upon it subsequently die.
Researchers have tracked the precipitous decline of the northern quoll and Mertens water monitor in Queensland, associated with the spread of the cane toad, which was brought there in 1935.

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Who is Chris Hipkins, New Zealand's Next Prime Minister?
By - Fantine Gardinier

The center-left Labor Party holds a majority in New Zealand’s Parliament, at least until the general election in October 2023. Regardless of the results, Labor is likely to remain a potent force in the legislature, as it is twice as large as the National Party, the next-biggest faction.

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After Labor Party leader Jacinda Ardern announced she was resigning as head of New Zealand's government earlier this week, only one candidate was nominated by Labor to replace her: Chris Hipkins, who holds several portfolios in Ardern's government.

Labor leadership nominated Hipkins on Friday to replace Ardern once she steps down, although the party caucus still has to formally approve his nomination in a vote scheduled for Sunday afternoon.

Hipkins is presently the minister for education and for police, although he rose to political prominence when, as Health Minister, he took over the country's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. In November of that year, Ardern's government created a separate Ministry for COVID-19 Response with Hipkins at the helm.

As COVID-19 minister, Hipkins led the country's strict lockdown plan, which succeeded for a time at sparing the island nation from the mass outbreak and death seen in other nations. As of January 20, the country had seen just 2,393 deaths out of a population of 5.1 million. However, the lockdowns also drew criticism, and Hipkins later admitted they had lasted for longer than was necessary.

At 44 years old, Hipkins has been a Labor MP since 2008, representing Remutaka, an electorate in the Wellington suburbs. He has also served as leader of the House, an archaic parliamentary position that manages government business in the lower parliamentary chamber. He was previously an adviser to Labor MPs Trevor Mallard and Helen Clark, the latter of whom was prime minister from 1999 to 2008.

According to media reports, Hipkins was selected over other candidatesbecause he was believed to be able to win the most support of other Labor MPs. However, it remains to be seen how well he can govern: the UK's ruling Conservative Party has run through a series of prime ministers in recent months, as one government after another was beset by scandal and dissent.

Ardern said she would leave office by February 7, about eight months before the scheduled general election. She announced her imminent resignation earlier this week, saying she no longer has "what it takes" to commit to the job. She has been prime minister since 2017, but made international headlines the following year when she became the world's second elected head of government to give birth while in office, after former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in 1990.

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China Replacing Aging Fighter Jets With Advanced J-16s in All Five Theater Commands, Report Says

By- Fantine Gardinier

The People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) has stepped up its efforts to replace aging fighter jets with top-of-the-line J-16 fighters, according to reports in Chinese media. The advanced aircraft has most recently been deployed in Tibet and Xinjiang, meaning all five PLA commands are now using it.

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One of China's newest fighters is being rapidly integrated into front-line air forces, allowing the PLAAF to phase out older aircraft like the J-7 and J-8, both of which are based on updated versions of the 1950s-era MiG-21, built by the Soviet Union.

"Chinese old generation military aircraft like the J-7 and J-8 are not enough to deal with the increasing security challenges around its periphery," Fu Qianshao, a retired PLAAF equipment specialist, was quoted as saying in Chinese media on Friday.

"Aircraft replacement is not taking place just in the western border, as China needs more long-range advanced warplanes to deal with increasing provocations from the United States and its allies in the South and East China seas, where the PLA's key strategic focuses are," he added.

The J-16 is one of numerous aircraft derived from the Sukhoi Su-27, many of which form the backbone of the Chinese air forces. The J-16 is the newest member of the family, entering service in 2016 with a host of advanced equipment, including AESA radar, long-range missiles, and in the newest D-variant, electronic warfare capabilities. It can serve as both a strike aircraft and an interceptor.

Although it is considered a 4.5-generation aircraft, the J-16 is intended to be a key partner for China's fifth-generation J-20, a true stealth aircraft, in future air operations. The PLAAF has already built at least 245 J-16s, with reported intentions to obtain at least 300 to meet anticipated threats from the United States and its allies in the region.

As such, China's J-16 is easily the equal of the US' F-15 Eagle fighter jets and could pose a threat to stealth aircraft like the F-35, too.

The J-16 has been spotted across China's eastern commands in recent years, including near Taiwan, but the most recent news shows the strike jet being deployed in the west, where Chinese troops have been engaged in violent exchanges with Indian forces in the high-altitude Ladakh region along their ill-defined border.

In the event of a shooting war with India, the J-16 would find itself facing advanced aircraft from the US, Europe, and even Russia, including Sukhoi Su-30s, Dassault Rafales, Lockheed Martin F-16s, and the indigenously-designed HAL Tejas. India has also incorporated Russia's advanced S-400 air defense system into its military, which would be a potent threat to the J-16.

"Increased air activity by [the] Chinese is being monitored. We have increased the presence of radars and air defense networks. Appropriate non-escalator measures have been taken in time," Indian Air Force Chief V. R. Chaudhary told Indian media in October, adding that the IAF was "expediting the operationalization of recently inducted systems," including S-400 and Rafale.

A similar dynamic is in play in the South and East China Seas, where US military forces have stepped up their presence in recent years amid claims Beijing has expansionist ambitions in the region. Washington has in particular begun selling new jets to Taiwan, an autonomous island Beijing considers to be a Chinese province in rebellion, as well as upgrading their existing fleet of F-16s. The PLAAF has used J-16s for naval patrols and to provide other aircraft, including their powerful Xi'an H-6 bombers, with a screen of electronic jamming during their patrols across the waterways.

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Macron Unveils Massive Military Expansion Plan Amid Nationwide Strike Over Neoliberal Budget Cuts
By - Fantine Gardinier

French President Emmanuel Macron revealed his plans to dramatically increase military and intelligence spending on Friday, saying French forces need to "reform and transform" amid the conflict in Ukraine, where NATO forces are supporting the Ukrainians. The announcement comes as 1 million people march against de facto budget cuts.

Macron's proposed new defense budget size for the 2024-2030 period, €413 billion, is 40% larger than the previous 2019-2025 period budget of €295 billion.

"The law on military programming (LPM) for 2024-2030 reflects the efforts made by the state to strengthen its army. They are proportionate to current dangers, which are significant. In 2024-2030, the government will allocate €400 billion to the defense ministry," Macron said in an address to the army at the Mont-de-Marsan airbase in southwestern France.

"France has and will have armies ready for the challenges of the century," he added.

He explained that part of the spending will go toward doubling the power of French air defense systems, and that the French intelligence budget would increase by 60% by 2030. He added that Paris would continue to modernize its nuclear forces, spending €5.6 billion on that effort in 2023 alone.

The French leader said the changes were necessary because of the conflict in Ukraine, which is nearly 11 months old. The NATO nations have backed Kiev, which seeks to join the alliance, funneling them vast amounts of money and military equipment to support their fight against Russian forces.

"It is necessary to pay special attention to the speed of response and build up the power of our army, because we do not choose the conflicts in which we might have to participate," Macron said.

Indeed, Macron's words came just hours after US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin urged American allies to "dig even deeper" and put up more funding for Ukraine.

Paris has thrown much of its weight behind supporting Kiev's war effort, including sending rockets, AMX-10 infantry fighting vehicles, and other weapons. In October, Macron unveiled a special €200 million fund from which Kiev would be able to buy military equipment from French defense contractors.

Most recently, Paris has publicly weighed sending Leclerc main battle tanks to Ukraine as other NATO allies make similar considerations.

Russia began its special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022 in response to a dramatic escalation of violence in the Donbass region, where since 2014, Russian-speaking minorities have resisted attacks by neo-Nazi groups integrated into the Ukrainian military. Its goals include promises Ukraine will never join NATO or allow NATO to position military equipment on Russia's borders.

Budget Hikes Amid Budget Cuts

Macron's announcement comes amid a new wave of mass demonstrations in France, where 1 million marched on strike on Friday against a proposed plan to increase the retirement age to 64.

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According to French media, eight of the country's largest unions took part in the strike, which included 40% of primary school teachers and one-third of high school teachers. Transportation networks also shut down as workers walked out on strike.

Macron has said the de facto budget cut is necessary because of a deficit in the pension fund. However, in October, his government used a special mechanism to shut down debate and ram a new budget through parliament, blocking attempts by opposition parties to add new taxes targeting corporations profiting massively off rising inflation and energy costs.
A former banker, Macron has been in office since 2017, and most of his tenure has been wracked by mass protests against his neoliberal budget plans, including the massive "Yellow Vest" demonstrations by working-class French people.

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Supreme Court Marshal: 'No Credible Leads' Any Justices Behind Dobbs Decision Leak
By - Fantine Gardinier

While the leak of a landmark ruling overturning federal abortion rights in the US was unprecedented and provoked nationwide mass protests, the justices maintained their course and published the draft, essentially unaltered, weeks later.
The head of security for the US Supreme Court said on Friday the service had no reason to suspect any of the Supreme Court Justices were behind the May 2022 leaking of a draft majority opinion to the press.
"During the course of the investigation, I spoke with each of the justices, several on multiple occasions," US Supreme Court Marshal Gail Curley said in a statement. "The justices actively cooperated in this iterative process, asking questions and answering mine. I followed up on all credible leads, none of which implicated the justices or their spouses. On this basis, I did not believe that it was necessary to ask the justices to sign sworn affidavits."
Her statement comes a day after saying all their leads had come up cold.
"It is not possible to determine the identity of any individual who may have disclosed the document or how the draft opinion ended up with Politico," the marshal said on Thursday. "No one confessed to publicly disclosing the document and none of the available forensic and other evidence provided a basis for identifying any individual as the source of the document."
The leaked draft of Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization revealed the court's six conservative justices had all voted to overturn Roe v. Wade, a 1973 ruling that established abortion as a protected rightnationwide. The justices argued the court had been wrong to rule that way, and that no such right was deep-seated in US political life. The news was somewhat expected, but nonetheless provoked massive protests outside the court, across the country, and even outside the homes of the justices.
The justices characterized the leak as a betrayal of trust, and a probe into the leak, led by Curley, was launched almost immediately.

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Iranian Man Who Publicly Decapitated His Child Bride to Serve Eight Years in Prison
By - Mary Manley

In a 30-second video released by an Iranian media website on February 5, 2022, an Iranian man, Sajjad, was seen grinning as he paraded the decapitated head of his 17-year-old wife in one hand and a knife in the other. The victim, Mona, had been forced into marrying Sajjad at the age of 12.

An Iranian man named Sajjad Heydari was sentenced on Wednesday to eight years and two months in prison after he beheaded his 17-year old wife in February 2022.

