

**7/13/22 Wednesday**

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Graham Challenges Georgia Subpoena Requesting Testimony Over 2020 Calls to Election Officials

By - Evan Craighead

Earlier this week, Fulton County Superior Court Judge Robert McBurney issued a subpoena requesting grand jury testimony from Sen. Lindsey Graham, who was described as a “necessary and material witness” to an investigation into former US President Donald Trump’s alleged attempts at overturning the results of the 2020 presidential election.

Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) is seeking to fight a recent subpoena to testify in a Georgia special grand jury investigation, arguing in a new filing that he never attempted to persuade Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger to overturn the state’s election results.

Graham’s testimony was supposed to relate to phone calls made to the Georgia Secretary of State during the weeks after the 2020 presidential election, according to the subpoena.

“Senator Graham did not inject himself into Georgia’s electoral process, and never tried to alter the outcome of any election,” reads the motion, [as reported by Fox News](#). “The conversation was about absentee ballots and Georgia’s procedures.”

The filing took place on Tuesday in South Carolina, Graham’s home state.

Graham also claimed the federal judge’s subpoena cannot stand, as his conversations with Raffensperger and other state officials fell within the parameters of his official conduct as a US legislator.

“Senator Graham’s contact with Georgia officials referenced in the Certificate falls within the ‘legislative sphere’ because it was to gather information relevant to his oversight responsibilities as Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee and given his obligations under the Electoral Count Act of 1887,” the filing states.

Attorneys for the South Carolina senator argue the subpoena is “gross overreach” and “an abuse of power.”

Graham told Fox News he was simply trying to do his “day job.”

“If we open up county prosecutors being able to call every member of the Senate based on some investigation they think is good for the country, we’re opening Pandora’s Box,” he told the outlet.

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, who announced the subpoena against Graham earlier this month, has also sought testimony from former Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani.

Raffensperger has already testified before the grand jury. Graham has been asked to deliver his testimony on August 2.

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## Biden: US Will Use Force Against Iran 'as Last Resort' to Prevent Tehran From Acquiring Nukes By - Evan Craighead

US President Joe Biden kicked off the first leg of his trip to the Middle East on Wednesday, arriving in Israel for a three-day visit that is set to include talks regarding Iran's developing nuclear program and stalled indirect negotiations between Washington and Tehran.

The US would only authorize the use of force "as a last resort" in its campaign to prevent Iran from acquiring or developing nuclear weapons, US President Joe Biden told Israeli media on Wednesday.

"Iran cannot get a nuclear weapon," Biden said to Channel 12's Yonit Levi, hours before he boarded an aircraft for his trip to the Middle East.

The pre-taped interview was broadcast alongside the US president's arrival at Tel Aviv's Ben Gurion Airport.

Biden went on to declare he believes the 2015 nuclear deal that then-President Trump withdrew the US from in 2018 should be resurrected because "the only thing more dangerous than the Iran that exists now is an Iran with nuclear weapons."

"They're closer to a nuclear weapon now than they were before," the US president said of Iran, noting that Trump's decision to leave the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was "a gigantic mistake" in terms of geopolitical strategy.

At the same time, Biden claimed the US' return to a nuclear agreement like the Iran deal "is up to Iran now."

Biden refused to disclose whether Israeli forces would be called to assist with any military action against Iranian nuclear sites.

The goal of the trip "is about stability in the Middle East," Biden said, arguing that the US cannot simply walk away from the region and allow Russia and China to "fill the vacuum."

"It is overwhelmingly in the US interest to have more stability in the Middle East," Biden said. He also emphasized it would be in Israel's best interest to be "integrated in the region as an equal and accepted," as this would likely open the door for "an accommodation with the Palestinians down the road."

As for Saudi-Israeli relations, Biden admitted it will "take a long time," but the two nations ultimately have to accept "each other's presence" in the Middle East.

Biden reportedly received a briefing on the Iron Dome missile defense system, which is set to be upgraded with a new laser system.

### Biden: The 'Few' Democrats Calling Israel an Apartheid State Are 'Wrong'

Biden notably took shots at fellow Democrats during the interview, telling Levi that the members of his party who have been critical of the Jewish state's treatment of Palestinians were flat-out wrong.

"There are few of them. I think they're wrong. I think they're making a mistake," the US president said. "Israel is a democracy. Israel is our ally. Israel is a friend, and I think that I make no apologies."

He added "there is no possibility" Democrats would turn their backs on Israel, adding that he has no shame and will not offer apologies for the billions of dollars in aid extended to the Jewish state.

Last year, Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) led a Democratic effort to block the \$735 million sale of precision-guided munitions to Israel due to the bombing of Palestinian civilians and media centers, such as Israel's May 2021 airstrike on a prominent Gaza building that housed Al Jazeera and Associated Press outlets.

AOC's release on the matter noted that the Joint Direct Attack Munitions, or JDAMS, kits were being used in a regional conflict, "which has killed ten Israelis and over 200 Palestinians, including at least 58 children."

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Crypto Lender Celsius Files for Chapter 11 Protection After Halting Withdrawals

By - Ian DeMartino

The cryptocurrency market as a whole has been in trouble for most of 2022, with stablecoins losing their peg to fiat currencies and a lack of liquidity hurting lending platforms like Celsius. Crypto lender Celsius Network has filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection, a little more than a month after the lender halted withdrawals from the site.

[CNBC first reported](#) that the company was planning to file for bankruptcy early on Wednesday, and the news was confirmed by Celsius later in the day.

Celsius previously offered investors a chance to make and take loans in cryptocurrencies, offering higher yields than a bank and, they claimed, less risk. However, the company overextended itself by making a series of large loans without enough collateral to back them up. The company, [valued at \\$3 billion](#) during its last venture funding round, started feeling the pinch when cryptocurrency prices plummeted in May after a popular stablecoin (a cryptocurrency designed to stay constant with the price of a fiat currency) TerraUSD lost its peg to the US dollar.

In June, the company halted withdrawals and all trading on the site, leading to mass speculation that a rug pull or bankruptcy proceedings would be happening soon.

Chapter 11 bankruptcy does not necessarily spell the end for Celsius, rather it means the company will be audited and restructured under the purview of the bankruptcy court and will be able to remain in operation during that time. In the news release, Celsius indicated they plan to use the money they have on hand to keep operations going and employees paid while it restructures.

"This is the right decision for our community and company," Alex Mashinsky, co-Founder & CEO of Celsius said in the company release. "We have a strong and experienced team in place to lead Celsius through this process. I am confident that when we look back at the history of Celsius, we will see this as a defining moment, where acting with resolve and confidence served the community and strengthened the future of the company."

However, the company is not requesting the court allow them to open up withdrawals at this time. With traditional lending platforms, customers would be protected under federal deposit insurance. As unsecured creditors, they will instead be far down the list of creditors who are made whole.

At this point, the best chance for customers to get their value back is for the restructuring to go well and for Celsius to manage to become a viable business again. The company says it has \$167 million in cash on hand. It [recently paid](#) a \$50 million loan back to Decentralized Finance (DeFi) loan platform Compound, allowing it to access \$200 million in wrapped bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies it had tied up in the network as collateral.

This marks the second cryptocurrency lending platform to declare Chapter 11 bankruptcy this month; Voyager Digital Ltd filed for Chapter 11 protection on July 6.

Bitcoin did not seem to move much on the news, with its price back above \$20,000 after a brief dip below that number earlier in the week.

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Second-Ever Skeleton From the Battle of Waterloo Has Been Found, Archaeologists Reveal  
By - Ian DeMartino

The Battle of Waterloo took place in Belgium in 1815 and was the decisive battle of the Napoleonic wars, ending Napoleon Bonaparte's conquest of Europe. It involved Napoleon's forces and a coalition of European states led by British commander, the Duke of Wellington, and Prussia's Marshal von Blücher.

The remains of a soldier killed at the Battle of Waterloo have been found in an extremely rare archaeological discovery.

This new finding included the remains of three horses and amputated limbs; it also included the second-ever full skeleton discovered from Waterloo, more than 200 years after the battle was fought.

According to [war service records](#), at least 3,500 Anglo-Allied forces and 24,000 French forces were killed outright in the battle, to go along with thousands more injured or missing. But very few remains and no mass graves have been found, leading archaeologists to wonder: "What happened to all the bodies?"

The prevailing theory is that grave robbers collected the bones, ground them up, and used them as fertilizer. Bonemeal was the most popular form of fertilizer in Europe at the time, until superphosphates were discovered a few decades later.

The dig, which is ongoing until July 15, was run by Waterloo Uncovered, a charity that brings soldiers and archaeologists together to search old battlefields for remains and historical finds. Using the soldiers' expertise, they were able to determine the grave was not a hastily built burial site, but an organized operation, contradicting reports that were written shortly after the battle. The group found amputated limbs at the site in 2019, leading to further investigation of the area. "The full skeleton changes the way we see this deposit, before it was trash from the hospital. Now we can see they dug this big pit," Veronique Moolaert, a Belgian archaeologist told The Telegraph. "They used quite an organization - the horses are on one side, the limbs in the middle and on the other side the entire skeleton."

The remains were found behind Mont Saint-Jean farm, which served as a field hospital for Wellington's forces.

Experts say it is too early to tell the nationality of the remains, but since the skeleton still has its teeth, they hope they will be able to determine his identity in the future.

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Bolton: Critics of Coup Admission Are 'Snowflakes' That 'Don't Understand' Efforts to Protect US

By - Ian DeMartino

John Bolton was the national security adviser under former President Donald Trump for 17 months before being fired. He also served as the director of the Project for a New American Century, a think tank that advocates for an aggressive US foreign policy.

