

8/17/22 Wednesday

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Media 'Overplaying' Trump-Endorsed Hageman's Primary Victory Over Liz Cheney, Experts Say

US Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY) has attracted no shortage of Republican ire after opposing the January 6, 2021, insurrection by supporters of then-US President Donald Trump, including censure by the party for her number-two role in the House committee investigating the attack. Much ado has been made about Harriet Hageman's Tuesday victory over Cheney in the Wyoming Republican primary election, especially the fact that Hageman was endorsed by Trump. However, experts told Sputnik on Wednesday that Cheney's loss was due to her own missteps and that the successes of Trump-endorsed candidates in the primaries won't necessarily translate into victory in the November 2022 elections.

In the Tuesday vote, Cheney was trounced by Hageman, an attorney who was endorsed by Trump and repeats his claims about the 2020 election being stolen by Democrats. The [incumbent candidate received](#) just 28.9% of the vote, while Hageman got 66.3%; a third candidate, Anthony Bouchard, received 2.6% of the votes.

Hageman is just the latest in a slew of candidates backed by Trump to zip past their competitors in primary races across the country.

"The press is overplaying the Trump power vote in this midterm election," Professor David Woodard, Clemson University political scientist and former political consultant for Republican congressmen, told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"The old adage is that 'All politics is local.' When a congresswoman like Liz Cheney alienates her base, she loses. You can't win an election in a Republican primary by asking Democrats to crossover and vote for you. The turnout for primary elections in both parties is quite low, but that is where the power is in American politics. You have to win the loyalists before you can win in a general election. Hageman was endorsed by Trump, but she would have won if she hadn't been endorsed."

"Trump will continue to claim victory in every case where a candidate he supports wins, but his are hollow victories," he noted.

"Voters are independent, and they don't like to take their cues from past politicians. People are deeply troubled about their country and its political institutions. They know that a divisive Republican president and Congress are a death sentence for their party. If they can deliver a united government in 2024 that solves problems like inflation, foreign political power and immigration, they could become the majority party for some time. If they fail, and Donald Trump might be a reason they fail, then they will avoid him."

Matthew Wilson, associate professor of political science at Southern Methodist University, told Sputnik that while Trump supporters are the largest faction of the GOP, "his endorsement remains powerful - though not foolproof - in Republican primaries." For now at least, it is dangerous to be a Republican lawmaker seeking reelection and also an outspoken Trump critic.

“Trump's endorsement of Hageman was helpful, but probably not critical in this race. Liz Cheney's high-profile crusade against Donald Trump attracted plenty of attention on its own, and most of that attention was negative among Republican primary voters. Among Republican primary voters, the January 6 investigation is largely regarded as irrelevant at best, and a politically-motivated witch hunt at worst,” Wilson said.

Wilson noted that primaries can be especially misleading because primary voters tend to “represent the ‘die-hards’ in each party,” which in the GOP are largely Trump loyalists.

“The problem for Trump and the Republicans is that the Republican primary electorate is not the nation as a whole,” Wilson said. “Trump's involvement in various races around the country has saddled the party with multiple weak nominees who are trailing their Democratic opponents in very winnable races. So all of Trump's ‘winning’ in GOP primaries may prove pretty ephemeral come November.”

However, now that she's lost her bid to stay in Congress, [Cheney told NBC News](#) that running against Trump in 2024 is “something that I'm thinking about.” She called the real estate mogul “a very grave threat and risk to our republic,” and said defeating him will require “a broad and united front of Republicans, Democrats and independents - and that's what I intend to be part of.”

Woodard told Sputnik that the outcome of the November 2022 elections will likely determine the tone of the 2024 race, especially if the GOP takes back both houses of Congress.

“If the GOP controls Congress, then in 2024 the GOP party regulars will want a president who can work with the legislature,” he predicted.

“I do not think that Donald Trump has a good record of working with other people, especially Congress, so I think most Republicans have a ‘wait and see’ attitude about Trump and the presidential race in 2024 after this fall. Liz Cheney will lead the anti-Trump crowd in the Republican party, but the people who come to see her may be small. A crowd size does not show political sentiment. People may not go hear Liz Cheney, and still vote against Trump as the nominee.”