The wife, identified as Mona, had been forced to marry Sajjad, her cousin, after her father obtained a legal certificate---as the minimum age for marriage in Iran is 13 for girls and 15 for boys. Mona gave birth to a son when she was just 14, and after being a victim of domestic violence she fled her home in mid-2021 to live in Turkey.

She then returned home after she received assurances from her father that she would be safe; however, she was beheaded by her husband and her brother-in-law in February.

The short sentence for the "honor killing," an act of violence in which primarily women are the victims and are killed by their male relatives, has sparked outrage in the country. The killings are only punishable in Iran by up to 10 years in prison unlike murder, which carries a sentence of life imprisonment or the death penalty.

Massoud Setayesh, who is a spokesman for Iran's Judiciary, confirmed Sajjad was "convicted of stewardship in intentional murder, intentional assault, and disturbing public order." The victim's brother-in-law was "convicted of being an assistant in an intentional murder." Mona's brother-in-law will receive just 45 months in jail for assisting in her murder.

Mona's family had pardoned her killer as opposed to demanding Iran's Islamic law of retribution: qisas, which would have found Sajjad to be punishable by death. Her father claimed he had not consented to the killing.

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Video: US Woman Attacks Flight Attendants, Police With Fire Extinguisher at Georgia Airport
By - Mary Manley

Holder, who is from Dayton, Ohio, had been attempting to open a secured door at the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta Airport. Airport security called police for back up, but not before Holder began to discharge a fire extinguisher at airport employees.

An Ohio woman was recently taken into police custody after she attacked flight attendants and police officers with a fire extinguisher at Georgia's Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport.

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The incident took place Tuesday at around 9:30 p.m. local time at the airport's Concourse D; however, by the time officers arrived at Gate D, they saw a woman discharging a fire extinguisher.

The woman has been identified as 27-year-old Jennifer Kaye Holder from Dayton, Ohio. Holder was taken into police custody but police add she continued to "behave erratically and combatively, by spitting and kicking at officers."

It's unclear what the 27-year-old's motive were, but she can be heard in footage of the incident responding aggressively when airport staff questioned her about not paying for her chicken wings at a Buffalo Wild Wings restaurant inside the airport. She can be heard saying that someone else had paid for her meal.

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Since the incident, Holder has been charged with obstructing law enforcement officers, two countries of simple assault, and three counts of simple battery. She was taken to Clayton County Jail following the assault.

Three flight attendants were assessed by first responders for respiratory discomfort and minor injuries after being assaulted by Holder, who had also been assessed for self-sustained injuries.

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Pompeo Claims Ivanka Trump, Jared Kushner Secretly Plotted to Remove Pence as VP

By - Mary Manley

Though the two are no longer working in politics, fresh allegations are being made against former President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka and her husband Jared Kushner, who both worked as advisers to the former president.

Ex-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has alleged in his forthcoming book that Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner schemed to kick then-Vice President Mike Pence to the curb for the 2020 presidential election.

The excerpt, which was first revealed by The Guardian, claims that Nikki Haley, a former United Nations ambassador (and a former governor of South Carolina) had been presented as an alternative option.

Before resigning from the Trump administration in October of 2018, Haley had a private meeting with Trump in the Oval Office, he writes. According to Pompeo, John Kelly, who was Trump's chief of staff at that time, believed Haley had her meeting with Trump while being accompanied by Ivanka and Kushner. It was during this meeting the three allegedly presented Haley as a possible "number two" to the president.

"As best Kelly could tell, they were presenting a possible 'Haley for vice-president' option," Pompeo writes in his upcoming book Never Give an Inch. "I can't confirm this, but [Kelly] was certain he had been played, and he was not happy about it. Clearly, this visit did not reflect a team effort but undermined our work for America."

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The story is just one way in which Pompeo hits out against the former ambassador. He also criticized her role as an ambassador to the UN, saying it's a "job that is far less important than people think," questioned her commitment to public service, and ridiculed her for resigning or, as he writes; "flat-out threw in the towel."

In response to Pompeo's claims, the former South Carolina governor dismissed the allegations as gossip and told Fox News that she "never had a conversation with Jared, Ivanka, or the president about the vice presidency."

"What I'll tell you is it's really sad when you're having to go out there and put lies and gossip to sell a book," Haley said. "I don't know why he said it but that's exactly why I stayed out of DC as much as possible – to get away from the drama and get away from the gossip."

The political dispute stretches beyond the scope of gossip, however, with both Haley and Pompeo teasing that they may run for the White House in 2024, with Haley even suggesting during her Fox News interview that she is prepared for a bruising 2024 Republican primary.

"I think we need a young generation to come in, step up and really start fixing things," said Haley, who is 51-years-old. "Can I be that leader? Yes, I think I can be that leader."

"May the best woman win," she added.

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Burkina Faso Wants French Troops Gone Within a Month
By - Mary Manley

Burkina Faso, a West African country, was a former French colony until it gained its independence in 1960. The landlocked "land of honest men" has suffered from recurring droughts and military coups. Since its last coup on September 30, 2022 the military has since taken control of the country in an effort to fight jihadism.

Burkina Faso's military regime has demanded that France pulls its troops from their country within a month AIB, the Burkinabe state news agency, reported on Saturday.

France has around 400 soldiers stationed in Burkina Faso. French minister Chrysoula Zacharopoulou recently said that France was still committed to aiding Burkina Faso against jihadists despite the tension between the two countries.

"France is a consistent partner, engaged at Burkina Faso's side through the challenges it faces, and is ready to stay," she told reporters on January 11. "We know the price the Burkinabe armed forces and the civilian population have been paying for years."

Burkina Faso's state television RTB, citing AIB, said the country's military government suspended a 2018 military accord on Wednesday. That military accord allows French armed forces to remain in the country.

"The Burkinabe government last Wednesday denounced the accord which has governed, since 2018, the presence of French armed forces on its territory," said AIB, adding that it will give France a month to leave the country.

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Burkina Faso, which is led by Captain Ibrahim Traore, has reportedly been inching away from France as a criticism of their failure to improve security issues in the country. Since the coup in September, the country has been making an effort to form a closer alliance with Russia.

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Six More Classified Documents Found in Search of Biden's Family Home
By - Mary Manley

The Department of Justice conducted a search of Biden's family home after classified documents were first discovered on November 2 at the Penn Biden Center in Washington by the president's attorneys.
The US Department of Justice found six more classified documents during a search of President Joe Biden's family home this week, according to the president's personal lawyer. The search is being conducted by a special counsel appointed by Attorney General Merrick Garland.
The documents were found at Biden's home in Wilmington, Delaware during a 13-hour search that the president promptly complied with, according to his lawyer Bob Bauer. Some of those documents and other materials were from the president's tenure in the Senate which lasted between 1973 and 2009.
“Yesterday, D.O.J. completed a thorough search of all the materials in the president’s Wilmington home. It began at approximately 9:45 a.m. and concluded at around 10:30 p.m. and covered all working, living and storage spaces in the home,” Bauer said.
The DOJ also found notes that Biden had personally handwritten while he was vice president. These are the first documents to be discovered by the DOJ and will join those which have been found by the president's attorneys.
"DOJ took possession of materials it deemed within the scope of its inquiry, including six items consisting of documents with classification markings and surrounding materials," Bauer said. "Some of which were from the President’s service in the Senate and some of which were from his tenure as Vice President.”
The White House is being criticized for their delaying the announcement that classified files had been found at Penn Biden Center, just six days before the midterm elections. Instead, the Biden administration waited until January to make that information public.

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Hundreds of Stranded Tourists Evacuated From Machu Picchu
By - Mary Manley

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More than 400 tourists were left stranded at the Inca citadel after Peru's authorities indefinitely suspended access to the site in response to the ongoing protests.
On Saturday, rescue teams were able to evacuate more than 400 tourists who were left stranded at the historic Inca citadel of Machu Picchu, according to Peru's Ministry of Tourism.
"This afternoon the 418 domestic and foreign visitors were transferred from the town of Machu Picchu to... Cusco," the ministry's Twitter account posted, along with photos of a train and passengers.
The evacuation comes after the Peruvian General-Directorate for Cultural Affairs in Cusco announced an indefinite suspension of access to Machu Picchu after protestors demolished railways which lead to the site.
Protests first began in early December after the country's parliament impeached former President Pedro Castillo. Then-Prime Minister Dina Boluarte was appointed as the country's new leader, however violent protestors have been calling for an immediate presidential election, the dissolution of the country's parliament and the resignation of Boluarte.

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Drug-Resistant Gonorrhea Found in the US for the First Time
By - Mary Manley

Health officials in Massachusetts are calling the strain a “serious public health concern”.
On Thursday, health officials announced the discovery of a new strain of gonorrhea in Massachusetts which they find to be concerning. The strain is showing a “reduced response to multiple antibiotics”, according to the Department of Public Health (DPH).
“The discovery of this strain of gonorrhea is a serious public health concern which DPH, the CDC, and other health departments have been vigilant about detecting in the US,” said Public Health Commissioner Margret Cooke.
“We urge all sexually active people to be regularly tested for sexually transmitted infections and to consider reducing the number of their sexual partners and increasing their use of condoms when having sex. Clinicians are advised to review the clinical alert and assist with our expanded surveillance efforts.”
The strain was discovered in two Massachusetts residents, one who had a reduced response to multiple antibiotics while the other showed genetic markers that would indicate a similar reduced response to the drug.
According to the DPH, this is the first time that gonorrhea, which shows reduced resistance to antibiotics, has been identified in the United States.
Both of these cases were finally cured with the treatment ceftriaxone. There has been no identified connection between the two persons in Massachusetts who were infected.
According to the DPH, the bacterial sexually transmitted infection has previously been identified in Asia-Pacific countries and in the United Kingdom. With the strain showing up in the United States, the DPH wants to emphasize that strains of gonorrhea are becoming less responsive in the United States.