Trump-era adviser John Bolton responded to surging backlash against him on Wednesday, remarking that individuals who opposed his recent remarks on US-staged coups were nothing more than "snowflakes."

Bolton's comments came a day after he [casually admitted](#) to having taken part in planning a coup d'état during an on-air discussion with CNN's Jake Tapper on Tuesday. At the time, the pair had been weighing in on the latest revelations from the Capitol riot public hearings. However, firing back at his critics on Wednesday, Bolton stated during an interview with conservative news outlet Newsmax that those in opposition to his beliefs simply are not grasping what is needed to "protect" the Land of the Brave.

"I think there are a lot of snowflakes out there that don't understand what you need to do to protect the United States," Bolton said.

While Bolton did not specify during the CNN interview which country's government he tried to overthrow, he did mention that he wrote about Venezuela in his memoirs. "Not that we had much to do with it," Bolton quickly backtracked at the time, "but I saw what it takes for an opposition to overthrow an illegally elected president, and they failed."

During [the Newsmax interview](#), Bolton continued, implying that coups are what presidents need to do to keep Americans safe.

"I'm not going to get into specifics. I did write about Venezuela in my memoir, and I think that any president that's not willing to do what it takes to protect the interests of the American people needs to have some counseling."

Newsmax anchor Bianca de la Garza did not ask a follow-up question.

During the Trump administration, the United States backed opposition candidate Juan Guaidó as the legitimate president of Venezuela.

An attempted coup d'état, known as Operation Gideon, saw members of a private military group, Silvercorp USA, attempt to remove Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro from power and arrest him; however, the attempt was quickly snuffed out by the Venezuelan government. Multiple Venezuelan opposition fighters were killed and two former US Special Forces members were arrested by the Venezuelan government.

Officially, the State Department [denied](#) any involvement in the coup.

Even though Maduro controls most of the power levers in the country, the State Department continues to recognize Guaidó as the interim president of Venezuela.

But relations have [thawed somewhat as of late](#), with the Biden administration seeking relief from record high oil prices in the United States. In May, the United States dropped some sanctions on Venezuela and allowed Chevron to start negotiations with the Maduro government, something it previously forbade. Still, the Biden administration has continued the policy of officially recognizing Guaidó as the legitimate interim president of Venezuela, despite the fact that many Venezuelans have rejected Guaidó as the country's leader.

Beyond failing to enact regime change in Venezuela, Bolton was also a strong proponent of invading Iraq and has advocated using military force against Iran on multiple occasions. He also worked at the State Department between 2001 and 2005, when there was a failed coup attempt against former Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez in 2002 that was [linked to Bush administration officials](#).

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Biden: 'I Would Not Be Disappointed' With a Trump Rematch in 2024

By - Ian DeMartino

Biden landed in Israel on Wednesday, with plans to stay there for two days before moving on to Saudi Arabia as part of a Middle Eastern tour. While in Israel the American president will also be making an appearance in the occupied West Bank.

US President Joe Biden said in a recent interview that [he is ready for a rematch](#) against his predecessor Donald Trump if it comes to that in the 2024 election cycle.

"I'm not predicting. But I would not be disappointed," Biden said in a pre-taped interview with Israel's Channel 12. Biden defeated Trump with 306 electoral votes to Trump's 232 in the 2020 election.

While Biden believes he can defeat Trump again, he did say he hopes the Republican Party can distance itself from Trump and politicians touting similar antics.

"No, look, the one thing I know about politics and American politics in particular is there's no way to predict what's going to happen. I'm not even halfway through my term yet ... but my hope is that the Republican Party moves back to a normal position that's not this MAGA party it's become in many ways," Biden stated.

The interview aired on Israeli TV on Tuesday, one day before the president arrived in Israel to appear for photo-ops, receive a briefing on Israel's Iron Dome and Iron Beam air defense systems and speak to both Palestinian and Israeli leaders.

It is expected Trump will make an announcement on his 2024 plans in the coming weeks as sources have detailed to The Hill that Trump is in the midst of internal discussions about a potential run. [Previously](#), the former president said he would wait until after the November midterm elections before making an official decision.

Biden has consistently and vehemently stated he plans to run for reelection in 2024, despite whispers from prominent Democrats it might be best for the party to nominate another contender in his place.

A Wednesday [Yahoo!/YouGov poll](#) stated that just 18% of Americans want Biden to run for president in 2024. Even among his own party, support for the commander-in-chief is not very robust; the same poll said 41% of Democrats would prefer a different candidate to win the primary, compared to 35% who said they want Biden in 2024.

The latest poll does not appear to be an aberration, either. A Monday [New York Times/Siena College poll](#) was even worse for the president. It found that 64% of Democratic voters preferred the party pick a different candidate, while only 13% of all Americans think the country is on the right track.

One silver lining for the president is The Times/Siena poll did indicate Biden would narrowly beat Trump in a hypothetical matchup - 44% to 41% - though Trump has outperformed polls in the past, as he did when he upset former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the 2016 election cycle. With the 2024 election still more than two years away, public sentiment is sure to change in that time, likely with whatever direction the economy goes in.

The Times/Siena poll found that more than two-thirds of respondents named the economy as “extremely important” to them, but only 1% rated the economy as excellent.

Besides the 2024 election, Biden also stressed in the Channel 12 interview that the United States will continue to support Israel, regardless of who is in charge of the country. Israel’s governing coalition disbanded in June. Naftali Bennett replaced Benjamin Netanyahu as prime minister in June 2021, but the coalition fractured and new elections are expected to take place in October.

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Trump to Return to DC for First Time Since Leaving Office – Reports

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump will return to Washington, DC this month for the first time since stepping down from office last year, according to Axios.

Trump will deliver a keynote address on July 26 at the policy summit of the America First Policy Institute, a non-profit research institute led by former senior officials of his administration.

The summit will focus on issues such as energy prices, inflation, education, crime, and border security. Various high-profile Republicans are expected to attend, including former Trump White House officials such as Kellyanne Conway, John Bolton and former House Speaker Newt Gingrich.

Trump's visit comes as a Politico-Morning Consult poll found 61% of Americans believe he should not run for reelection in 2024, versus 64% who feel the same about incumbent President Joe Biden.

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Russian Officials 'Have No Place' at This Week's G20 Meetings - Yellen

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - Russian officials have no place at this week's G20 meetings of finance ministers and central bankers as the Ukraine conflict has made business as usual with Moscow impossible, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Thursday.

"Well, you know, I think I've made clear that it cannot be business as usual with respect to Russia's participation at these meetings," Yellen said in a transcript of a news conference in Nusa Dua, Indonesia, where the G20 meetings are being held. "Russia's actions are not the actions of a government that upholds international norms and laws. Representatives of the Putin regime have no place at this forum."

Yellen said she could count herself to express her views "on Russia's invasion, the war against Ukraine ... in the strongest possible terms" and added that she expects her colleagues in the G7 "will do the same".

On the contrary, Yellen said, Ukraine is welcome to the G20 meetings. "We stand firmly with the people of Ukraine, and I look forward to welcoming the Ukrainian Finance Minister to this G20 meeting tomorrow."

Host Indonesia has said that it cannot "uninvite" Russia to this year's G20 meetings after having extended the invitation to Moscow well before the Ukraine conflict.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who currently holds the G7 presidency, said in late June that all G7 leaders would attend the G20 summit in Indonesia this November even if Russian President Vladimir Putin participated. For this week's meeting, Russia Finance Minister Anton Siluanov will attend via videolink.

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Tens of Thousands of Users Report Twitter Service Outage – Downtdetector

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – Twitter's service went down for more than 50,000 users at around 8:00 a.m. EST on Thursday, according to Ookla-owned outage tracker Downtdetector.com.

Downtdetector collects status reports from various sources and analyzes them in real-time to detect service disruptions in their very early stages.

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Biden Says US, Israel to Cooperate on New High-Energy Laser Weapon Systems

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – The United States and Israel will cooperate on new high-energy laser weapon systems, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

"The United State and Israel defense sectors will cooperate in new high-energy laser weapon systems that can defend Israeli lives as well as lives of American servicemembers," Biden told reporters during his trip to Israel.

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US Will Not Allow China, Russia to Fill Power Vacuum in Middle East - Biden

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States will make every effort to avoid creating a power vacuum in the Middle East that can be filled by China or Russia, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

"Our influence in the Middle East ... There are so many issues at stake. We will continue to lead in the region and not create a vacuum that is filled by China or Russia against the interest of both Israel and the United States," he said while speaking at a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid.

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US Waiting for Iran to Respond to Proposals on JCPOA, But Cannot Wait Forever

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) – The United States is waiting for Iran to respond to its proposals regarding reviving the 2016 nuclear deal, but is not going to wait forever, President Joe Biden said on Thursday.

"We have laid out for the leadership of Iran what we are willing to accept in order they get back in the JCPOA. We are waiting for the response, whenever it occur – I am not certain, but we are not going to wait forever," Biden said during his trip to Israel.

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Biden Reiterates Stance on Khashoggi, Says Will Reassert Position While in Saudi Arabia

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday that his views on the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi are clear, and he is going to Saudi Arabia to reassert what the US has been walking away from.

"My views on Khashoggi [case] are clear - I have never been quite about talking about human rights. The [reason] of going to Saudi Arabia is an opportunity to reassert of that we've been

walking away from," he said while speaking at a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid.

During his 2020 presidential campaign, Biden labeled Saudi Arabia a "pariah state" over what he said was the crown prince's purported role in the murder of Khashoggi.

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**Biden Says He Will Be First US President to Fly Directly From Israel to Jeddah**

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he will be the first American president to fly directly from Israel to the Saudi city of Jeddah, noting that he will be carrying a direct message of peace between Israel and the Arab world.