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PNA President Abbas Accuses Israel of ‘50 Holocausts’ at Berlin Presser, Provoking Fury

Speaking to Sputnik earlier this year, Gaza-based historian Mohammed Hijazi claimed it was a widespread view among Palestinians that the Nazi atrocities have “largely been exaggerated by Jews” and the deaths only amounted to “dozens of thousands.”

Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) that governs the West Bank, aroused condemnation and scorn following comments to the press on Tuesday in which he accused Israel of “50 Holocausts.”

Abbas' comment was in response to a question by a journalist about whether he intended to apologize for the [1972 killing of 11 Israeli athletes](#) and a West German police officer by the Palestinian militant group Black September. The attack occurred during the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, and the 50th anniversary is on September 5.

“If we want to dig further into the past, yes, please, I have 50 massacres that were committed by Israel,” Abbas said at the Berlin presser. “Fifty massacres, 50 Holocausts, and to this day, every day, we have dead people killed by the [Israeli Defence Forces], by the Israeli army.”

Scholz condemned Abbas’ remarks on Wednesday, tweeting he was “disgusted by the outrageous remarks made by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. For us Germans in particular, any relativization of the singularity of the Holocaust is intolerable and unacceptable. I condemn any attempt to deny the crimes of the Holocaust.”

Ron Prosor, Israel’s ambassador to Germany, accused Abbas of “Holocaust denial,” saying there should be “zero tolerance” for it.

During the Holocaust of World War II, the Nazi German forces [exterminated nearly 12 million people](#), 6 million of whom were Jews, with the others being from variously minority groups including Roma, Slavs, LGBTQ people, and disabled people. Before the Nazi defeat in 1945 ended the massacres, nearly two-thirds of European Jewry had been annihilated, and many of the survivors fled from Europe in the aftermath, going especially to the Palestine territory that in 1948 would become Israel.

In the war against nearby Arab powers following its declaration of independence, Israel expelled more than 600,000 Palestinians from the land they conquered, massacring many villages and spreading news of the horrors to drive others from the land. In the decades since, Israeli forces have [continued to kill Palestinian](#) civilians, sometimes claiming [they are actually terrorists](#), other times during police raids and checkpoint stops, especially in the West Bank.

The perpetrators of the 1972 Munich massacre, a group called Black September, were a split from Fatah - Abbas’ party - who set out to get revenge for the expulsion of Palestinian refugees from Jordan in 1970, assassinating Jordanian Prime Minister Yasfi Tal the following year. They were also linked to numerous other incidents, and after the Munich massacre, Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir ordered the Mossad to hunt down and destroy Black September in what was termed “Operation Wrath of God.”

Ironically, even the German government is facing criticism from the families of the victims of Munich, who have [boycotted the September 5 opening](#) of the memorial because they don’t believe the government has given them adequate financial compensation for it.

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Mali Accuses France of Supporting Terrorists on its Soil in Letter to UN Security Council

The French-led overthrow of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi in 2012 resulted not only in the collapse of Africa’s most prosperous and stable country, but sent shockwaves through the continent that destabilized neighboring countries, including the remote deserts of northern Mali, where Tuareg rebels tried to form their own independent state of Azawad.

In a letter to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on Monday, Malian Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop accused France of supporting terrorist groups inside the African country, urging the council to call an urgent meeting for Bamako to present its evidence.

In the letter, a copy of which was obtained by Sputnik, Diop notes that since the beginning of 2022, French aircraft have illegally crossed Malian airspace more than 50 times, including drones, Chinook transport helicopters, Casa C-295 and Airbus A400M cargo aircraft, and Mirage 2000 strike aircraft.

"The government of Mali has several pieces of evidence that these flagrant violations of Malian airspace were used by France to collect intelligence for the benefit of terrorist groups operating in the Sahel and to drop arms and ammunition on them," the letter stated.