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The DPH adds that gonorrhea has been increasing in Massachusetts as well as nationally. In Massachusetts, cases of the STI have increased by 312% going from 1,976 cases in 2009 to 8,133 cases in 2021. Across the United States cases have increased by 131% between 2009 and 2021 with 696,764 cases reported in 2021 according to data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

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Police Surround Mass Shooting Suspect in California, Find Dead Body in Van
By - Mary Manley

On Saturday 10 people were killed and another 10 were injured during a mass shooting in the city of Monterey Park. At around 10:22 PM the gunman opened fire at a local dance studio which is located near the Monterey Park Lunar New Year Festival is usually held.
On Sunday police were reported to be in a stand-off with the person they suspect was responsible for killing 10 people in a mass shooting in Monterey Park, California, including five men and five women.
Aerial footage showed a white transit van cornered by two SWAT vehicles as a number of police cars were stationed nearby in Torrance, just south of Los Angeles. A 67-year-old eyewitness reportedly saw a drone fly near the van as police commanded the vehicle's occupant to roll down the window or open the door.
A bomb squad vehicle also arrived on the scene of the stand-off as police expand the safety perimeters of the scene.
A SWAT team was able to breach the white van and found a body inside, according to ABC News. The body was found in the driver's seat after a stand-off which lasted for two hours on Sunday. US media is speculating whether or not the gunman shot himself.
While police are unsure of the gunman's motives, they published a photo of their suspect. The suspect, according to Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna, is an Asian man between 30 and 50-years-old who was seen wearing a knit hat and glasses.
Police believe the gunman went to a second dance hall in the neighboring city of Alhambra just 20 minutes after the first shooting, but people there were able to forcibly take the weapon way from him and he fled the scene.
About 65% of the 60,000 people in Monterey Park are Asian American. The shooting on Saturday took place at a building on West Garvey Avenue, which is a main thoroughfare that had hosted a festival celebrating the eve of the Lunar New Year earlier in the day.
Events celebrating the Lunar New Year were cancelled in the wake of the shooting.

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Panel of International Experts Demand Biden End Persecution of Julian Assange

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By - Wyatt Reed

“We’re all making an appeal for President Biden to desist from the appeal that he’s brought to the British courts so that Julian could be free,” former UK Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn told Sputnik News.

Efforts to demand the US government end its political persecution of jailed WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange ramped up Friday as a group of legal experts, whistleblowers, and journalists warned that the Biden administration’s insistence on extraditing a foreign journalist under the Espionage Act could signal the death knell for what remains of free speech guarantees in the West.

Speakers at the third Belmarsh Tribunal of the National Press Club in Washington, DC – including WikiLeaks editor Kristinn Hrafnsson, Pentagon Papers whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, preeminent American public intellectual Noam Chomsky, and recently-liberated human rights attorney Steven Donziger – called on Biden to end its efforts to force Assange to the US, where he could face up to 175 years in a US supermax prison if convicted.

“It is, in effect, a death sentence,” explained former UK Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn, who noted that, if extradited, Assange would likely “be left for the rest of his life in a maximum security prison in the most appalling conditions.”

As secretary of the Labour Party, Corbyn was defeated in the 2019 British general election following an intense campaign of media attacks over what were later revealed to be spurious claims of antisemitism.

An explosive audio recording revealed that then-CIA Director Mike Pompeo promised leading Zionist in New York that he had no plans to wait until “Mr. Corbyn manages to run the gauntlet and get elected” to “begin to push back” against him.

Lambasting the political elites who oversaw Assange's political persecution, Corbyn noted that “they're very keen on putting everyone else under surveillance – their decisions should be under surveillance.”

When approached for comment by Sputnik News, the former UK Labour leader slammed the “brutal treatment” that “Assange is getting… by much of the media here.”

He stressed “the need for us to not only support and defend him, but also defend journalism but the right to know, and the right to be able to speak about it.”

“And that's why we’re all making an appeal for President Biden to desist from the appeal that he’s brought to the British courts – so that Julian could be free.”

Asked about the need to bring the CIA under democratic control, Corbyn confirmed that “all state power should be under democratic control.”

“That is the function of a parliamentary democracy,” he explained.

“That is why an effective War Powers Act is very important – that includes the use of special forces,” he continued. “But it’s also about the accountability of all arms of government, including obviously, the special forces.”

Assange has been held at the Belmarsh prison since 2019, when his seven-year asylum at the London-based Ecuadorian embassy was revoked under the Moreno administration. More recently, in December 2022, Assange applied to the European Court of Human Rights to challenge his extradition.

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Brazil's Army Chief Ousted Over Apparent Complicity in Jan 8 Riots
By - Wyatt Reed

The investigation into the violent riots which tore through Brazil's capital earlier this month claimed their highest-ranking military official yet on Saturday.

Brazilian President Lula da Silva has removed the Chief of the Army, General Julio Cesar de Arruda, following riots which saw thousands of supporters of former president Jair Bolsonaro storm the country's top political institutions on January 8.

According to Globonews, Arruda is set to be replaced by southeastern army commander Tomas Ribeiro Paiva.

Arruda served for two years as the Dean of the Agulhas Negras Military Academy, where Bolsonaro graduated in 1977, and was seen as a key ally of the former president. He spent only 23 days as Army Chief, having been appointed just two days before Bolsonaro stepped down.

Over 2,000 Brazilians have been arrested for allegedly participating in the chaos in Brasilia which saw the country's presidential palace, Supreme Court, and Congress ransacked, priceless pieces of art trashed, and graffiti messages demanding a military coup scrawled throughout.

Prosecutors are bringing them up on an array of charges, including staging a coup, to armed criminal association, violent attempts to subvert the democratic state of law, and damage to public property.

Arruda reportedly sheltered many of those implicated at Army headquarters, and has been accused of allowing hundreds to escape by insisting that Lula's justice minister was "not going to arrest people here."

He's certainly not alone. Numerous military officials have been implicated in this month's unrest, including Anderson Torres, a former justice minister under Bolsonaro and the security chief of Brasilia at the time of the rioting. Authorities jailed Torres last week after reporting they'd found a draft in Torres's home which would have declared a "state of defense" to overturn Lula's victory at the polls by overriding a decision by the electoral court of Brazil.

On Friday, Brazilian Defense Minister Jose Mucio said he believed "there was no direct involvement by the armed forces," but "if any element participated, they will have to answer as citizens."

Dozens of members of Lula's security detail have been forced out after being accused of involvement in the riots as well, amid what Lula described as a "deep review" of the security situation.

Civil-military ties in Brazil were widely expected to be more difficult under Lula than they were under his predecessor, and observers point to the riots as proof that relations between the elected government and its infamously coup-happy army have soured.

Bolsonaro fled Brazil two days before Lula was inaugurated, and has been living in an 8-bedroom mansion in central Florida owned by former MMA fighter Jose Aldo ever since.

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The former president quickly condemned the riots and has denied any involvement in the unrest but maintains the election was stolen from him. While no direct evidence tying him to the chaos has been reported, a recently-announced inquiry is set to probe whether Bolsonaro was one of the “intellectual authors” of the alleged attempted coup.

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Hundreds Detained In Peru as Cops Raid University in Post-Coup Crackdown
By - Wyatt Reed

Mass arrests at Peru’s most storied university kicked off another round of international criticism towards the authorities who’ve been using violence to control an angry public since seizing power from Peru’s ousted indigenous president last month.

Hundreds of pro-democracy demonstrators were arrested Saturday after police in Peru used an armored vehicle to ram through the gates of the oldest university in the western hemisphere and arrested those gathered there en masse.

At least 200 people remained jailed hours after the raid on the National University of San Marcos (UNMSM) – including a journalist, as well as a mother and a young girl whose detention has since sparked outrage among the school’s faculty, human rights organizations, and social media users.

“Under no state of law can a girl be detained,” wrote Indira Huilca, a UNMSM sociologist and former member of Peruvian Congress.

“Clearly the Peruvian police are violating the human rights of detainees,” she concluded.

Her colleagues at the school from the Faculty of Arts and the Humanities issued their own statement expressing their total “rejection of the authorization of the violent police intervention” on the part of the regime.

Colombian President Gustavo Petro reacted with shock to footage of the assault on Twitter, urging the Organization of American States to look into the matter.

Peru’s National Association of Journalists demanded the “immediate release” of reporter Paty Condori, who they said Saturday was being held at the country’s Counter-Terrorist Directorate.

Interior Minister Vicente Romero defended the actions of security forces and appeared to attempt to pin the blame on the director of the university, claiming that the assault was carried out at her direct request.

“I did not know that the police were going to enter with tanks,” she quickly shot back.

Peruvian authorities – who seized power after arresting former President Pedro Castillo last month for his failed coup attempt – have so far struggled to respond to growing outrage over the raid.

Dina Boluarte's government has employed increasing violent methods in an effort to crush an uprising that’s endured for nearly two months. At least 59 people have died in the unrest, and security forces throughout the country continue to be accused of intentionally killing demonstrators.

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King Charles III Refuses "Slimmed Down" Coronation Amid Cost-of-Living Crisis
By - Wyatt Reed

"At a cost of tens of millions of pounds this pointless piece of theater is a slap in the face for millions of people struggling with the cost-of-living crisis," an anti-monarchist protest group declared.

The UK's King Charles has rejected pleas for a more modest coronation, royal aides have reportedly told British media, as an unprecedented cost-of-living crisis is forcing a shocking number of Britons out of their homes and into food banks.

Promising the planned celebration will be "a glorious advertisement for the UK," royal aides reportedly told the Sunday Times that Charles is "actively involved and engaged in" planning to ensure his coronation day is "a thing of splendor," with "pomp, pageantry, braids, brass and fly-pasts."

The announcement effectively pours cold water on speculation that Britain's monarchy would pursue a "slimmed down" coronation as more and more of the crisis-stricken island nation's working people struggle to put food on the table.

With Britons facing double-digit inflation – the highest it's been in 41 years – rising costs have pushed basic necessities like food, heating, and housing out of the grasp of hundreds of thousands of families.

"At a cost of tens of millions of pounds this pointless piece of theater is a slap in the face for millions of people struggling with the cost-of-living crisis," the anti-monarchy group Republic wrote in a statement.

The group condemned coronation as a "celebration of hereditary power and privilege" which "has no place in a modern society" and promised to protest near Westminster Abbey during the proceedings.

Alongside concerns that the coronation could make the monarchy seem out-of-touch with the needs of everyday people, the royal family is reportedly also struggling to decide on an appropriate role for Prince Harry and Meghan Markle.

The pair has been engaged in a prolonged battle with much of the rest of the royal family over their scathing public criticisms of the monarchy — and the lucrative book, TV, and podcast deals they've garnered with them. The royal couple has reportedly netted over 100 million pounds from their self-promotional projects.

The Daily Mail reported Saturday that the royal couple is "unlikely" to attend a much-vaunted ceremony on the balcony of Buckingham Palace.