"I will be first us President to fly directly from Israel to Jeddah," he said while speaking at a press conference with Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid.

"I will be carrying a direct message of peace," he added.

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**Montreal Police Questions Person Suspected of Threatening Russian Clergy, Flock - Bishop**

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The Montreal police has questioned an individual who might have been connected to the threats directed against the Russian Orthodox clergy and believers in the city, Archbishop Gabriel of Montreal and Canada told Sputnik.

"We learned that the police even brought somebody in for questioning, and they were able to find some individual that they feel might have been responsible or at least involved in these threats directed at us," Gabriel said.

Security threats against the Russian clergy and flock in Montreal began soon after Russia launched its special operation in Ukraine on February 24. Gabriel praised the police for taking the threats seriously.

"In April, they sent 30 police officers and even special forces to protect our people during the Easter service in the cathedral in Montreal. Nothing happened, but the threats continued and the police continued to take them seriously too," he said. "We are thankful to the police in Montreal for protecting us."

Gabriel said he does not know the outcome of the police questioning the suspect.

"I assume things are quiet and calm at present, and, with God's help, these people will no longer continue their threats because they understand the police is promptly investigating them," he added.

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Canada Sanctioning Russian Patriarch 'Ridiculous', ROCOR Continues Commemorations - Bishop

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government's decision to sanction the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill is "ridiculous" and the Russian Church Abroad (ROCOR) will continue commemorating him during its services, Archbishop Gabriel of Montreal and Canada told Sputnik.

"In a word, one can say this is ridiculous just like the sanctions imposed by the United Kingdom are. It makes no sense, because the patriarch is the head of the church," Archbishop Gabriel said.

On July 8, Canada imposed sanctions on Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill as well as on 21 other Russian nationals, including Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova, in response to the country's special military operation in Ukraine.

Gabriel said the decision to sanction the patriarch is in line with the Russophobia in the collective West that has now been amplified and made visible through politics. He pointed out that it is only natural, who is the head of the Church, supports the president and the military of his country as they are defending the Russian speakers in the Donbas region from the attack of the Neo-Nazis and the Ukrainian army, which continue to this date.

The archbishop expressed hope that Canada's decision will not affect the Canadian diocese or the entire Russian Church Abroad.

"We still understand that in Canada the church is separated from the state and that we are free to worship and to commemorate whomever we please. In this case, we acknowledge Patriarch Kirill to be the head of the Russian Church, and we recognize his authority," he said.

Gabriel also expressed hope that the Canadian authorities will not take action contrary to the aforementioned position and that ROCOR will be allowed to be free as it should be in a democratic country.

The archbishop noted that the entire ROCOR will continue commemorating Patriarch Kirill despite some of the Western countries imposing sanctions against him.

"We see no reason why we should cease commemorating him especially if somebody is forcing that on us," he said.

Gabriel also said that despite the many Ukrainians among the Russian Orthodox clergy and flock in Canada, no one out of almost 30 parishes requested permission to stop commemorating the patriarch.

Canada is the second Western country that sanctioned Patriarch Kirill shortly after the United Kingdom added him on the sanctions list in June.

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## US House Approves Defense Bill Amendment Authorizing \$100Mln for Ukraine Military Pilots

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The US House adopted an amendment to the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that would make \$100 million in funding available for Ukrainian military pilots, among other measures.

"Authorizes \$100,000,000 to provide assistance to Ukrainian military pilots and associated personnel," the text of the amendment that was adopted en bloc in a voice vote on Wednesday said.

The House also approved adding a measure that would require a study into the amount of funding provided to defense contractors for procuring replacement stocks of covered systems for the United States in Ukraine. House lawmakers also added an amendment that would require the US Defense Secretary to report to Congress every six months on the Pentagon's plan for responding to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

The US House is in the process of debating and voting on 650 amendments to the NDAA, about 120 of which were passed on Wednesday. Some of the amendments yet to be voted on include proposals for using seized Russian assets to rebuild Ukraine, restricting F-16 sales to Turkey, and limiting weapons sales to Saudi Arabia.

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## US Opposes Turkey's Potential Military Operation in Northern Syria - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is opposed to a possible military operation by Turkey in northern Syria, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East Dana Stroul said.

"We strongly oppose any Turkish operation into northern Syria and have made clear our objections to Turkey specifically because ISIS [Islamic State terror group, banned in Russia] is going to take advantage of that campaign and not to mention the humanitarian impact," Stroul said on Wednesday.

Stroul noted that the issue concerns not only some 10,000 fighters of the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia), who are in Syrian Democratic Forces custody, but also some 60,000 displaced persons in the Al Hol and Al Roj camps in northern Syria who are vulnerable to radicalization and exploitation.

Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin said earlier that Ankara was ready to launch a new military operation in northern Syria that could begin at any moment. Damascus has repeatedly called the presence of Turkish forces in the border area of Syria, which carry out operations there against Kurdish formations, illegal and urged Ankara to withdraw its troops. Syrian Democratic Council Representative in the United States, Bassam Saker, told Sputnik last week that the Syrian Kurds are warning Turkey's potential military operation in northern Syria will make it impossible to safeguard prisons there and thousands of Islamic State fighters may break free.

The armed conflict in Syria has been going on since 2011, with different insurgent groups, including terrorist organizations, fighting the Syrian Army in order to topple the government of President Bashar Assad. In late 2017, the Islamic State was declared defeated in Syria and Iraq, but counterterrorism mop-up operations are still underway.

Washington backs the Kurdish armed groups in Syria despite protests by the Syrian government.

Damascus does not recognize the so-called autonomous administration of northern and eastern Syria, and calls the presence of the US military on its territory an occupation while the theft of Syria's oil state-sponsored piracy.

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US Senate Confirms Michael Barr as Federal Reserve Board Vice Chair for Supervision  
(Updates with more details in paras 6, 7)

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The US Senate confirmed Michael Barr as Vice Chair for Supervision of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, a position intended to develop policy recommendations on matters related to regulating institution holding companies and other financial firms overseen by the central bank.

The senators confirmed Barr to the position in a 66-28 vote on Wednesday.

Barr previously served as Assistant Treasury Secretary for Financial Institutions under the administration of Barack Obama, as well as an adviser to organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Brookings Institution.

The confirmation to the US central bank's Board of Governors comes amid the highest inflation in the United States in 41 years. The Federal Reserve is tasked with keeping inflation in check US consumer prices increased by 9.1% from the beginning of 2022 to June - the greatest pace of increase since 1981, the US Labor Department said earlier on Wednesday.

President Joe Biden said in a statement that Barr's confirmation advances the White House's plan to address runaway inflation and enable a transition to steady, stable economic growth.

Biden's other two nominees to the Federal Reserve - Jerome Powell and Lael Brainard - bring the necessary skill and knowledge to fight inflation and protect economic stability, the statement said.

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US, Ukraine Officials Discuss Progress on Imposing Price Cap on Russian Oil - Statement  
WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo and Ukraine Minister of Finance Sergii Marchenko discussed the progress made in reaching a price cap on Russian oil, the Treasury Department said in a readout of the conversation.

"Deputy Secretary Adeyemo reiterated that the US Treasury continues to use its sanctions authorities to degrade Russia's ability to wage its war in Ukraine and threaten its neighbors," the

readout said on Wednesday. "Deputy Secretary Adeyemo and Minister Marchenko also discussed progress made toward implementing a price cap on Russian oil to restrict revenue for Russia's military while dampening the impact of Putin's war on global oil and energy prices." Adeyemo and Marchenko also discussed international economic assistance by donor countries, including the latest US contribution to Ukraine of \$1.7 billion in direct budgetary support, the readout added.

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US Maintains Syria Deconfliction Channels With Russia to Avoid Miscalculation - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to maintain air and ground deconfliction channels with Russia in Syria to protect the Coalition forces and avoid any miscalculation, senior Pentagon official Dana Stroul said at a virtual Middle East Institute conference.

"The coalition maintains air and ground deconfliction channels with the Russian military solely to protect Coalition forces and reduce the risk of an adverting escalation or miscalculation," Stroul, who is Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East, said on Wednesday.

US Central Command (CENTCOM) head Gen. Kenneth McKenzie said in March that the US deconfliction relationship with Russia in Syria has been very professional.

The US has conducted multiple strikes against terrorist leaders inside Syria in recent weeks, including one on Tuesday that killed two members of the Islamic State terrorist group (banned in Russia). Damascus has said the United States is in Syria illegally to steal the country's oil under the excuse of fighting terrorists.

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UPDATE: US Jury Finds Ex-CIA Employee Guilty for Massive Theft of Information - WikiLeaks (Updates with additional information in paras 4, 5)

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - A US jury found former CIA employee Joshua Schulte guilty on all counts of an alleged massive theft of classified information, WikiLeaks said in a statement.

"Alleged WikiLeaks Vault 7 whistleblower Joshua Schulte found guilty on all counts in response to the embarrassing Vault 7 publication," WikiLeaks said via Twitter on Wednesday, referring to a batch of classified US government information of sensitive nature stored in the so-called Vault 7.

Schulte was on a trial for the second time after being convicted by a jury in 2020 on two counts of contempt of court and making false statements to the FBI.

The Justice Department cited US Attorney Damian Williams as saying that Schulte had access to some of the country's most valuable intelligence-gathering cyber tools used to battle terrorist organizations.

"When Schulte began to harbor resentment toward the CIA, he covertly collected those tools and provided them to WikiLeaks, making some of our most critical intelligence tools known to the public," Williams said.