In an accompanying table, 16 violations are listed, with the most recent being an August 8 encounter between Malian forces near Tessit and a French Chinook helicopter that, by its pilots' panicked reaction, wasn't expecting to encounter them.

Other listed events include reconnaissance missions over Malian forces and transporting terrorist forces from one location to another. These occurred mostly in the country's eastern half, especially near Gao, Timbuktu, and Goundam. Rebels operating in Mali include forces aligned with al-Qaeda as well as Daesh*, many of which became radicalized following the catastrophic [destruction of Libya by NATO](#) in 2012.

In the letter, Diop demanded that Paris end such flights, noting that Bamako "reserves the right to use self-defense" should they continue.

'A De Facto Partition'

Malian Prime Minister Choguel Kokalla Maïga has levied similar accusations, accusing France of carrying out ["a de-facto partition" of the country](#).

"When the Malian state went to cooperate with France on intervention in Mali to combat terrorism, we asked for help with intelligence and air support. No one talked about sending the military to the territory. France respected this agreement in Kona, Gao, Timbuktu. When they approached Kidal, they forbade the Malian military to enter there," [Maïga told RIA Novosti](#) in October 2021.

"Mali does not have access to Kidal, it is an enclave controlled by France. They have armed groups that were trained by French officers. And we have evidence of this," Maïga continued.

"We have an expression that if you are looking for a needle in your room, but whoever is involved in the search for this needle is on it, then you will never find it. This is the situation that is currently in Mali and which we do not understand and do not want to put up with."

Barkhane and After

Diop's letter was sent the same day that [Paris announced the withdrawal of the last](#) French troops from Malian soil, flying out of their operational headquarters in Gao on Monday. They arrived nine years earlier as part of Operation Serval, a mission to push back Tuareg rebels that had used the chaos of [a military coup in Bamako](#) to go on the offensive, seizing nearly half of the country.

Serval evolved into Operation Barkhane, a broad war on terror-style campaign across five Sahelian nations that was run out of N'Djamena, Chad. Similar to the US wars, French forces in Barkhane became notorious for [killing civilians and claiming](#) that they were terrorists, and for accomplishing little in the way of defeating militant groups.

Following the May 2021 coup in Bamako, in which the military consolidated its hold on a sizable part of the military-civilian interim government brought to power by the August 2020 coup, Paris backed out of its cooperation with Mali. Shortly thereafter, French President Emmanuel Macron

announced [the end of Barkhane](#) and its replacement with a smaller, more focused mission in the tri-state area of Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, named [Task Force Takuba](#). Later, Paris announced a total pullout from Mali.

The French withdrawal has [opened up new offensives](#) by the Islamist rebels, which have recently reached as far west as the capital Bamako. As a result, Mali has looked for new international partners willing to [respect its sovereignty](#) and help it win the war, leading to [a budding friendship](#) with Russia.

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Factories in China's Sichuan Turn Off for Six Days to Conserve Power Amid Heat Wave, Drought

While some parts of China have been soaked by rains that triggered destructive flooding, other parts have been parched, leading to water management procedures and brownouts in regions like Sichuan and Chongqing, which rely heavily on hydroelectric power.

A devastating heat wave has baked southwestern China in its worst heat wave in nearly 60 years. According to China's [National Climate Center](#), the heat wave has lasted for 64 days as of Wednesday, and 262 of its weather stations have climbed above 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit).

In the central Yangtze valley regions like Hubei Province, aircraft have been loaded with special silver iodide rods to "seed" the clouds for rain; however, with so few in the skies, the mission is on standby.

In Sichuan, reservoirs are running low, affecting hydroelectric power plants that keep the region running. To compensate, authorities have ordered all factories to shut down for six days so power can be diverted to residential and commercial uses; however, residents are also being asked not to turn down the temperatures on their air conditioners below 26 degrees Celsius (78.8 Fahrenheit) and to use stairs instead of elevators in order to further conserve power. Similar orders have gone out in Jiangsu, Anhui, and Zhejiang provinces.

"Some main reservoirs in Sichuan have dried up. The power generation capacity declines while the gap between supply and demand increases," Zhou Jian, an engineer with the Sichuan branch of the State Grid, told [Xinhua News Agency](#).