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Americans Smuggling Eggs from Mexico Amid Surging Prices, Border Officials Say

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By - Wyatt Reed

Would-be eggsporters can be forced to fork over a fine of up to $10,000 if they're caught sneaking them back into the country.
Eggs have gotten so expensive in recent months that Americans are increasingly relying on a new way of getting them: smuggling them across the Mexican border.
Officials with Customs and Border Protection (CBP) say they've seen an uptick in the number of egg-running attempts.
"The San Diego Field Office has recently noticed an increase in the number of eggs intercepted at our ports of entry," Jennifer De La O, CBP Director of Field Operations in San Diego, wrote on Twitter.
"As a reminder, uncooked eggs are prohibited entry from Mexico into the US," she noted.
"Failure to declare agriculture [sic] items can result in penalties of up to $10,000."
The cost of food has become a major cause of concern in the US, where the Bureau of Labor Statistics found the average price of a dozen large eggs classified as Grade A by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) in a city reached $4.25 in December – an increase of 138% from the $1.79 consumers were typically paying a year earlier.
A recent Instacart survey found that consumers in six states are now paying over $6 per dozen of the cheapest eggs available.
The cause of the massive surge in price is hotly contested, but there are likely a number of factors at play.
Observers who've accused agricultural giants of price-gouging point to Cal-Maine Foods, Inc. the largest egg distributor in the US, which credited the "significantly higher selling prices" for its record quarterly profit of $198.6 million.
Others point to data from the US Department of Agriculture, which claimed U.S. that "egg inventories were 29 percent lower in the final week of December 2022 than at the beginning of the year" because of "recurrent outbreaks" of avian flu and a gap in production due to disinfection protocol.
There's almost certainly more to the story, however. The surge in energy prices which accompanied the Western world's anti-Russian sanctions crusade is likely to blame as well.
Emily Metz, president and CEO of trade group American Egg Board recently noted: "When you're looking at fuel costs go up, and you're looking at feed costs go up as much as 60%, labor costs, packaging costs — all of that... those are much much bigger factors than bird flu for sure."

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RPT - Biden 'Sleepwalking Into Disaster' on Foreign Policy Front at Midway Point - Experts

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's policies toward Russia, China, and Iran, among other states, have the US headed for catastrophe as he starts the second half of his first term, experts told Sputnik.

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Biden hit the midway point of his presidency earlier in the day, a period during which the White House has claimed successes on the economic front while some critics have slammed him for record-high inflation, the border crisis, and a foreign policy that has escalated tensions with both Russia and China.

"I think he's done better than some of us expected, but he's still sleepwalking into disaster," political commentator and US constitutional historian Dan Lazare told Sputnik.

Biden, like all US presidents, was the victim of forces beyond his control, Lazare cautioned.

"He entered the White House promising to be a big-spending FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] and thus succeeded in pushing through his $1.9-trillion American Rescue Plan less than two months after taking office. But it backfired due to mounting inflationary pressures, which it undoubtedly helped aggravate," he said.

The rapid and humiliating Taliban conquest of Afghanistan in July 2021 during Biden's first year in office was a disaster that just about everyone in Washington had a hand in creating over the previous 40 years, Lazare acknowledged.

"Instead of fiddling while Rome burned, he flipped burgers while Kabul collapsed. The result was the worst foreign-policy setback since Vietnam from an imperial point of view," he said.

On the economic front, the Inflation Reduction Act, which passed in November 2022 put new strains on the Atlantic Alliance, Lazare said.

"[The act] has left Europeans unnerved due to its outrageously protectionist industrial policies," he said.

UKRAINE DANGERS

The Biden administration unveiled another $2.5 billion in military aid for Ukraine on Thursday, bringing the total to around $27.5 billion since Biden took office. Lazare said this type of continual support has the US headed for a potential world war.

"Biden looks pretty good shepherding one military aid package after another through Congress. But the longer the conflict goes on, the more apparent it becomes that NATO's aggressively expansionist policies are leading to another 1914," he said.

Biden's failure to pursue any serious means of resolving the conflict meant it was bound to get steadily worse, Lazare predicted.

"Just as the Entente more or less maneuvered Austro-Hungary into going to war against crazy little Serbia, the Atlantic Alliance maneuvered Russia into going to war against Ukraine by engaging in actions that were increasingly provocative and confrontational," he said.

Biden risked going down in history alongside disastrous UK leader Herbert Henry Asquith who led his country into a catastrophic world war with Germany back in 1914, Lazare said.

"I think history will, thus, end up looking at Biden the same way it looks at Asquith, the UK prime minister who thought he could get away with playing with fire in the Balkans. Once again, short-sighted imperial ambitions are plunging the world into catastrophe," he said.

Despite all this, Lazare added, the US media had covered Biden sympathetically so far in contrast to their unrelenting attacks on his predecessor, Lazare said.

"Joe Biden may be a B- president so far, but I'm sure his report card will be bristling with F's before too long," he said.

FECKLESS MEDIOCRITY

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Retired Ambassador Chas Freeman, who served as assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs in the Democratic Clinton administration, noted that Foreign Policy had assembled 20 analysts who had nothing but praise for Biden's diplomatic performance.
"No oriental potentate employing praise singers could ask for more. And yet, the Biden administration has produced not a 'foreign policy for the middle class' but one notable for its feckless mediocrity," Freeman told Sputnik.
Biden, he added, has also recklessly sparked conflict and crises with major superpowers.
"Biden and his team have catalyzed and subsequently escalated a dangerous proxy war between the United States, Western Europe, and Russia in Ukraine [and] escalated tensions with China amidst rising concern about the possibility of a war over the status of Taiwan," Freeman said.
He also abandoned diplomatic efforts, Freeman added, to constrain Iran's development of nuclear weapons, which has driven Russia, China, and Iran together.
In addition, Biden has doubled down on protectionism and repudiated the "rules-based order" of the World Trade Organization, thereby generating discord with US allies in both Europe and Asia, he said.
Biden's vacillating policies had also produced a visible reduction in US influence in the Middle East, including a rift with Saudi Arabia and a default on any effort to counter the replacement of apartheid in Israel by renewed ethnic cleansing, Freeman said.

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US Government Seizes Nearly $700Mln of FTX Founder SBF's Assets - Filing

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The US government seized almost $700 million worth of assets from cryptocurrency firm FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried in connection to an ongoing criminal case, court documents revealed.

The court documents showed on Friday that federal prosecutors seized Bankman-Fried's more than 55 million shares in Robinhood stock, which is valued at $526 million when stocks closed earlier in the day.

Nine other accounts linked to Bankman-Fried, three of which did not have their value disclosed, were also seized by the federal government for a total value of more than $697 million, according to court documents.

Founded by Bankman-Fried in 2019, FTX became one of the world's largest cryptocurrency exchanges. It filed for bankruptcy on November 11, with an estimated one million customers facing billions of dollars in losses.

In December, the US government indicted Bankman-Fried in what prosecutors have described as one of the biggest financial fraud cases in US history. Prosecutors allege that FTX violated US campaign finance laws and schemed to misappropriate customer funds.

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Elon Musk Says Relentless Escalation 'Very Risky for Ukraine, Whole World'

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said that despite being very supportive of Ukraine, the relentless escalation of the conflict there is dangerous for the country as well as the entire world.

"I am super pro Ukraine, but relentless escalation is very risky for Ukraine and the world," Musk said via Twitter on Friday.

Musk's comment came in response to South African-American entrepreneur David Sacks, who re-tweeted the New York Times article "US Warms to Helping Ukraine Target Crimea." Sacks commented on Twitter that the reported development in Washington seems "insanely risky."

In October, Musk proposed a peace plan to end the conflict in Ukraine, but his proposal drew condemnation from US and Ukrainian officials, including President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

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Musk's peace plan would guarantee that Russia controls Crimea and there would be a continued water supply to the peninsula. The proposal also called for United Nations-monitored referenda in the four regions that recently voted to join the Russian Federation.
In addition, Musk published two polls asking the public their opinion about a peace deal between Ukraine and Russia and about the status of the Donbas and Crimea. Ukrainian officials, including Zelenskyy, criticized the polls and published a poll asking the public whether Musk supports Ukraine or Russia. In November, Zelenskyy invited Musk to come to Ukraine and see the situation in the country first-hand.

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UPDATE - US House Speaker McCarthy Says Accepts Biden's Request to Discuss Debt Ceiling
(Updates with more details in paras 6-9)
WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said he has accepted President Joe Biden's invitation to discuss the situation regarding the United States' national debt and a possible increase of the debt ceiling imposed by Congress.
"President Biden: I accept your invitation to sit down and discuss a responsible debt ceiling increase to address irresponsible government spending," McCarthy said via Twitter on Friday.
On Thursday, the Treasury Department said it started taking extraordinary measures to avoid a government debt default by temporarily suspending payments not immediately needed for essential programs or to keep the government running.
Last week, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned that the United States will soon reach its outstanding debt limit. The US national debt stands at approximately $31.46 trillion, according to Treasury Department data.
On Friday, Yellen warned that the United States risks sparking a recession or global financial crisis if Congress does not soon address the debt limit. The United States will automatically default on its payments if Congress fails to raise the limit and would also obstruct basic US government functions.
Biden will meet with McCarthy as part of a series of talks with new congressional leaders, the White House said in a statement on Friday. Biden and McCarthy will debate two different visions for the United States, which the president is happy to do, the White House said in a statement.
"Like the President has said many times, raising the debt ceiling is not a negotiation; it is an obligation of this country and its leaders to avoid economic chaos. Congress has always done it, and the President expects them to do their duty once again," the White House statement said.
Biden and McCarthy will also discuss Republicans' plan to cut Social Security and other government programs, as well as impose a 30% national sales tax, the statement added.
Biden will also tell McCarthy about his own plan to cut the deficit while strengthening retirement programs by taxing big corporations, according to the statement.
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US Treasury Says Russia Price Cap Coalition Agrees to Two Levels Based on Oil Product Type
(Adds details in paras 4,5)

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WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The coalition of countries imposing a price cap on Russian oil agreed to two separate price caps on oil products based on their type and price relative to crude oil, the US Treasury Department said in a statement.
On Friday, officials representing the coalition countries, including US Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo, met virtually to discuss the effort, the statement said.
“The Deputies agreed to an approach for refined products that will institute two distinct caps, in addition to the crude cap: one cap for products that generally trade at a premium to crude, such as diesel or gasoil, and one for products that trade at a discount to crude, such as fuel oil,” the statement said.
The multilateral coalition of countries imposing a price cap on Russian oil products agree that their efforts have been successful so far and plan to review the price level of the cap in March, the statement said.
Planning a review for March allows the coalition to take into account developments in global markets after the refined product caps are implemented, the statement said.

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WikiLeaks Editor Says Lula Assured Him Assange Case to Be Brazil’s Foreign Policy Priority

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - WikiLeaks Editor-in-Chief Kristinn Hrafnsson said Brazil’s President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva assured him the fight to end the injustice in the case of WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange will be a priority in his foreign policy.
"President Lula assured me that the fight to end the injustice entailed in the Assange case would be a priority in his foreign policy," Hrafnsson said on Friday.