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Oil Up After 2-Day Plunge But Remains Below \$100 Based on Stock Build, Rates Hike Fears

NEW YORK, July 14 (Sputnik) - Oil prices closed up for the first time in three days but a barrel remained below the key bullish mark of \$100 a barrel after the US government reported the largest weekly fuel stockpile build in six months that indicated waning demand for energy. A new four-decade high in US consumer prices which grew 9.1% during the year to June also raised the caution of traders fearing a record interest rate hike by the Federal Reserve later this month. President Joe Biden said inflation was "unacceptably high" in the United States, a remark echoed by officials at the central bank and Treasury.

Prior to the June CPI data, the Federal Reserve had been expected to raise interest rates by 75 basis points, or three quarters of a percentage point, at its July 27 meeting. Now, officials were hinting an 100-basis point, or full percentage point, hike instead.

President Biden also lamented that the price of gasoline at the pump has not come down accordingly with the recent drop in crude prices and vowed to continue releasing emergency oil reserves into the market as well as do everything else in his power to lower fuel prices.

A gallon of unleaded gasoline, the most in-demand fuel product at US pumps, averaged \$4.63 on Wednesday, about 8% lower than the record high of \$5.01 a month ago, the American Automobile Association said. Crude prices, meanwhile, were down about 20% from their June peak of around \$120 a barrel.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude settled up 46 cents, or 0.5%, at \$96.30 a barrel. The US crude benchmark lost nearly 10% over the previous two sessions.

London-traded Brent crude settled up 8 cents, or 0.1%, at \$99.57 a barrel. The global crude benchmark lost more than 7% over two previous days of trade.

Both WTI and Brent have slipped more than 20% from their mid-June peaks of above \$120 a barrel, sliding into bear markets.

The two benchmarks, however, are still up about 27% on the year from gains made at the height of the Russia-Ukraine conflict in March that took WTI to around \$130 and Brent to nearly \$140. US crude inventories rose 3.254 million barrels during the week ended July 8, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) said. This was against the drop of 154,000 barrels forecast by analysts.

It was the second week in a row that crude inventories had risen, after the previous week's gain of 8.235 million barrels.

The EIA also said the Biden administration released almost 7 million barrels from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) last week to add to a market perceived to be in short supply of crude. The release is part of the one-million-barrels per day of SPR withdrawals scheduled between May and October.

Stockpiles of gasoline, the main automobile fuel, rose by 5.825 million barrels last week, versus the forecast drop of 357,000 barrels and the previous week's decline of 2.497 million.

Historical EIA data showed the last time gasoline inventories rose 5 million barrels or more in a week was six months ago, during the week ended Jan 15.

Balances for distillates, the oil variant required for making the diesel needed for trucks, buses and trains, as well as the fuel for jets, grew by 2.668 million barrels last week. Analysts had forecast a build of 1.591 million after the previous week's decline of 1.266 million.

Historical EIA data showed the last time distillates inventories rose as much or more was during the final week of December.

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**Biden Says Willing to Use Force as 'Last Resort' to Prevent Iran From Obtaining Nuke**

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told an Israeli broadcaster that he would be willing to use military force as a last resort to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

"If that was the last resort, yes," Biden said on Wednesday when asked if he would use force against Iran to prevent it from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

Biden emphasized that Iran cannot be allowed to obtain a nuclear weapon.

In December 2021, the United States and Iran agreed on two drafts of a new nuclear deal, but no definite agreement has since been reached. The latest round of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations took place in Doha, Qatar, from June 29-30.

Earlier on Wednesday, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian said 90% progress has been made in the negotiations on a new nuclear deal. He added that Iran was in contact with the United States about the lifting of sanctions and significant progress was made at the negotiations.

One of the obstacles to the completion of the negotiations is the United States' refusal to exclude Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from the list of terrorist organizations, the minister said. However, Biden told the Israeli broadcaster that he is committed to keep the IRGC on the foreign terrorist organizations list.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 14 (Sputnik) -

#### GLOBAL ECONOMY

- \* Russia's economy faces a softer but longer economic decline than thought several months ago, according to a July report penned by analysts at the Russian central bank.
- \* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) predicts that the global economic situation will continue to be difficult in 2022 and 2023 with a growing risk of a recession, Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said.
- \* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) plans to further downgrade its global growth projection later in July, Georgieva said.

#### UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- \* US national Suedi Murekezi is being held by the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) on charges of participating in pro-Ukrainian protests in the city of Kherson, The Guardian reported on Wednesday.
- \* The Ukrainian Foreign Ministry announced the severance of diplomatic relations and the termination of political and economic contacts with North Korea due to the recognition of the people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR and LPR).
- \* NATO is focused on helping Ukraine with weapons, and not on its accession to the alliance, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said.

#### GRAIN EXPORTS

- \* At a meeting of delegations from Turkey, Russia, Ukraine and the UN on the "grain issue," an agreement was reached on the establishment of a coordination center in Istanbul, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said on Wednesday.
- \* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told reporters that the parties to the grain talks in Istanbul will hopefully reconvene very soon and reach a final agreement next week.
- \* The Russian delegation, which includes representatives of the Russian Defense Ministry, offered a solution for the export of agricultural products from the Black Sea ports during the talks in Istanbul, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Lt. Gen. Igor Konashenkov told reporters.

#### KALININGRAD

- \* The European Commission said on Wednesday it had advised to not impose a ban on railway transit of sanctioned Russian goods to Kaliningrad if the transit is under appropriate control of the EU member states.
- \* Lithuania positively assesses the recommendations of the European Commission on transit to Kaliningrad and intends to adhere to them in order "not to split the transatlantic unity," the country's foreign ministry said.
- \* The decision of the European Commission on Kaliningrad transit is a manifestation of common sense, Moscow will closely follow how these steps are implemented, although there are some questions, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.
- \* The authorities of the Kaliningrad region continue to seek the complete removal of restrictions on transit of goods to the region through Lithuania from other regions of Russia, Kaliningrad Governor Anton Alikhanov said.

#### UK PRIME MINISTER

\* Former UK Treasury Secretary Rishi Sunak and Minister of State for Trade Policy Penny Mordaunt have secured enough support to get into the second round in the election of the head of the UK Conservative Party, who will also become the country's prime minister, Sky News reported on Wednesday.

\* Six candidates made it to the second round of UK Prime Minister election, Graham Brady, the head of the Conservative Party's members' committee, said.

#### GLOBAL ENERGY

\* The decision to return the sanctioned Gazprom Nord Stream 1 turbine to Germany was a "difficult one," Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

\* The Hungarian government declares a state of energy emergency in the field of energy, Gergely Gulyas, the head of the Hungarian Prime Minister's office, said.

\* Gazprom does not have a single document that allows Siemens to take a gas turbine engine for the Portovaya compressor station from Canada, which is vital for the operation of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, and cannot predict the development of the situation, the company said.

\* President Joe Biden vowed to do everything within his power to lower US fuel pump prices which have not come down accordingly with crude oil prices, saying he would continue releasing emergency oil reserves to add to supply.

#### ROSCOSMOS-ESA RELATIONS

\* The European Space Agency (ESA) has sent a notification to Russia's Roscosmos to inform about the decision to terminate the cooperation on the ExoMars project, the agency's press service told RIA Novosti on Wednesday.

\* Roscosmos received a notification from the ESA about the termination of cooperation on the joint ExoMars mission, saying that the ways of returning the Russian equipment from the European Union are being worked out.

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#### Treasury Tell Federal Reserve US Inflation 'Too High' After Record Increase in June

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - Treasury Department officials on Wednesday told the Federal Reserve that inflation in the United States is too high after another shocking increase in consumer prices for June raised the likelihood of the US central bank imposing a record interest rate hike later in the month.

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) increased 9.1% over the year to June, hitting new four-decade highs, the US Labor Department reported on Wednesday. The figure overshoot the 8.8% annual growth economists had anticipated for June, after the previous 12-month expansion of 8.6% in May. President Joe Biden issued a statement saying inflation reading is "unacceptably high."

Prior to the June CPI data, the Federal Reserve had been expected to raise interest rates by 75 basis points, or three quarters of a percentage point, at its meeting on July 27. Now, officials were hinting that a 100 basis points, or full percentage point, might be imposed instead. Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta President Raphael Bostic said "everything is in play" in response to a reporter's question whether the central bank may impose a 100-basis point hike. Bostic said the CPI numbers suggest the trajectory is not moving in a positive way and added that the next question is how much higher interest rates have to go.

US Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo weighed in, saying: "Prices in America remain too high, and the Biden administration must do everything possible to reduce inflation."

Investing.com's Federal Reserve rate tracker tool showed a 70% chance of a full percentage-point hike at the July 27 rate revision meeting of the US central bank.

Many economists say the Federal Reserve kept rates "too low for too long" and could push the United States into a recession in its fight to bring inflation under control quickly.

The Federal reserve left interest rates at between zero and 0.25% for two years during the pandemic and only raised them this year in March this year. It began with a hike of 25 basis points, or quarter-percentage point, then raised it by 50 basis points, or a half percentage point, in May. In June, it imposed an increase of 75 basis points, or three quarters of a percentage point - its highest in 28 years - bringing current rates to between a 1.5% and 1.75% range.

US gross domestic product already declined 1.6% in the first quarter. A negative second quarter GDP is all that is decided to send the economy into a recession.

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US Advised Turkey at Senior Levels Not to Conduct Military Operation in Syria - Official

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The United States conveyed to Turkey at very senior levels not to conduct a military operation in Syria, US Deputy Homeland Security Advisor Joshua Geltzer said on Wednesday.

"The US government has conveyed to the Turkish government at very senior levels that we think the right answer... is no operation," Geltzer said in a panel discussion hosted by the Middle East Institute. "This is not how we think countries should operate and we've communicated that in quite senior levels."