In Chongqing, a megacity region sandwiched between Sichuan and Hubei, only [half the expected rainfall](#) has fallen this year and 600,000 people are experiencing water shortages and crops are being watered with fire trucks.

"August and September are critical periods for the formation of autumn grain production, so close attention should be paid to the impact of natural disasters and pests on grain production," Fu Linghui, a spokesman for the National Bureau of Statistics, told the [South China Morning Post](#).

With crop yields threatened, Vice Premier [Hu Chunhua said on Tuesday](#) that Beijing would "make all-out efforts in its disaster relief work" to ensure the fall harvest met the goal of 650

billion kilograms of grain. In addition, the Finance Ministry has set aside 300 million yuan (\$44.3 million) for disaster relief associated with the drought.

However, nearby regions like Hunan and Jiangxi have seen flooding in recent months driven by heavy rains. [Downpours in June](#) displaced a quarter of a million people and killed 10 while destroying thousands of structures. Some parts of [Sichuan have also seen](#) flash flooding caused by rain in recent weeks.

A recent study by climate scientists at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire in the United States found that US pollution has caused [nearly \\$2 trillion in damage](#) to the global economy due to its role in driving man-made climate change. By increasing the global temperature with heat-trapping gas emissions, industrialization has triggered changes in weather patterns like those seen across China, causing droughts in some places and deluges in others.

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New Evidence Supports Theory That the Moon was Once Part of Earth
By - Ian DeMartino

The Moon has been studied by humans since we first looked up at the night sky, but its origins remain a mystery. Further evidence supports the theory that the Moon was once part of the Earth.

The prevailing theory among scientists is that around 4.5 billion years ago when the Earth was still forming and was covered in molten lava, it was struck by an object thought to be roughly the size of Mars known as Theia.

It is believed that Theia was destroyed in the process and Earth lost a significant portion of its mass. The gravitational pull of the remains of Earth then held debris from the event in its orbit which quickly, perhaps in less than 100 years, formed into the Moon.

Now, [thanks to new research](#) coming from the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich, we have more evidence to back that up. Patrizia Will led a group of researchers in studying six lunar meteorites discovered in Antarctica in the early 2000s.

Inside she found small glass beads containing helium and neon that were formed during volcanic eruptions during the Moon's early life. These gases are called noble gases because of their relatively low volatility. They are believed to have originated from Earth, inherited when the Moon was created in the aforementioned massive impact.

Scientists believe that because of the amount found in moon rocks and lunar meteorites, they must have come from Earth. The theory is that after the great collision, noble gases floated around Earth while superheated to thousands of degrees. The Moon formed at the same time and much of the noble gases settled in and on the Moon.

Had the gases come from elsewhere, like dust traveling on solar winds, scientists would expect there to be far less of it.

Despite their relative abundance, they're still fairly rare, and no study had been able to prove the existence of the gases in lunar meteorites before.

Will was able to do so by weighing individual molecules to determine the makeup of chemical substances using an advanced mass spectrometer from the Noble Gas Laboratory at ETH Zurich.

Scientists are also trying to figure out how the noble gases got to Earth in the first place. There are two prevailing theories: that they were delivered here by comets and meteorites, or that they were present in a nebula cloud when the Sun was still young, and while Earth was forming, it pulled them in.

The plan is to look for other noble gases like krypton and xenon. If they are found on lunar meteorites and similar instances of the gases are found in other meteorites, then that would suggest that Earth likely got its noble gases from collisions early in its life. If not, that would lend more weight to the nebula theory.

The study's authors say they found some evidence of krypton and xenon on the lunar meteorites, but more research will be required to confirm that.

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Biden Administration to Stop Paying for COVID Testing, Treatment, and Vaccines
By - Ian DeMartino

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 6,003 new COVID-related hospitalizations and 400 deaths occur daily in the United States on average.

White House Covid-19 Coordinator Dr. Ashish Jha announced that the Biden administration will [stop paying for COVID](#) tests, vaccines, and treatments as early as this fall.