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Hrafnsson noted that he traveled to South America to meet with the presidents of several countries and they expressed concern about the precedent set by the case against Assange with respect to fundamental freedoms.

"I got the same strong support from Gustavo Petro President of Colombia, who called for Julian's release, and the end of the persecution. Lastly, I met Andreas Manuel Lopez Obrador, the president of Mexico, who has been a constant supporter of Julian," he said. "It was Obrador who said that if Julian is extradited to the United States, the Statue of Liberty should be dismantled and returned to France."

In 2019, the UK authorities apprehended Assange in London on an arrest warrant request by the US government. Assange faces extradition to the United States and a sentence of up to 175 years in maximum security prison if convicted of charges of espionage levied against him by the US government. The charges include disclosing classified information and violating the Espionage Act.

The 51-year-old Australian took refuge in the Ecuadorian Embassy in June 2012 until his arrest in April 2019, after which his extradition hearings began. Assange has been held in the United Kingdom in the notorious Belmarsh prison.

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US Recommends Kiev Not to Cling to Bakhmut, Prepare for Counteroffensive - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - The United States recommends that Kiev not cling to defending the town of Bakhmut and instead focus on undertaking a major counteroffensive against advancing Russian forces, AFP reported, citing a senior US official.

The Biden administration is trying to convince the Ukrainian leadership that it makes no sense to hold on to Bakhmut, also known as Artyomovsk, at any cost as this could worsen Ukraine's chances of undertaking a successful counteroffensive against Russian forces in the south, the report said on Friday.

At this stage, time favors Russia given Moscow surpasses Kiev in available artillery and the number of troops in the region, the official said.

Ukraine needs time to train on new military equipment that is pouring into the country from its allies and for this reason will have to trade Bakhmut for time in order to prepare for the offensive, the report added.

Earlier on Friday, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said the United States is currently preoccupied with helping Ukraine prepare for a spring counteroffensive against advancing Russian forces.

Bakhmut is located north of Donetsk in the Kiev-controled part of the Donetsk People's Republic and is an important transport hub for supplying Ukrainian troops stationed in the Donbas.

Last week, Russia gained control over the strategic city of Soledar, about six miles from Bakhmut, securing the ground to attempt an encirclement of the Ukrainian troops stationed there.

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US House Speaker McCarthy Says Accepts Biden's Request to Discuss Debt Ceiling

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said he has accepted President Joe Biden's invitation to discuss the situation regarding the United States' national debt and a possible increase of the debt ceiling imposed by Congress.
"President Biden: I accept your invitation to sit down and discuss a responsible debt ceiling increase to address irresponsible government spending," McCarthy said via Twitter on Friday.
On Thursday, the Treasury Department said it started taking extraordinary measures to avoid a government debt default by temporarily suspending payments not immediately needed for essential programs or to keep the government running.
Last week, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned that the United States will soon reach its outstanding debt limit. The US national debt stands at approximately $31.46 trillion, according to Treasury Department data.
On Friday, Yellen warned that the United States risks sparking a recession or global financial crisis if Congress does not soon address the debt limit. The United States will automatically default on its payments if Congress fails to raise the limit and would also obstruct basic US government functions.

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Assange's Father Says Sees Support in Every European Parliament, Worldwide

WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) -John Shipton, father of Julian Assange said on Friday that his son's supporters are seeing more and more support worldwide as well as in every European Parliament and expressed confidence that it will help them free Assange.
"We, Julian's supporters, Julian's family , are beginning to prevail, are beginning to see around the world, in every European Parliament, support for Julian Assange," Shipton said via video message at the Washington, DC event.
Shipton added that they also see a lot of support from civil society and unions.
The support comes from across the globe, he added, noting that Assange is supported In the Middle East, India and Eurasia .
"Together we have done this and together we will prevail in bringing about Julian's freedom," Shipton stated.
Assange was apprehended in London in 2019 on a US arrest warrant and faces extradition to the United States and a sentence of up to 175 years in a maximum security prison if convicted of espionage.

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The 51-year-old Australian, wanted by the US government on charges of disclosing classified information and violating the Espionage Act, took refuge at the Ecuadorian Embassy in June 2012 until his arrest in April 2019, after which his extradition hearings began.

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UN Team Completes Trip to Afghanistan to Appraise Situation, Engage Authorities -Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 21 (Sputnik) - A United Nations team led by the Deputy UN Secretary-General Amina Mohammed has completed a four-day trip to Afghanistan to appraise the situation in the country and engage the government on a number of issues, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a statement.

"Deputy Secretary-General, Amina Mohammed, Executive Director of UN Women Sima Bahous and Assistant Secretary-General of the Department of Political, Peacebuilding Affairs and Peace Operations Khaled Khiari completed a four-day visit to Afghanistan to appraise the situation, engage de facto authorities and underscore UN solidarity with the Afghan people," the statement said on Friday.

In meetings with the authorities in Kabul and Kandahar, the delegation directly conveyed the alarm over the recent government decree banning women from working for national and international non-governmental organizations, the statement said.

"[The move] undermines the work of numerous organizations helping millions of vulnerable Afghans," the statement also said.

The visit followed a series of high-level discussions on Afghanistan the delegation engaged in across the Persian Gulf and Asia, whereby it met with the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and Islamic Development Bank leaders, as well as groups of Afghan women in Ankara and Islamabad and a group of ambassadors and special envoys to Afghanistan based in Doha, the statement added.

Earlier on Friday, Russian Special Presidential Envoy for Afghanistan Zamir Kabulov said the government will have to address the issue of inclusiveness as well as respect for the rights of national minorities and women.

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Three US Marines Charged for Involvement in Capitol Riot - Filing

Washington, January 21 (Sputnik) - Three members of the US military were arrested and charged with being a part of the mob that stormed the Capitol on January 6, 2021, court documents revealed.

Micah Coomer, Joshua Abate and Dodge Dale Hellonen were arrested earlier this week, the document showed.

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According to the criminal complaint, the initiation of the investigations into the three marines was prompted by Instagram posts and video footage from the day of the attacks.
In one post Cooper indicated that he was awaiting "Civil War 2."
The three men spent about 52 minutes inside the Capitol, the document said, and at one point, while in the rotunda, they put a MAGA hat on a statue and took pictures with it.
In the 18 months since the January 6 riot, law enforcement has made almost 900 arrests. More than 325 people have plead guilty to being a part of a mob, some of whom ransacked the Capitol and sought to disrupt the transition of power from former President Donald Trump to President Joe Biden.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, January 21 (Sputnik) -

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS
* It would be difficult for Ukraine to militarily eject Russian forces from the territory that is now under Moscow’s authority, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said on Friday.
* The West's decision to discuss the new supply of weapons to Kiev, including at Ramstein Air Base in Germany, will inevitably lead to an increase in casualties and a dangerous escalation, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.
* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with the ICRC President Mirjana Spoljaric and focused her attention on the cases of torture and other crimes committed by the Kiev regime against captured Russian soldiers the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
* Lavrov said Moscow expects the ICRC to intensify visits to the detained Russians and exercise close control on the observance of their rights, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

NEW WESTERN MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE
* The new seventh European Peace Fund package of military equipment for Ukraine will amount to US$540 million, a senior European Union official said on Friday.
* The US government announced a new $2.5 billion military aid package for Ukraine, including Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and Stryker armored personnel carriers among other equipment, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said.
* The newly-announced $2.5 billion US military package includes National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems, among other capabilities, the Defense Department said.
* As a result of the meeting of the contact group on support for Ukraine, NATO countries and their allies failed to reach a consensus on the supply of German main battle tanks to Kiev, but Berlin will continue to consider this possibility, German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius said.
* The Russian forces have liberated the village of Klishchiivka near Bakhmut, also known as Artyomovsk, in the Donetsk People's Republic, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

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SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

* The European Union has not yet decided on the date of adoption of the new tenth package of sanctions against Russia, and is currently focusing preventing circumvention of existing restrictions, a senior EU official said on Friday.
* The United States will soon designate the private military company Wagner Group as a transnational criminal organization and impose sanctions on its network, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.
* The United States has charged a Russian and a British businessman with money laundering and conspiracy to defraud the US government for allegedly facilitating a sanctions evasion scheme for a sanctioned Russian businessman, the Justice Department said.

SITUATION AT ZAPORIZHZHIA NPP

* Kiev finances the acts of sabotage at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (ZNPP) and creates difficulties of ensuring its safety, Renat Karchaa, spokesman for Rosenergoatom, a subsidiary of Russian state nuclear energy corporation Rosatom, told Sputnik.
* Almost all the damages to ZNPP critical infrastructure facilities caused by Ukrainian shelling have been eliminated and preventive measures to protect the plant have also been taken, Karchaa told Sputnik.

FRANCE'S DECISION TO FREEZE RT FRANCE BANK ACCOUNT

* The bank accounts of the broadcaster RT France have been frozen in France, editor-in-chief Ksenia Fedorova said on Friday, adding that the bank refers to the authorities' order.
* The entire French-speaking population of Europe will suffer from the persecution of RT France as it will lose a high-quality and reliable source of information, the Russian Embassy in France told Sputnik.

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Corbyn Urges US Lawmakers to Speak Up for Assange, Against Espionage Act

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Member of UK parliament and former Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn urged US lawmakers on Friday to speak against charging WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange under the Espionage Act and push for his freedom.

"I appeal to elected officials in the United States to speak up to defend democracy, speak up against the powers of the Espionage Act, and speak up for Julian Assange," Corbyn said at the Belmarsh Tribunal event in Washington, D.C.

"We are demanding justice for Julian Assange. Here is the call - let's Free Julian Assange and we will all be safer as a result of that," he added.

WikiLeaks was founded by Assange on October 4, 2006, but rose to prominence in 2010 when it began to publish large-scale leaks of classified government information exposing US war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Since April 2019, Assange has been held in the high-security Belmarsh prison in London while facing prosecution in the United States under the Espionage Act. If convicted, the WikiLeaks

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founder may get 175 years in prison. In December, he appealed to the European Court of Human Rights to challenge his extradition.

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Biden on Tanks: Ukraine Will Get All Help It Needs

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden, when asked about deliberations among allies to send tanks to Ukraine, told reporters on Friday that Ukraine will get all the help it needs, according to the White House press pool.
"Ukraine is going to get all the help they need," Biden said, as quoted by the press pool.
Earlier in the day, Republican Senator Lindsey Graham and Democratic Senator Richard Blumenthal, following a meeting with Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Kiev, emphasized the important of the United States sending Ukraine modern US tanks and long-range missile systems in order to repel an expected Russian offensive in the coming weeks or months, which will be a critical moment in the conflict.