Geltzer said such operations will pull away some of the United States' key partners in the region in the fight against the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia).

Turkish media reported in June that the country's troops were set to start their fifth operation in northern Syria against the Kurdistan Workers' Party and its military wing known by the acronym YPG, both of which are designated by Ankara as terrorist organizations.

Since 2016, Turkey has carried out four counterterrorism operations in Syria. The new operation, initially announced in May, was planned to take place in four areas - near the cities of Tall Rifat, Kobani, Ain Issa and Manbij. However, Turkish media reported that Ankara had decided not to send troops to Kobani and Ain Issa due to opposition from Russia, which has recently sent new reinforcements to the region.

The United States is cooperating with Kurdish militants, having supplied them with thousands of weapon-loaded trucks and carrying out joint military patrols of Syrian areas near the Turkish border, according to reports.

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US Seeks to Build Temporary Detention Centers for IS Fighters in Syria - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is working with its partners in Syria to build temporary detention centers for members of the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia), US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Middle East Dana Stroul said on Wednesday.

"What we are seeking to do is to work with our partners and with the coalition to construct facilities that will allow for the secure humane detention of Islamic State fighters while the longer-term solution of repatriation, rehabilitation, de-radicalization, etc. continues," Stroul said at the Middle East Institute in Washington.

Stroul noted that this is a so-called middle-term effort led by the US State Department, and joined by the Defense Department as well as other entities like the National Security Council and the US Agency for International Development.

However, Stroul declined to clarify how many such facilities remain in Syria and how much the United States is spending to maintain them.

"This is an ongoing assessment", she said.

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US Jury Finds Ex-CIA Employee Guilty for Massive Theft of Information - WikiLeaks

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - A US jury found ex-CIA employee Joshua Schulte guilty on all counts of an alleged massive theft of classified information, WikiLeaks said on Wednesday.

"Alleged WikiLeaks Vault 7 whistleblower Joshua Schulte found guilty on all counts in response to the embarrassing Vault 7 publication," WikiLeaks said via Twitter referring to a batch of classified US government information of sensitive nature stored in the so-called Vault 7.

Schulte has been on a trial for the second time after he was convicted by a jury on two counts in 2020 for contempt of court and for making false statements to the FBI.

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US Senate Confirms Michael Barr as Federal Reserve Board Vice Chair for Supervision

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday confirmed Michael Barr as Vice Chair for Supervision of the Federal Reserve Board of Governors, a position intended to develop policy recommendations for the board on matters related to the regulation of institution holding companies and other financial firms overseen by the central bank.

Senators confirmed Barr to the position in a 66-28 vote.

Barr previously served as Assistant Treasury Secretary for Financial Institutions under the administration of Barack Obama, as well as an adviser to organizations such as the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Brookings Institution.

The confirmation to the US central bank's Board of Governors comes amid the highest inflation in the United States in 41 years, one that the Federal Reserve is tasked with keeping in check. US consumer prices increased by 9.1% from the beginning of 2022 to June - the greatest pace of increase since 1981, the US Labor Department said earlier on Wednesday.

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Amazon Doorbell Company 'Ring' Gives Footage to Police Without User Consent - US Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The technology and commerce company Amazon has given footage from video doorbells made by their subsidiary Ring to law enforcement without the consent of users almost a dozen times so far this year, US Senator Edward Markey said in a statement on Wednesday, citing a letter received in response to his probe of Ring.

"In response to Senator Markey's June letter, Ring reported a more than five-fold increase in law enforcement partnerships on its platform since November 2019. Ring further revealed that Ring has provided law enforcement with user footage through a process that does not require user's consent - under a so-called 'emergency circumstance exception' - 11 times so far this year," the statement said.

Ring partners with 2,161 law enforcement agencies through its Neighbors Public Safety Service, which police can use to request Ring footage from users, according to the company's letter in response to Markey.

In each of the 11 cases where an emergency request from law enforcement for footage was granted, Ring made a "good-faith determination" that there was an imminent danger of death or serious injury to a person requiring undelayed information sharing, the statement said.

In response to privacy concerns raised by Markey, Ring refused to commit to never incorporating voice recognition technology in its products, eliminating the devices' default setting to automatically record audio, and making end-to-end encryption the default storage option for consumers, the statement added.

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### Saudi Arabia to Allow Direct Flights to-From Israel for Islamic Pilgrimage - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - Saudi Arabia will allow Muslims from Israel to take direct charter flights for the purposes of Islamic pilgrimage and will permit other flights to and from Israel, CNN reported on Wednesday, citing people familiar with the matter.

Riyadh's decision comes amid US President Joe Biden's visit to the Middle East, including to Israel and Saudi Arabia. The trip, Biden's first to the region as US president, will feature meetings with Israel Prime Minister Yair Lapid, United Arab Emirates President Mohammed bin Zayed and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas.

Biden will fly directly to Saudi Arabia from Israel as part of what he called a "small symbol of the budding relations" between the two nations, the report said.

On Saturday, Biden said in an opinion-editorial piece that his trip to the Middle East will focus on starting a new chapter in the United States' engagement with the region. Engaging with countries like Saudi Arabia, whom Biden called a "pariah state" during his 2020 presidential campaign, is critical to countering Russian and Chinese competition, Biden also said.

The three-day trip will also focus on bolstering the US-Israel partnership, attempt to mend frayed US-Saudi relations and rally support of Gulf allies to ease surging oil prices.

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### US Court Denies Amber Heard's Motions for Mistrial, Juror Fraud Argument - Court Order

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - A US court denied all post-trial motions for mistrial and a juror fraud argument filed by Amber Heard in a defamation lawsuit initiated by her former husband and actor Johnny Depp, according to a court order published on Wednesday.

"[I]t is therefore ORDERED as follows: Defendant Amber Laura Heard's Post-Trial Motions I through VI are DENIED for the reasons stated on the record. Defendant Amber Laura Heard's Post-Trial Motion VII is likewise DENIED," the order said.

With regards to Heard's allegations that the assignment of one of the jurors in the case was a result of a fraud or wrongdoing, the court found that questioning of potential jurors was conducted in "a fair and impartial manner, with the court and both parties examining the potential jurors."

"Defendant has neither followed the proper procedure nor shown evidence of prejudice.

Defendant does not allege Juror Fifteen's inclusion on the jury prejudiced her in any way. The juror was vetted, sat for the entire jury, deliberated, and reached a verdict," the order said.

In June, a US jury ruled in favor of Johnny Depp in his libel suit against his former wife Amber Heard, backing his complaint that the actress fabricated claims he had abused her.

The jury found that Depp should be awarded \$10 million in compensatory damages and Heard should receive \$2 million.

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#### US Budget Deficit Rises in June After Months of Drops on Reduced Pandemic Aid - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The US government budget deficit increased by \$89 billion to reach \$515 billion in June on increased spending after months of expenditure cuts of funds for the expiring coronavirus pandemic-related aid programs, the Treasury Department's monthly budget breakdown showed.

Total receipts for June were at \$460.76 billion while outlays amounted to \$549.60 billion, resulting in the rounded-up deficit of \$515 billion in the nine months since the start of fiscal year 2022 for the government, the breakdown showed.

A year ago, the deficit stood at more than \$2 trillion.

The Biden administration said it has resolved to keep the 2022 deficit at under \$1 trillion and is so far making good on that objective.

Both the Biden administration and the previous Trump government had provided hundreds of billions of dollars in relief payments to eligible recipients during the coronavirus pandemic.

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#### Only 18% of Americans Feel Biden Should Seek Reelection – Poll

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – Less than one-fifth of Americans believe President Joe Biden should stand for reelection in 2024, a Yahoo News/YouGov poll revealed Wednesday. Just 18% of Americans say Biden should seek a second term in 2024, the lowest number to date. As many as 64% say he should "bow out," the findings said.

For the first time, the poll said, more Democrats support the idea that Biden shouldn't pursue a second term (41%) versus those who support his run (35%).

"Since late May, the number of Americans who say Biden should run for reelection has fallen by 7 points; among Democrats, that number has fallen by 8 points," researchers found.

Researchers found that both Biden and possible Republican nominee Donald Trump are increasingly unpopular with American voters. Among registered voters, Biden leads 44% to 43%, researchers said.

In the wake of the January 6 Select Committee hearings, 52% of Americans now believe "Trump committed a crime by trying to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election;" and 54% of those polled believe that Trump should be prosecuted by the Justice Department. Meanwhile, almost 60% of Americans say Trump shouldn't run for president again either and a mere 28% support him if he does.

Biden has been buffeted by a growing mountain of discontent around spiraling inflation, several recent Supreme Court verdicts, gun reform and the federal right to an abortion – all of which are indicated by people surveyed as the US being off-track and going in the wrong direction.

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#### US Navy Rejects China Trespass Claim on Xisha Islands Destroyer Incident

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The US Navy has rejected China's position that the guided missile destroyer USS Benfold broke international law during its claimed Freedom of Navigation Operation (FONOP) sailing near the Xisha Islands, which the United States refers to as the Paracel Islands.

"The PRC [People's Republic of China]'s statement about this mission is false," the US Navy said. "USS Benfold conducted this FONOP in accordance with international law and then continued on to conduct normal operations in international waters."

Earlier in the day, Chinese Air Force Senior Colonel Tian Junli, spokesman for the Southern Theater Command of the People's Liberation Army, said the Benfold had entered Chinese waters off the islands in the South China Sea without Beijing's permission and that it had thereby undermined peace and stability in the region.

The US Navy counter-charged that the PLA Southern Theater Command's statement was the latest in a long string of Chinese actions to misrepresent lawful US maritime operations and assert its excessive and illegitimate maritime claims at the expense of its Southeastern Asian neighbors in the South China Sea.

In its statement, the US Navy defended the Benfold's mission and described it as a freedom of navigation operation to uphold the rights and freedoms recognized in international law by challenging the restrictions on innocent passage imposed by Beijing in the region.

Beijing has long been disputing the ownership of several hydrocarbon-rich islands in the South China Sea with several Asia-Pacific countries. The territories include the Xisha archipelago, the Spratly Islands, and the island of Huangyan, also known as the Scarborough Shoal. Vietnam, Brunei, Malaysia and the Philippines have been claiming ownership of the territories.

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#### US Training Journalists in Eastern Europe to Report on Russian Activities - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is training journalists in Ukraine and other Eastern European countries to report on alleged instances of malign Russian activity, Acting Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation Kathryn Insley said on Wednesday.

"To counter Russia's disinformation campaign, we're training journalists in the region to identify and investigate Russia's malign activities, whether corruption, ties to sanctioned individuals, or seeking undue influence and advanced conventional weapon deals," Insley said during an event at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The US is also working with the Ukrainian diaspora to develop a network of experts to identify alleged Russian disinformation efforts, Insley added.

International press freedom watchdog Reporters Without Borders earlier this month criticized Ukrainian authorities for hampering objective media coverage of the conflict unfolding in the country and called for the government to alleviate barriers for journalists.

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US Housing Demand 'Weakened Noticeably' in June as Costs Soared - Fed Beige Book

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US housing demand fell substantially last month as soaring mortgage rates and other ownership costs cooled buying appetite in a sector that had barely shown any decline over the past two years, the Federal Reserve said in its Beige Book report on business conditions.

"Housing demand weakened noticeably as growing concerns about affordability contributed to non-seasonal declines in sales, resulting in a slight increase in inventory and more moderate price appreciation," the central bank said. "Both in New York City and across the metropolitan region, there has been a steady and pronounced decline in signed contracts in both May and June, going against normal seasonal trends."

Key mortgage rates in the United States have hit three-and-a-half decade highs as interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve to beat inflation pave the way for a further cooling of the red-hot US housing market, the government agency overseeing mortgages said last week.

US home prices jumped 37% over the past two years. Mortgage rates, meanwhile, have surged from 3.2% to 5.88% in the past six months. The combination has pushed up the cost of home ownership in the United States to the highest in a generation, officials say.

In June, the Federal Reserve imposed a 75-basis point increase for the third US interest rate hike since the outbreak of the pandemic. It was the largest hike in 28 years and brought key lending rates to between 1.5% and 1.75% from a mere zero to 0.25% in February.

That was before the latest inflation print for June released on Wednesday, where the Consumer Price Index jumped 9.1% over the year to June, hitting new four-decade highs. The figure overshot the 8.8% annual growth economists had anticipated for June, after the previous 12-month expansion of 8.6% in May.

Hot on the heels of the so-called CPI data, some forecasters, including Japan's Nomura, were calling for a record 100-basis point rate for July versus previous bets for a 75-basis point increase. Atlanta Federal Reserve Bank President Raphael Bostic further stoked expectations for a 100-basis point hike in July by saying "everything is in play".

Investing.com's Fed tracker tool, meanwhile, showed almost a 70% chance of a full percentage-point hike at the July 17 rate revision meeting of the central bank

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### SpaceX's Starship Could Be Ready for Orbital Flight in August If Testing Goes Well - Musk

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - SpaceX founder Elon Musk said on Wednesday that the Super Heavy Starship spacecraft prototype could be ready for an orbital test flight as soon as August if testing of the booster engine goes well.

SpaceX conducted an ignition test on Monday of the spacecraft's booster, which is powered by 33 Raptor engines, but it ended in a powerful explosion that started a fire at the bottom of the launch tower.

"If testing goes well, as soon as next month," Musk wrote on social media.

Earlier in the day, Musk said damage in the booster propulsion section appears to be minor but they still need to inspect all the engines.

Starship is a fully reusable two-stage-to-orbit super heavy-lift launch vehicle under development by SpaceX. Musk plans to use the spacecraft to establish permanent bases on the moon and Mars.

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### UN Chief Says 'Substantive Step' Made in Istanbul to Ensure Ukraine Grain Exports

UNITED NATIONS, July 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said Wednesday that the Istanbul talks on the Ukraine grain issue produced substantive results, but more technical work is needed to materialize the progress.

"Today is an important and substantive step, a step on the way to a comprehensive agreement," Guterres said.

"In a world darkened by global crisis today, at last, we have a ray of hope. A ray of hope to ease human suffering and alleviate hunger around the world. A ray of hope to support developing countries and the most vulnerable people, a ray of hope to bring a measure of much-needed stability to the global food system," Guterres said.

The UN has been working on the deal around the clock, but more technical work will be needed to materialize the progress, the secretary general continued.

Guterres also thanked Turkey for "their outstanding efforts to convene these talks and their critical role" and Russian and Ukrainian officials for their "constructive engagement."

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Guterres Sees No Prospect of Immediate Russia-Ukraine Peace Deal Despite Progress on Grain

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told reporters on Wednesday that despite the progress made on Ukrainian grain exports in Istanbul, he does not see prospects for an immediate peace deal between Kiev and Moscow

"I do not see immediately the perspective of a peace agreement. I think in any case this demonstrated that the parties are able to have a constructive dialogue and this is, of course, very good news, but for peace we still have a long way to go," Guterres said.

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Guterres Says Parties in Grain Talks to Reconvene Very Soon, Sure About Deal Next Week

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told reporters on Wednesday that the parties to the grain talks in Istanbul will hopefully reconvene very soon and reach a final agreement next week.

"We are hoping that we'll be able to reconvene very soon, I am sure next week, and hopefully we'll be able to have a final agreement," Guterres said. "But as i said we still need a lot of good will and commitment by all parties, they have shown it. I am encouraged, i am optimistic, but it's not yet fully done."

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Third US Citizen Detained by Donetsk People's Republic Forces - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US national Suedi Murekezi is being held by the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) on charges of participating in pro-Ukrainian protests in the city of Kherson, The Guardian reported on Wednesday.

Murekezi, 31, settled permanently in Kherson in 2020 after visiting Ukraine to conduct business since 2017, the report said, citing Murekezi's brother.

Murekezi called his brother on July 7 to inform him that he is being held in the city of Donetsk on charges of participating in pro-Ukrainian protests in Kherson, which was captured by Russian forces on March 2, the report said.

Murekezi has denied the accusations levied against him, the report added.

US nationals Alexander Drueke and Andy Tai Ngoc Huynh were acting in the capacity of foreign fighters during the special military operation in Ukraine and detained by Russian forces near Kharkov in June. Drueke and Huynh are a US Army and US Marine Corps veteran, respectively. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said in June that foreign nationals fighting illegally as mercenaries in Ukraine will be held accountable for any crimes committed without the Geneva Conventions' protections granted to soldiers.

The DPR Supreme Court in June sentenced to death two United Kingdom citizens captured in Ukraine, Shaun Pinner and Aiden Aslin, as well as Moroccan citizen Saadoun Brahim, for serving as mercenaries.

Friends and family reportedly said Murekezi was not in the country as a fighter but settled there before the russia launched its special military operation in late February.

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**GUTERRES SAYS DOES NOT SEE PROSPECT OF IMMEDIATE RUSSIA-UKRAINE PEACE AGREEMENT DESPITE DEAL ON GRAIN EXPORTS**

Sputnik

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US Air Force Successfully Tests Hypersonic Missile - Statement

(Updates with more details in paras 2, 3; changes attribution in headline, lede)

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The United States has successfully tested a hypersonic missile that is being developed by defense contractor Lockheed Martin, the US Air Force said in a statement on Wednesday.

"The Air Force conducted another successful hypersonic test off the Southern California coast on July 12, 2022. The Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon Booster Test Flight (BTF) -3 was the twelfth flight for the program and third release demonstration. The AGM-183A weapon system reached hypersonic speeds and primary and secondary objectives were met," the statement said.

The test completes the series of booster tests and paves the way for a fully integrated testing later in the year, Program Executive Officer Brig. Gen. Heath Collins said in the statement. The latest test of a hypersonic missile in June in the US state of Hawaii failed because of a malfunction during the ignition portion of the launch. The test marked the second unsuccessful attempt to launch the missile amid growing concerns in Washington that the main US rivals, Russia and China, are ahead of the United States in the development of hypersonic weapons.

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Bill Gates Says Transferring \$20Bln to His Foundation's Endowment Later in July

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - Billionaire businessman and Microsoft founder Bill Gates announced on Wednesday that he will donate \$20 billion to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and plans to give nearly all of his money to the foundation.

"With the support and guidance of our board, we plan to increase our spending from nearly \$6 billion per year today to \$9 billion per year by 2026. To help make this spending increase possible, I am transferring \$20 billion to the foundation's endowment this month," he said. Gates added that he plans to give virtually all of his wealth to the his foundation and will move down and eventually off of the list of the world's richest people.

"I have an obligation to return my resources to society in ways that have the greatest impact for reducing suffering and improving lives. And I hope others in positions of great wealth and privilege will step up in this moment too," he said.

In May 2021, Bill and Melinda Gates announced their decision to end their marriage. The media reported in April that the two had officially divorced. It has also been reported that Melinda Gates could step down as trustee of the foundation in two years if she is unable to work alongside her former husband.

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#### US Air Force Successfully Tests Hypersonic Missile - Reports

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The latest test of a hypersonic missile in June in the US state of Hawaii failed because of a malfunction during the ignition portion of the launch. The test marked the second unsuccessful attempt to launch the missile amid growing concerns in Washington that the main US rivals, Russia and China, are ahead of the United States in the development of hypersonic weapons.