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US Charges Russian, British Citizens With Facilitating Sanctions Evasion - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has charged a Russian and a British businessman with money laundering and conspiracy to defraud the US government for allegedly facilitating a sanctions evasion scheme for a sanctioned Russian businessman, the US Justice Department said on Friday.
"Two businessmen, Vladislav Osipov, 51, a Russian national, and Richard Masters, 52, a United Kingdom national, are charged in separate indictments unsealed today in the US District Court for the District of Columbia, with facilitating a sanctions evasion and money laundering scheme in relation to the ownership and operation of the Motor Yacht… owned by sanctioned Russian oligarch Viktor Vekselberg," the Justice Department said in a statement.
The United States requested Spain arrest Masters for the purposes of extradition, which they granted on Friday, the statement said.
The arrest warrant against Osipov remains outstanding, the statement said.
The indictments allege the two men concealed the ownership of a yacht belonging to Vekselberg while using US companies and the US financial system. Osipov and Masters also allegedly advised and enabled the yacht's employees to continue doing business with US companies and avoid sanctions, the statement added.

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US Navy SEAL Killed Working as Foreign Fighter in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - A US Navy SEAL who deserted his post to work as a foreign fighter in Ukraine was killed by Russian forces this week, TIME reported on Friday, citing a Navy official.

Navy Special Warfare Operator First Class Daniel Swift died from injuries sustained during an attack by Russian forces, the report said.

Swift has been listed as an active deserter since March 11, 2019, the report said, citing official service records. The soldier deserted to fight alongside Ukrainian forces, the report said.

The US State Department did not confirm Swift's identity, but confirmed that a US citizen recently died while fighting in Ukraine, the report said.

The Biden administration has urged US citizens, including servicemembers and veterans, not to travel to Ukraine to act as foreign fighters.

The Russian Defense Ministry has also warned that mercenaries who arrive in Ukraine are not considered official combatants and risk death or imprisonment.

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US Informs UNSC of DPRK Violating Sanctions by Allegedly Supplying Arms to Wagner - Kirby

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The United States shared information with the UN Security Council about sanctions violations committed by North Korea through allegedly providing arms to the Wagner private military company amid Russia's special operation in Ukraine, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Friday.

"As we have stated previously, the arms transfers from the DPRK [North Korea] are in direct violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions, so today, we shared information on these violations with the Security Council's DPRK Sanctions Committee panel of experts," Kirby said during a press briefing.

The US will continue to raise these violations at the Security Council alongside its allies and partners, Kirby said.

The US, according to Kirby, has imagery showing Russian railcars traveled to North Korea in November and returned to Russia loaded with shipping containers.

Kirby said Washington expects North Korea to continue to provide the Wagner Group with weapon systems and calls on Pyongyang to cease all arms shipments to Russia.

The US believes North Korea provided the Wagner Group with infantry rockets and missiles toward the end of last year.

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RPT - Austin Says No Announcement on Abrams for Kiev, No Linkage to Leopards
(Fixes quote in para 2)

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Friday he has nothing to announce with respect to the provision of M1 Abrams tanks to Ukraine and denied that Germany conditions sending its Leopard tanks to Kiev on the United States providing its own tanks first.
"I don't have any announcements to make on M1s. And you heard the German Ministry of Defense say that they've not made a decision on Leopards," Austin told reporters following the eighth Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting in Germany. "I think you heard the German Minister of Defense [Boris Pistorius] say earlier today that there's no linkage between providing Abrams and providing Leopards."
Austin added that instead of focusing on Abrams tanks for Ukraine, the United States is currently preoccupied with helping Kiev to prepare for a spring counteroffensive against advancing Russian forces.
On Thursday, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said that the United States believes it makes no sense to provide Abrams tanks to Ukraine, considering the high costs associated with their maintenance.
The successes of the Russian military in recent weeks, including the capture of the key Ukrainian town of Soledar in the Donbas region, have intensified discussions in Western ruling circles about the need to supply Kiev with heavy weapons and, above all, tanks. A number of European countries, including Poland, have declared their readiness to send their heavy tanks to Ukraine if other countries follow suit. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom has already announced the dispatch of 14 Challenger 2 tanks to the country.

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Russian National Legkodymov to Be Transferred to New York to Face Charges - Court Document

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Russian national and head of the Bitzlato cryptocurrency exchange Anatoly Legkodymov will be transferred from Miami to New York to face money laundering charges, a US court document showed on Friday.
“Defendant WAIVES Removal and is ordered removed to the ED/NY (Eastern District of New York),” the court said in a notice after Legkodymov's detention hearing in Miami.
The matter of bond will be addressed in the court in New York, according to the notice.
Legkodymov also told the court that he is fluent in English and therefore did not require the services of a Russian interpreter during the hearing, it added.

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The Federal Bureau of Prisons website shows that Legkodymov is currently being held at the Federal Detention Center in Miami.
US authorities arrested Legkodymov in Miami on Wednesday. The Justice Department alleges that Bitzlato, which was headed by Legkodymov, became a haven for criminal proceeds and funds intended for use in criminal activity given that it did not require identifying information from users. If convicted, Legkodymov faces a maximum penalty of five years in prison.

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Thousands Attend Anti-Abortion 'March for Life' Rally in Washington Following Roe Reversal

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Thousands of demonstrators attended the anti-abortion March for Life rally in Washington on Friday - the event's 50th anniversary and its first since the US Supreme Court overturned the Roe v. Wade ruling last June.
The rally takes place every year on the anniversary of the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling, which granted federal protections to the practice of abortion in the United States. In June 2022, the US Supreme Court overturned Roe in a new ruling, which returned the right to regulate abortions to state governments.
"Today, thousands of passionate Americans will come together in our nation's capital for the March for Life. Equality begins in the womb, and I will continue to fight for the right to life until every unborn child is protected," US Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith, Chair of the Senate Pro-Life Caucus, said on Friday.
Earlier this month, the new Republican-led US House of Representatives also passed the Born-Alive Abortion Survivors Protection Act, which requires doctors to provide the same care to infants who survive an abortion as would be offered to any other infant born prematurely.
Pro-abortion members of Congress have attempted to secure federal protections for those who receive or provide abortions in the months since the US Supreme Court overturned Roe, with President Joe Biden vowing to sign any such legislation that makes it to his desk.
However, Biden said in November that he does not expect the new Congress to have the votes to codify federal protections for abortions in the style of Roe.

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Kirby Confirms Brazil's Lula Will Visit White House in Early February

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby confirmed that Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva will visit Washington in the beginning of February.
"I can confirm that we look forward to seeing President Lula early next month," Kirby said on Friday.

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US Debt Default Will Trigger Global Financial Crisis, Treasury Secretary Yellen Warns

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - A debt default by the United States will trigger a global financial crisis, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen warned on Friday as the US government remained without an agreement in Congress to extend its approaching debt limit.

"If that happened, our borrowing costs would increase and every American would see that their borrowing costs would increase as well," Yellen told CNN in an interview, referring to a potential debt default. "On top of that, a failure to make payments that are due, whether it's the bondholders or to Social Security recipients or to our military, would undoubtedly cause a recession in the US economy and could cause a global financial crisis."

The debt limit drama has become a yearly political fight in Congress between the party in power — the Democrats and its office bearers like Yellen — and its rivals — now made up of Republicans. A drawn-out struggle to raise the nation's debt ceiling in 2011 triggered a financial crisis that culminated in major credit rating agency Standard & Poor's stripping the United States of its top triple-A credit status.

The Treasury announced on Thursday that it has taken "extraordinary measures" to avoid a government debt default by temporarily suspending payments not immediately needed by federal retirement, disability and health benefit funds and channeling the money instead to other urgent services needed to keep the government running until June at least.

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US to Designate Wagner Group as Transnational Criminal Organization - White House

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - The United States will soon designate the private military company Wagner Group as a transnational criminal organization and impose sanctions on its network, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

"The Department of the Treasury will be designating Wagner as a significant transnational criminal organization under Executive Order 13581 as amended," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby said the US government will also impose additional sanctions next week against Wagner and its support network across multiple continents.

The US government will work to identify, disrupt, expose and target firms that are assisting the Wagner Group, Kirby said.

Designating the Wagner Group as a transnational criminal organization will open up additional avenues for the United States to continue to not only sanction Wagner but put more pressure on

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the company's ability to do business around the world and assist others in doing the same, Kirby added.

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US Senators Express Opposition to Gas Stove Ban, Request Clarity From Regulator - Letter

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - A group of Republican US Senators wrote a letter to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to express their opposition to a potential ban on gas stoves and request clarity from the regulator on the proposed policy, Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith said on Friday.

Earlier this month, US media reported on CPSC Commissioner Richard Trumka's desire to ban gas stoves in the United States. However, CPSC Chair Alex Hoehn-Saric said in a statement in response to the reports that the commission is not seeking to ban gas stoves at this time.

"CPSC Commissioner Trumka's comments have created uncertainty about a potential ban on gas stoves, and we need clarification on how the CPSC plans to move forward. An outright ban is a glaring regulatory overreach that would cause more problems that it would solve," Hyde-Smith said via Twitter.

US Senators including Hyde-Smith, Cynthia Lummis, Jim Risch and Roger Wicker sent the letter to Hoehn-Saric on Thursday, delivering a copy to Trumka and other CPSC commissioners as well.

More than one-third of households in the United States use gas stoves, the letter said, citing Energy Information Administration data. Gas stoves also tend to be more durable, with a ban likely resulting in a disproportionate impact on low-income populations, the letter said.

CPSC is researching gas emissions in stoves and exploring ways to address related health concerns, Hoehn-Saric said in a statement. Research indicates that emissions from gas stoves can be hazardous, Hoehn-Saric said.

"Like the CPSC, our desire is to ensure that consumer products are as safe as possible. Home appliances are some of the most expensive purchases that our constituents make each year, and those products must be designed first and foremost with safety in mind. However, we remain concerned about regulatory overreach from federal agencies," the lawmakers' letter said.

CPSC should instead gather more information and work with manufacturers to ensure the safety of gas stoves, the letter said.

The senators requested a response to the letter by January 27.

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Existing US Home Sales Down 11th Month in Row as Inflation, Rate Hikes Bite - Realtors

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WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Existing home sales in the United States fell for an 11th month in a row in December, growing at its slowest pace in 12 years, as the economy transitions from runaway inflation and aggressive rate hikes that drove prospective buyers away, the country's leading realtors group said Friday.