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#### Biden Likely to Discuss Global Food Insecurity During Visit to Middle East - USAID

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is likely to discuss the global food insecurity during his visit of the Middle East, US Agency for International Development (USAID) Assistant Administrator for the Middle East Andrew Plitt said on Wednesday.

"Of course, the president is traveling to the region. I am not sure what he has in his talking points, but I would imagine, given the importance of global food insecurity and the importance of what is going on in the region, that... this is going to be part of his dossier," Plitt said during an interview with the Middle East Institute.

While violence in Syria has declined compared to previous years, humanitarian conditions in the country have worsened due to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and a drought, Plitt added.

Biden is traveling to the Middle East for the first time as US president and will visit Israel, including the West Bank, and Saudi Arabia through July 16.

During his visit, Biden will meet with the officials, including Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid, United Arab Emirates President Mohammed bin Zayed and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas.

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North Korea Ready to Support Russia's Position on Donetsk, Luhansk Republics - Envoy to UN  
(Adds background in paras 4, 5)

UNITED NATIONS, July 13 (Sputnik) - North Korea is ready to support Russia's position regarding the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics, Pyongyang's Envoy to the United Nations Kim Song said on Wednesday.

"The government of the DPRK [North Korea] is fully ready to support the position of the Russian Federation ... concerning Donetsk and Luhansk," Kim Song said.

The ambassador also said North Korea could take additional measures concerning the possible representation of the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics at the United Nations.

Earlier in the day, Donetsk People's Republic head Denis Pushilin announced that North Korea recognized the DPR, describing it as "another victory" for diplomacy.

Russia was the first country to recognize the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics in February, followed by Syria last month.

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Handing Back Nord Stream 1 Turbine to Germany 'Difficult' Decision - Trudeau  
(Adds details in paras 3-5, background in paras 6-7)

OTTAWA, July 13 (Sputnik) – The decision to return the sanctioned Gazprom Nord Stream 1 (NS1) turbine to Germany was a "difficult one," Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

"We're there to support them [Ukraine] with billions of dollars in humanitarian economic and military support," Trudeau said when asked about agreeing to Germany's request to send a gas turbine back. "This decision was a very difficult one, but we have to remind ourselves that the sanctions we're leading are there to punish Putin and his friends, and not our allies, not the European populations."

The prime minister added that the Canadian government would continue to stand with Ukraine while also supporting Germany and other European allies as they work on reducing their dependence on Russian fossil fuels.

"This decision to be there to support Germany and Europe in the real challenges they face around energy, particularly over the coming year as they work as fast as they can to get off the reliance on Russian oil and gas," Trudeau said.

The decision was also made thinking of the public opinion, as an abrupt reduction of gas flow and other energy sources from Russia leading to shortages and high prices could weaken approval for the governments providing financial and military support to Ukraine, Trudeau added.

On Sunday, Canadian Minister of Natural Resources Jonathan Wilkinson said that Ottawa decided to return the Nord Stream 1 turbine to Germany to help the country and Europe have access to "reliable and affordable energy."

On July 12, the Ukrainian World Congress announced they are taking legal action against the Canadian government for having violated sanctions when it decided to return the turbine to Germany.

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US, UN Seeking Solution to Open Ukraine's Black Sea Ports for Grain Exports - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The United States is working closely with the United Nations to find a solution to the issue of reopening Ukraine's ports on the Black Sea in order to facilitate exports of grain and other food items, US Assistant Secretary of State Michele Sison said during a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"We are working closely with the UN food agencies, but also with the Humanitarian Affairs part of the UN, Martin Griffiths, the OCHA [UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs] piece of this, looking for solutions to reopen the Black Sea ports to facilitate those grain and other food exports," Sison said before a US House Subcommittee on International Development, International Organizations and Global Corporate Social Impact.

Sison said he United States is also working together with its partners on efforts to boost the global food supply and to address issues pertaining to fertilizers and fuel.

Earlier on Wednesday, the delegations representing the United Nations, Ukraine, Russia and Turkey met in Istanbul to conduct talks on enabling grain exports.

The collective West has blamed the global food crisis on Russia, accusing Moscow of allegedly blocking Ukrainian grain shipments.

Russia said cargo ships have been unable to leave Black Sea ports due to mines planted by Ukraine's military and has called on Kiev to clear the waters. In addition, Russia has said it had established not one but two safe sea corridors.

The United Nations has repeatedly warned that the broken supply chain threatens food insecurity on a global scale.

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UN Chief to Make Press Statement on Grain Talks in Istanbul at 18:00 GMT - Office

UNITED NATIONS, July 13 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres will make a statement at 18:00 GMT on Wednesday to brief the press on the results of talks in Istanbul concerning exports of grain out of Ukraine, his office said.

"The Secretary-General will do a press stakeout at 2 pm today, at the Security Council stakeout position," the statement said.

"We believe this is something positive, and he [the UN chief] will talk to you at some length about why that is," UN deputy spokesman Farhan Aziz Haq told a briefing.

On Wednesday, delegations from Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, and the United Nations met in Istanbul for talks. The United Nations has been trying to broker a deal between Russia and Ukraine on grain and fertilizer exports.

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#### US, Israel Announce New Strategic High-Level Dialogue on Technology - White House

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has announced a new strategic High-Level Dialogue on Technology with Israel that will elevate the strategic partnership and tackle challenges to global problems, the White House said on Wednesday.

"Today, the President of the United States and the Prime Minister of the State of Israel reaffirm their commitment to elevating the strategic partnership between the countries to new heights by launching the new Strategic High-Level Dialogue on Technology, tasked with establishing a US-Israel technological partnership on critical and emerging technologies and solutions to global challenges: pandemic preparedness, climate change, implementation of artificial intelligence and trusted technology ecosystems," the White House said in a press release. The two countries will work on creating and advancing innovative solutions to the global challenges and promote a shared agenda in the international arena, while also reinforcing the existing collaboration mechanisms, the release said.

The United States and Israel will also commit to holding high-level inter-agency discussions led by the national security councils of each country with the goal of improving collaboration so that new and emerging technologies on a global scale are promoted and protected, the release said.

Researchers from both countries will work on the large-scale implementation of artificial intelligence, focusing on agriculture, medicine and transportation, the release also said.

Of equal importance is sharing information and building out new technologies to mitigate climate change, the release added, noting that this includes cooperative research and development ventures and best practices in renewable energy solutions and water management.

The Strategic Dialogue on Technology will be held every year alternating between the United States and Israel, and the first meeting is envisioned to take place in Israel later this year, according to the release.

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#### Blinken Invites Abu Akleh Family to US for Direct Talks – White House

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – Secretary of State Antony Blinken has invited the family of slain Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh to the United States, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

In response to a reporter's question about whether President Joe Biden would bring up her case during his trip to Israel, Sullivan said that Blinken "actually spoke with Shireen's family a short while ago."

"He has invited the family to the United States to be able to sit down and engage with them directly," Sullivan added.

Sullivan, who spoke aboard Air Force One enroute to Israel, insisted that the Biden administration had been very engaged in trying to get to the bottom of her killing, adding that her case would "of course" be "one of the subjects at play" during Biden's visit in Israel.

A beloved veteran journalist at Al Jazeera Arabic, Abu Akleh, was killed by an Israeli-fired bullet to the head on May 11 while on assignment in the occupied Palestinian city of Jenin.

Last week, her family sent a letter to Biden, demanding that he meet with them during his regional tour and help ensure that justice is served in the investigation of her killing.

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US Oil, Fuel Stockpiles See Big Weekly Build, Suggesting Slack in Demand - Energy Agency

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - US crude oil and fuel stockpiles rose sharply together last week for the first time in months, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) reported on Wednesday, signaling a slack in summer demand in what is typically the busiest time of the year for energy consumption.

Crude inventories were up 3.254 million barrels during the week that ended on July 8 versus the drop of 154,000 barrels forecast by analysts and against the 8.235 million barrels reported for the week that ended on July 1, EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report.

It was the second week in a row that crude inventories had shown a build, after the previous week's rise of 8.235 million barrels.

The EIA also reported that the Biden administration released almost 7 million barrels from the US Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR), or emergency oil reserve, last week to add to a market perceived to be in short supply of crude. The move is part of the Biden administration's one-million-barrels per day of SPR release scheduled between May and October.

Stockpiles of gasoline, the main automobile fuel, rose by 5.825 million barrels last week, versus the forecast decline of 357,000 barrels and the previous week's drop of 2.497 million.

Historical EIA data showed the last time gasoline inventories rose 5 million barrels or more in a week was six months ago, during the week that ended on January 15.

Stockpiles of distillates, the oil variant required for making the diesel needed for trucks, buses and trains, as well as the fuel for jets, grew by 2.668 million barrels last week, versus a forecast build of 1.591 million and a previous weekly decline of 1.266 million.

Historical EIA data showed the last time distillates inventories rose as much or more was 6-½ months ago, during the final week of December.

Analysts expressed surprise with the large builds, which were atypical for summer.

"It is certainly one of the weakest summer demand periods for both crude and fuel products," John Kilduff, founding partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said.

The inventory builds come on the back of a weakening too in crude oil prices, which fell 20% over the past month to just under \$100 a barrel, as analysts said energy costs were fueling inflation at four-decade highs and stifling economic growth.

US consumer prices increased by more than 9% over the year to June, hitting new four-decade highs, the US Labor Department said earlier on Wednesday.

Unleaded gasoline, the most in-demand fuel product at US pumps, currently averaged \$4.63 a gallon, versus the record high of \$5.01 a month ago, the American Automobile Association said.

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North Korea Ready to Support Russia's Position on Donetsk, Luhansk - Envoy to EU

UNITED NATIONS, July 13 (Sputnik) - North Korea is ready to support Russia's position regarding the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics, the country's Ambassador to the United Nations Kim Song said on Wednesday.

"The government of the DPRK [North Korea] is fully ready to support the position of the Russian Federation... concerning Donetsk and Luhansk," Kim Song said.

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Handing Back Nord Stream 1 Turbine to Germany 'Difficult' Decision - Trudeau

OTTAWA, July 12 (Sputnik) - The decision to return the sanctioned Gazprom Nord Stream 1 turbine to Germany was a "difficult one," Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Wednesday.

"We're there to support them [Ukraine] with billions of dollars in humanitarian economic and military support," Trudeau said. "This decision was a very difficult one."

On Sunday, Canadian Minister of Natural Resources Jonathan Wilkinson said that Ottawa decided to return the Nord Stream 1 turbine to Germany to help the country and Europe have access to "reliable and affordable energy."

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UPDATE - The Bank of Canada Hikes Overnight Rate by 100 Basis Points to 2.5%, Highest Since 1998

(Updates with more details in paras 1, 3-8)

OTTAWA, July 12 (Sputnik) - The Bank of Canada on Wednesday announced in a statement that it has increased the overnight interest rate by 100 basis points to 2.5% in the highest rate hike since 1998 to fight runaway inflation.

"The Bank of Canada today increased its target for the overnight rate to 2.5%, with the bank rate at 2.75% and the deposit rate at 2.5%. The Bank is also continuing its policy of quantitative tightening (QT)," the statement said.

Inflation is much higher than the bank's April forecast and experts said they expect it to remain around 8% in the months to come.

The Bank of Canada said in the statement that the interest rates hike was mainly driven by the current global situation resulting from Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and China's zero-COVID-19 policy.

"Global inflation is higher, reflecting the impact of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, ongoing supply constraints, and strong demand. Many central banks are tightening monetary policy to combat inflation, and the resulting tighter financial conditions are moderating economic growth," the statement said.

As Canada experiences low unemployment, labor shortages and demands for higher wages, companies are increasing the price of products and services to compensate for higher operational costs.

The Canadian economy is expected to grow by 3.5% in 2022, 1.5% in 2023, and is also expected to continue slowing in 2024, the statement said.

The Bank of Canada will deliver the next announcement on the overnight rate target on September 7. On June 1, Bank of Canada increased the interest rate from 1% to 1.5% in an attempt to address raising inflation.

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China, India Could Support Russia Oil Price Cap to Get EU to Follow Suit - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that China and India, two countries who are major buyers of Russian oil, could be a part of the proposed oil price cap and their participation can persuade the European Union to also adopt the measure, US Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic and Business Affairs Erik Woodhouse said on Wednesday.

"Obviously, China and India are important purchasers of Russian oil. I can say that we've been [talking] most intensively with partners and allies to help design a proposal," Woodhouse said during a press briefing. "Perhaps this can work, as well as outreach to countries that we would like to see participate or otherwise support the price gap."

Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Molly Montgomery said during the briefing that the main intent of the Russian oil price cap is to pay less for energy and have a more stable global oil market.

Earlier on Wednesday, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said that the proposed plan on a price cap on Russian oil will take time because of the sheer number of elements that have to be worked through, but the United States has already been engaging with a number of key oil consuming countries, including China and India.

During the Group of Seven (G7) meeting in Germany on June 28-30, the leaders of the seven most economically advanced countries issued a communique saying that the oil price cap scheme could be implemented through the options such as allowing Russian seaborne crude oil and petroleum products to be shipped worldwide only if they are purchased at or below an agreed price threshold.

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#### US Secret Service Agent Sent Home From Israel After Altercation With Woman – Reports

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – A US Secret Service agent was sent back to the United States after an alleged physical altercation with a woman in Jerusalem while off-duty, CBS reported on Wednesday, citing the agency.

The Secret Service told CBS that the agent was briefly detained, questioned, and released by Israeli police following the alleged incident. His access to agency systems and facilities has been suspended pending an investigation.

Citing a person familiar with the situation, CBS reported that the woman called the authorities after allegedly being struck by the agent, who was leaving a dinner with colleagues.

Investigators are examining whether he was drunk.

The incident occurred as US President Biden was about to travel to Israel to begin his first Middle East tour since assuming the presidency.

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#### NATO Air Forces Ready to Integrate With Those of Finland, Sweden – General

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – NATO air forces have good coordination with partners in Sweden and Finland and are ready to integrate them as soon as the two countries join the alliance, Deputy Chief of Staff Operations at NATO's Headquarters Allied Air Command Brigadier General Christoph Pliet said on Wednesday.

"On the air side, we are prepared, we had some initial discussions with our partner nations already," Pliet told a virtual press briefing.

He expressed confidence that the integration of both countries with NATO is "quite strong already," and the military is awaiting a political decision with regard to approving the bids of Finland and Sweden.

"They are practicing day to day with us," Pliet said.

In May, Finland and Sweden submitted membership applications to NATO, abandoning decades of neutrality due to a shift in the European security environment that they said was caused by Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

The membership bids were initially blocked by Turkey due to the two nations' long-standing support for the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), which Ankara considers a terrorist organization and threat to its national security.

However, the three countries signed a security memorandum last month prior to the NATO summit in Madrid, unblocking the accession process and agreeing to bolster cooperation on counterterrorism.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in early April that further expansion of the alliance eastward is aggressive in nature and will not make Europe more secure. At the same time, the Kremlin does not consider the accession of Sweden and Finland to NATO an existential threat to Russia, he noted.

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RPT - US Has Option of Increasing Pressure on Russian Financial Sector – State Dept.  
(Repeats to correct date of story)

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – The United States has an option of increasing and deepening its pressure on Russia's financial sector while European allies can decide on whether to cut more Russian banks off from SWIFT, Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic and Business Affairs Erik Woodhouse on Wednesday.

"The removal of banks from SWIFT is an action normally led by our partners in the European Union because SWIFT is an entity based in a European Union member state. But I can say that increasing and deepening the pressure in the financial sector is one area and mechanism that we may use to increase pressure over time. So that's something that is an option going forward," Woodhouse told a press briefing.

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Bank of Canada Hikes Policy Interest by 100 Basis Points to 2.5%, Second Hike in 2022

OTTAWA, July 12 (Sputnik) - Bank of Canada said in a statement on Wednesday that it has increased the key interest rate by 100 basis points to 2.5%.

"The Bank of Canada today increased its target for the overnight rate to 2.5%, with the Bank Rate at 2.75% and the deposit rate at 2.5%. The Bank is also continuing its policy of quantitative tightening (QT)," the statement said.

On June 1, Bank of Canada increased the interest rate from 1% to 1.5% in an attempt to check runaway inflation.

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Biden Says to Do 'Everything' to Lower Fuel Prices, Including More US Oil Reserve Release

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden vowed on Wednesday to do everything within his power to lower US fuel pump prices which have not come down accordingly with crude oil prices, saying he would continue releasing emergency oil reserves to add to supply.

"I will continue to do everything I can to bring down the price of gas," Biden said in a statement released by the White House. "I will continue my historic release of oil from our strategic petroleum reserve."

A gallon of unleaded gasoline, the most in-demand fuel product at US pumps, averaged \$4.63 on Wednesday, versus the record high of \$5.01 a month ago. US crude oil prices, meanwhile, have fallen 20% from around \$120 a barrel a month ago to just under \$100 now.

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NATO Does Not See Russia's Intent to Attack, But Ready to Deploy Extra Forces – General

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) – NATO does not see Russia's intent to attack its territory, but remains vigilant and ready to defend allied countries if necessary, Deputy Chief of Staff Operations at NATO's Headquarters Allied Air Command Brig. Gen. Christoph Pliet said on Wednesday.

"Do we have indications at the moment that the Russians have any intent to attack NATO territory? We can not see that at the moment," Pliet told reporters during a virtual press briefing.

NATO's current mission is to deter Russia in case of invasion, and the air forces of the alliance are ready to intercept Russian planes, he added.

The alliance remains vigilant and will deploy more forces if need be, Pliet noted. "But at the moment we can not see that," he said.

The alliance is now going to provide additional air policing forces on the Eastern flank in order to assure allies that nobody will attack NATO, Pliet noted. "Actually, we started on July 1. We will deploy assets from the US and from other allied nations to the Eastern flank for a period of 4-6 months maximum to support our operations," he added.

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US Has No Evidence of Iran Delivering Drones to Russia, But Sees Engagement - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The United States has no evidence of Iran delivering drones to Russia but sees engagement between the two on the issue, National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Wednesday.

"We have not seen evidence of delivery, but we have seen evidence of engagement between the two countries on this specific issue of large numbers of UAVs, including weapons-enabled UAVs for Russia to acquire from Iran," he said.

The official added that if such drones are used in the Ukraine conflict, it will pose a threat.

On Monday, Sullivan accused Iran of planning to provide Russia with numerous drones, without specifying the source of such information or providing evidence.

The next day, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Nasser Kanaani dismissed the allegations. Russia too, has denied the claims.

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State Dept. Says to Work With Congress on Extra \$4.5Bln in Ukraine Budget Support

WASHINGTON, July 13 (Sputnik) - The US State Department will work with the Congress to allocate additional \$4.5 billion in direct budget support for Ukraine over the next five months, Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Molly Montgomery told reporters on Wednesday.

"We intend to work with Congress to provide the Government of Ukraine with an additional \$4.5 billion in direct budget support over the next five months, as it continues to fight the Russian invasion," Montgomery said.