"December was another difficult month for buyers, who continue to face limited inventory and high mortgage rates," Lawrence Yun, chief economist at the National Association of Realtors, said in a statement. The association, however, "expect[s] sales to pick up again soon, since mortgage rates have markedly declined after peaking late last year", Yun added.

Existing home sales, which account for resale of previously transacted homes, ended December at a seasonally adjusted, annualized pace of 4.02 million units. That was 34% lower than in December 2021. Historical data from the realtors association showed it to be the smallest advance since November 2010, when the US economy was struggling through a housing crisis brought on by faulty subprime mortgages.

Since January 2022, existing home sales have fallen a break, as inflation triggered by trillion-dollar government spending and other relief for the coronavirus pandemic added to aggressive rate hikes by the Federal Reserve. The central bank's monetary tightening have bumped up mortgage rates for home buyers. The average for a 30-year, fixed loan for a home — the benchmark for mortgages in the United States — was at 6.33% during the week ended January 13. That was up from 4.54% in 2018 and 3.94% in 2019.

Housing and real estate play important roles in the US economy, with roughly 65% of occupied housing units being owner-occupied. That makes homes a substantial source of household wealth and home construction a key provider of employment.

In the 2008/09 financial crisis, a crash of the housing market precipitated what later came to be known as the era of the Great Recession. Since then, the US property market has rapidly recovered on the back of economic recovery as well as demand from buyers.

New home sales plummeted 11% in September, reversing the large gain in the prior month, as spiraling lending rates choked off prospective buyers.

Until their recent decline, US home prices jumped almost 40% over the past two years. Price hikes and previous rate hikes by the Fed had pushed up the cost of US home ownership to the highest in a generation, putting purchases out of reach for a growing number of prospective buyers, particularly first-timers.

Data from the realtors association shows the market continuing to slow, with homes sitting on the market an average 26 days, up from 24 days in November and 19 days in December 2021. The trouble, however, is that sellers are not entering the market, given falling prices and weaker demand. The total inventory is higher than a year ago because homes are sitting on the market longer. New listings in January are down year over year.

Data shows buyers still struggling to make their first home purchases, with maiden buyers accounting for just 31% of the December sales of previously-owned houses. While this is up from 30% in December 2021, it is still far from the historical norm of 40%.

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Austin Says No Announcement on Abrams for Kiev, No Linkage to Leopards

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said on Friday he has nothing to announce with respect to the provision of Abrams tanks to Ukraine and denied that Germany conditions sending its Leopard tanks to Kiev on the United States providing its own tanks first.

"I don't have any announcements to make on him once. And you heard the German Ministry of Defense say that they've not made a decision on Leopards," Austin told reporters following the eighth Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting in Germany. "I think you heard the German Minister of Defense [Boris Pistorius] say earlier today that there's no linkage between providing Abrams and providing Leopards."

Austin added that instead of focusing on Abrams tanks for Ukraine, the United States is currently preoccupied with helping Kiev to prepare for a spring counteroffensive against advancing Russian forces.

On Thursday, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said that the United States believes it makes no sense to provide Abrams tanks to Ukraine, considering the high costs associated with their maintenance.

The successes of the Russian military in recent weeks, including the capture of the key Ukrainian town of Soledar in the Donbas region, have intensified discussions in Western ruling circles about the need to supply Kiev with heavy weapons and, above all, tanks. A number of European countries, including Poland, have declared their readiness to send their heavy tanks to Ukraine if other countries follow suit. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom has already announced the dispatch of 14 Challenger 2 tanks to the country.

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Chicago Pharmacy Employee Convicted for Kickback Conspiracy Scheme - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - A federal jury in Illinois convicted Chicago resident Mark Sorensen for participating in a conspiracy to pay approximately $25 million in illegal kickbacks to generate business for his durable medical equipment pharmacy, the US Justice Department said on Friday.

"Mark Sorensen, 53, worked at Symed, a Chicago pharmacy that paid illegal kickbacks to obtain patients to bill to Medicare, TRICARE and the Department of Labor's Office of Workers' Compensation Programs (OWCP)," the Justice Department said in a press release.

Between 2015 and 2018, Sorensen illegally bought patient leads from Bernie Perconti, who obtained them from others, including Christine Anderson and Craig O'Neil, the release said.

"Without the involvement of the Symed, the conspirators could not have submitted claims to obtain reimbursement from Medicare or other federal health care benefit programs," the release said.

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Perconti, O'Neil and Anderson each pleaded guilty to being involved in a conspiracy to pay and receive kickbacks in 2019, July 2020 and January 2021, respectively, and are awaiting sentencing, the release added.
Sorensen was convicted of one count of conspiracy and three counts of payment of illegal kickbacks and faces a maximum of five years behind bars on each count if he is convicted, according to the release.

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US Congressman Santos' Twitter Account Suspended Amid Accusations of Dishonesty

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Twitter suspended the official account of US Congressman George Santos amid accusations of dishonesty against the freshman Republican lawmaker and calls for him to step down.
Santos' official Twitter account as a US Congressman was suspended on Friday, with no explanation provided except for a standard disclaimer that the platform suspends "accounts that violate the Twitter rules."
However, the official campaign account run by Santos has not been suspended.
Following his election to the US House of Representatives, Santos admitted to allegations of fabricating portions of his professional and educational backgrounds, prompting condemnation by some Republicans and calls for the lawmaker to resign.
In addition, Santos has been accused of violating campaign finance laws, resulting in federal probes being undertaken into the matter.
Santos also reportedly admitted to stealing a checkbook in Brazil in 2008 to purchase shoes and clothing, although he avoided prosecution.
Santos has denied recent allegations of performing as a "drag queen" and characterized the claims as categorically false. The lawmaker has also dismissed the calls for him to resign.

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Republican, Democrat Lawmakers Say Do Not Want 'Blank Check' for Ukraine But 'Big Check'

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Democratic Senator Richard Blumenthal and Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said during a meeting in Kiev with Ukrainian officials on Friday that they are not calling for a "blank check" to provide continued assistance to Ukraine, but Congress would need to provide a "big check" to enable the Ukrainian troops to repel Russian forces.
"We're not asking for a blank check," Blumenthal said when the senators were asked about concerns that a Republican-majority US House of Representatives would cut aid to Ukraine.
"We don't want a blank check. We want a big check."

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Speaker Kevin McCarthy last year vowed not provide a blank check to Ukraine if Republicans won a majority in the House. Since winning a majority in the November midterm elections, Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Greene Taylor recently introduced a resolution to audit US assistance sent to Ukraine, which McCarthy said he would support.
Graham said from his point of view, the Republicans in Congress will not cut aid to Ukraine during in the new session.
Blumenthal underscored that the United States should not send US troops to Ukraine but provide Ukrainian forces will all the military capability US troops would have if they were engaged in combat in Ukraine, including provide main battle tanks and long-range systems like the Army Tactical Missile System.
The two senators, who were also joined by Democratic Senator Sheldon Whitehouse in their meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, expressed concern that the coming weeks and months of fighting could mark a critical turning point in the conflict.
On Thursday, the United States announced a new military assistance package for Ukraine with $2.5 billion worth of weapons and ammunition. The package includes munitions for NASAMS air defense systems and High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS). The package also includes dozens of Bradley and Stryker armored combat vehicles and eight Avenger air defense systems.

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Three Drones Attack US Base in Syria, No US Forces Injured - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Three drones struck the US al-Tanf military base in Syria, causing no injuries to American forces, CENTCOM said.
"This morning, three one-way attack drones attacked the At Tanf Garrison in Syria. Two of the drones were shot down by Coalition Forces while one struck the compound, injuring two members of the Syrian Free Army partner force who received medical treatment," CENTCOM said in a statement.
No US forces were injured, it added.
CENTCOM spokesman Joe Buccino said that attacks of this kind jeopardize the fight against the Islamic State terrorist group (IS, banned in Russia).
Al-Tanf is a small outpost in southeastern Syria along the Baghdad-Damascus highway. US troops have used the base for counterterrorism operations against the IS and to train Syrian fighters since at least 2016.

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Top US General Says Difficult for Ukraine to Eject Russian Forces From ‘Occupied’ Areas

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WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - It would be difficult for Ukraine to militarily eject Russian forces from the territory that is now under Moscow's authority, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said on Friday.

"From a military standpoint, I still maintain that for this year, it would be very, very difficult to militarily eject the Russian forces from every inch of Russian-occupied Ukraine," Milley said.

Milley made the remark during a press conference after the meeting of the multilateral Ukraine Defense Contact Group.

However, Milley said it is still possible to establish a stabilized defensive front or even conduct offensive operations by Ukraine.

Milley predicted the conflict will end in negotiations, to be determined by the leadership of Russia and Ukraine.

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Canada Takes Steps to Enable Commercial Space Launches – Transport Ministry

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) – Canada is taking steps to enable commercial space launches and encourages the industry to present their projects, Transport Minister Omar Alghabra said on Friday.

"In today's world, we are seeing a great deal of private sector leadership supporting space related projects, and our government wants to encourage and welcome that kind of private sector investment and innovation here … We want to position Canada as a leader in commercial space launches," Alghabra said during a press conference.

Alghabra said Ottawa wishes to convey a "loud and clear" message to Canadians as well as the private sector and other countries that it intends to become a leader in space launches.

To implement the country's goals in the space sector, Canada will begin with a set of interim measures which will last for about three years, Alghabra said.

The interim measures will follow current legislation and consider existing regulations, Alghabra added. Canada will allow commercial launches that are safe and secure, while also being respectful toward the environment, he added.

Moreover, Transport Canada will cooperate with other federal agencies to determinate "robust" regulations for said space launches, Alghabra said.

The minister intends to launch an interdepartmental review process allowing for expertise from other government agencies and ensuring the regulations are consistent with international treaties and conventions, the country's national interests and foreign policy.

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NASA, JAXA Astronauts Begin Spacewalk to Prepare for Intl'l. Space Station Power Upgrades

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WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - A pair of NASA and Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) astronauts began their first spacewalk outside of the International Space Station (ISS) to assemble mounting brackets for the station's next set of solar arrays, the US space agency said in a blog post.

"NASA astronaut Nicole Mann and Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA) astronaut Koichi Wakata began a spacewalk at 8:14 a.m. EST to complete the installation of two mounting platforms as part of planned solar array augmentation on the starboard side of the space station's truss," the blog post said.

They will finish installing a mounting platform on the 1B power channel, a process started during a previous spacewalk, and will begin installing a mounting platform on the 1A power channel, the blog post also said.

The installation is part of a series of spacewalks to augment the ISS's power channels with new roll-out solar arrays (iROSAs), the blog post added.

Four iROSAs have been installed and two more will be mounted to the platforms installed during this spacewalk, according to the blog post.

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US Official to Visit Belgium, UK for Talks on Achieving Long-Term Peace - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations Anne Witkowsky will visit the United Kingdom and Belgium on January 23-27 for talks on increasing collaboration to achieve long-term peace, the State Department said on Friday.

"The focus of the talks includes opportunities for deeper engagement through the US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, a core component of which is working with partners to foster greater collaboration for long-term peace," the State Department said.

Witkowsky will also discuss engagement on security issues as well as atrocity prevention and women, the statement said.

In London, Witkowsky will meet with representatives from Parliament and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development offices, the statement said.

However, in Belgium, Witkowsky will also meet with NATO, European Union and International Organization of Migration representatives in addition to officials from Belgium's foreign affairs ministry, the statement added.

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Google Says to Cut 12,000 Jobs in Latest Round of Big Tech Layoffs

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WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Google will reduce its global workforce by 12,000 jobs, CEO Sundar Pichai announced on Friday in the latest round of big tech layoffs.
"I have some difficult news to share. We've decided to reduce our workforce by approximately 12,000 roles. We've already sent a separate email to employees in the US who are affected. In other countries, this process will take longer due to local laws and practices," Pichai said in a statement.
The layoffs are the result of a "rigorous review across product areas and functions to ensure that our people and roles are aligned with our highest priorities as a company," the CEO explained.
"The roles we're eliminating reflect the outcome of that review. They cut across Alphabet, product areas, functions, levels and regions," he added.
Pichai also defended pivoting the company to be "AI-first" years ago, noting that it led to "groundbreaking advances" across Google businesses and the entire industry.

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Major Train Service in Washington DC Area Canceled Due to System-Wide Outage

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) – One of the major commuter train systems in the Washington DC Metropolitan Area canceled all services in the US capital and neighborhoods on Friday following a system-wide outage, the Maryland Transit Administration (MTA) said.
"Due to a system wide outage all service [MARC Train Service] has been temporary suspended. No estimated time for restoration of service," MTA said in a statement.
The company is working on eliminating the cause of the problem and on restoring the service, it added.
The outage affected about 20 trains between Washington and different cities in the state of Maryland during morning peak hours.
MTA Administrator Holly Arnold said that MARC lines had been affected by a positive train control (PTC) communication issue. This system is used to prevent train collisions, over-speed derailments and moving trains through switches.

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RPT - Biden Fueled Crises Abroad, Failed to Deliver at Home in First 2 Years in Office - Experts

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) - Halfway through his first four-year term as leader of the United States, President Joe Biden has destroyed diplomatic bridges with the other two major superpowers and crippled the US and allies' economies, while failing to deliver on key agenda items for his supporters, experts told Sputnik.

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Friday marks two years since Biden was inaugurated, a period during which the White House has argued the administration delivered on a number of fronts - from boosting jobs to handling the pandemic.

Biden's job approval rating, according to the Real Clear Politics (RCP) poll of polls, sits at about 42.8%, not much higher than President Donald Trump's rating of 41% at the same point in his presidency. Biden's RCP rating in the past 2 years dropped to as low as 37%, matching Trump's all-time nadir.

The White House website officially lists as Biden's leading accomplishments rescuing the domestic economy, starting the rebuilding of national infrastructure, and rallying the Western world in support of Ukraine.

The administration has also lauded Biden policies that helped bring down the unemployment rate. When taking office the rate was at 6.3% and is now 3.5%, matching its lowest level in half a century.

Critics, while pointing to his continual gaffes, have raised concerns about his age and mental competence. At 80, he is now the oldest person ever to hold the office.

He has also come under fire for the crisis at the US southern border and is facing a number of probes under the new Republican-majority House.

The congressional opposition wants to investigate Hunter Biden's business dealings in Ukraine along with the recent revelations of Biden mishandling classified information after leaving the White House as vice president. In addition, Republicans are demanding more details on the US botched exit from Afghanistan, among other issues.

Biden has also been plagued by a supply chain crisis, rising inflation and skyrocketing gas prices, which many have tied to his bid to isolate Russia and reckless spending to back Kiev. On Thursday, Biden authorized another $2.5 billion in security aid for Ukraine, for example, bringing the total to about $27.5 billion since taking office. This comes as economists predict the US could face a recession within the next 12 months, according to a Wall Street Journal survey published earlier this week.

Shortly after Biden was inaugurated the US inflation rate was around 1.7% and a gallon of gas on average cost about $2.50, according to data tracked by the Energy Information Administration (EIA). By mid-2022 gas prices would rise north of $5.00/gallon before gradually coming down to $3.30 today.

Meanwhile, inflation rose to a 40-year high of 9% last summer and came down to 6.5% only after a series of interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve.

Some detractors have accused Biden and his policies for putting the US on a nuclear war footing with both Russia and China.

Canadian historian and political commentator Matthew Ehret, vice president of the Rising Tide Foundation, said Biden's attempt to economically isolate Russia with ferocious economic sanctions has backfired and brought chaos and disaster to the economies of Western Europe.

"He [Biden] has… successfully destroyed more diplomatic bridges between the USA and both Russia and China at the same time while crippling an already dependent Europe which has become ever more dependent on extremely expensive US energy resources," Ehret told Sputnik.

Political commentator, author and former hedge fund manager Charles Ortel warned that Biden is pushing the US into situations that threaten America's security.

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"We rush headlong into dangerous, tragic conflicts in ways that already have tarnished America's standing with allies and rivals alike," Ortel said.

DOMESTIC FRONT FAILURES

Biden has not only fueled conflict abroad, he has stoked divisions at home, Ortel added.

"At home, Biden and his cabinet are fomenting hatred and division, for example failing to stop raucous, intimidating protests against Supreme Court justices or in unpresidential speeches insulting Republicans and Trump supporters," Ortel said.

In addition, Ortel pointed to the border crisis as another problem exacerbated by Biden.

Biden after taking office rescinded a number of Trump's stringent immigration policies, decisions fellow Democrats have even criticized.

According to border control data, illegal crossings in fiscal year 2022 exceeded 2.7 million, breaking the previous record by 1 million.

Ortel also said the economy is much worse off than it was under Biden's predecessor.

"Conditions inside the United States in the Main Street economy and on Wall Street are deeply concerning," he added.

Ehret said Biden's policies have damaged the economy and there might be little hope for recovery.

"Thus far Biden has done a remarkable job at successfully annihilating his nations' already dwindling chances of surviving the economic collapse which it has brought entirely onto itself," Ehret said.

Biden, he added, has also succeeded in destroying America's farmers and capacity to grow food while creating rates of scarcity that have never been seen in US history.

Christian political activist Reverend Graylan Scott Hagler said while Biden's message about the right threatening democracy resonated with voters in the midterms, he failed on other fronts important to Democrats.

"In terms of the other things like voting rights, protecting reproductive rights, canceling student debt, the will of the Democrats never materialized," Hagler told Sputnik.

Ortel said Biden may have so far fooled "a majority of voters most of the time," but hopefully the US public will realize the truth.

"But, with luck, American voters will finally wake up and prove that no one is above the law forever by bringing Joe Biden, his family and their puppeteers to justice in the courts, at the ballot box and for posterity," Ortel concluded.

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US Estimates Russian Oil Price Cap May Save $6Bln Annually for Africa's Major Importers

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) – The United States expects that the implementation of the price cap on Russian oil will allow Africa's largest oil-importing countries to save up to $6 billion annually, Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen said on Friday.

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"While the policy is in the early stages of implementation, Treasury estimates that it has the potential to result in around $6 billion in annual savings for the 17 largest net oil-importing African countries," Yellen said during her visit to Senegal.
She claimed to be seeing examples of emerging markets saving even more by using the price cap to negotiate steeper discounts with Russia. The United States encourages more countries to do the same, Yellen added.
The US and its partners will soon impose a price cap on Russian refined products as well, Yellen said.
The G7 implemented a $60 per barrel cap in December, with plans to periodically reevaluate the price cap to keep it below market price. The multilateral price cap is intended to reduce Russia's revenues from energy exports.

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New $2.5Bln US Military Package for Ukraine Includes New NASAMS Systems – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) – The newly-announced $2.5 billion US military package for Ukraine includes new National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems among other capabilities, the Pentagon said on Friday.
"This includes new National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems, and eight Avenger air-defense systems," the Pentagon said in a press release.
"Our new package provides even more air defense capabilities to help Ukraine defend its cities and its skies," Austin told members of the eighth Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting in Germany, as quoted in the release.
The United States to date has delivered two NASAMS systems to Ukraine out of a total of eight systems committed to Kiev. The other six air defense systems are not expected to be delivered anytime soon, according to Pentagon officials.

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Crypto Lender Genesis Files for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy in US – Company

WASHINGTON, January 20 (Sputnik) – Digital currency prime brokerage Genesis Global Holdco, LLC and two of its lending subsidiaries have filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy in New York, according to a release on Friday.
The company's liquidity issues were caused by "the recent extraordinary challenges" in the industry, including the default of Three Arrows Capital and the bankruptcy of crypto exchange FTX, Genesis Interim CEO Derar Islim said in the release.
"Genesis Global Holdco, LLC and two of its lending business subsidiaries, Genesis Global Capital, LLC and Genesis Asia Pacific Pte. Ltd., filed voluntary petitions under Chapter 11 of the

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U.S. Bankruptcy Code in the United States Bankruptcy Court for the Southern District of New York," the release stated.

It added that "Genesis's other subsidiaries involved in the derivatives and spot trading and custody businesses and Genesis Global Trading are not included in the filing and continue client trading operations."

As part of its Chapter 11 filing, Genesis has proposed a plan for a global resolution of all claims through the creation of a trust that will distribute assets to creditors. The plan suggests a dual track process in pursuit of a sale, capital raise, and/or equitization transaction that would enable the business to emerge under new ownership.

The company will initiate a marketing and sale process to monetize GGH's assets or otherwise raise capital, using the transaction proceeds to pay creditors. If the marketing process does not result in a sale or capital raise, creditors will receive ownership interests in Reorganized GGH. All aspects of the restructuring process will be overseen by an independent special committee of the company's board of directors.

Genesis has more than $150 million in cash on hand to support its ongoing business operations and facilitate the restructuring process. The company has filed a number of customary "first day" motions with the court to enable day-to-day operations to continue in the normal course. Court approval for these requests is expected in the coming days.

Redemptions and new loan originations in the lending business remain suspended, and claims will be addressed through the Chapter 11 process.

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