"My hope is that in 2023, you're going to see the commercialization of almost all of these products. Some of that is actually going to begin this fall, in the days and weeks ahead. You're going to see commercialization of some of these things," Jha said at an event sponsored by the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation on Tuesday.

He stated that the transition to commercialization of COVID treatments, tests, and vaccines will begin as soon as the coming weeks and months but will be more visible in 2023. He also expects the transition to be difficult.

"Right now, everybody can walk into a CVS and get a vaccine. I want to make sure that when we make this transition, we don't end up at a point where nobody can get a vaccine because we didn't get the transition right," he said.

Tests, vaccines, and treatment would be moved into the normal healthcare system, with patients needing to visit their doctor or a hospital to receive a vaccine or treatment.

The issue comes down to funding. In April, Congress appeared close to a \$10 billion COVID funding plan, but it stalled at the last minute after Republicans insisted the bill include the reinstatement of Title 42, a supposed "public health measure" applied by former President Trump in the early days of the pandemic. It was ostensibly designed to reduce the spread of COVID in the United States by preventing asylum seekers from entering the US while waiting for their cases to be heard.

In response, the Biden administration began to shift funds away from testing and treatment and into developing next-generation vaccines.

Last month, Senate Democrats introduced a bill to provide more COVID funding but it was [quickly shot down](#) by Republicans.

In April, Democrats wanted military and humanitarian aid to Ukraine to be tied to a COVID funding bill to ensure its passage. But [by early May](#), the administration backed off on that and signaled that Congress could do both separately. More than \$50 billion in aid has been sent to Ukraine this year; no significant COVID funding bills have made it through Congress since the American Rescue Plan Act was passed in March 2021.

“It will be the first priority, the second priority and the third priority [of the Biden administration] — to deal with COVID,” Biden [told The New York Times](#) in December 2020.

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Florida Prosecutor Suspended by DeSantis Sues To Get His Job Back
By - Ian DeMartino

Florida has been a hotspot for debate after the overturn of Roe v. Wade and the actions the state has taken against gender-affirming care.

The Florida prosecutor that was suspended by Governor Ron DeSantis [is suing](#) to get his job back.

Earlier this month, DeSantis suspended Andrew Warren, the Hillsborough County State Attorney, over comments and letters Warren signed stating that he will not enforce laws prohibiting sex change operations for minors or anti-abortion legislation.

Warren contends in his lawsuit that the action violated his First Amendment rights and illegally overturned an election. Warren was elected twice by the voters of Hillsborough County. While he did sign the letters and has spoken about his political stances publicly, Warren notes that he has not yet taken any action related to those issues and there are no pending cases at his office dealing with abortion or gender-affirming care.

“The governor’s authority is not unlimited,” Warren said at a news conference in Tallahassee. Warren contends that DeSantis violated Florida law because he removed him for political reasons.

When [announcing the suspension](#), DeSantis insisted that the move was not political but he did refer to Warren’s perceived political stance. “I don’t think the people of Hillsborough County want to have an agenda that is basically woke,” the governor said.

Warren is asking the court to rescind DeSantis’ order and reinstate him. The Florida state Senate may also look at the suspension if the court rules against Warren.

This is not the first time DeSantis has removed a Democratic elected official. In 2019, DeSantis removed Scott Israel, then the sheriff of Broward County, for his department’s failings during the Fort Lauderdale Airport shooting in 2017 and the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in 2018. Those shootings left five and 17 people dead, respectively. The Florida state Senate upheld the suspension.

However, DeSantis' suspension of Israel came after multiple scandals and a no-confidence vote from the police union that ended 534-94 against the sheriff. Warren has no controversies weighing against him other than his perceived political stances and has a reputation for [being tough](#) on violent crime.

"[The suspension] spits in the face of the voters of Hillsborough County who have twice elected me to serve them, not Ron DeSantis," Warren said when news of the suspension first broke. DeSantis replaced Warren with county judge Susan Lopez. As her first act, she announced that she [will be seeking](#) the death penalty for Matthew Terry, who is accused of stabbing his girlfriend, school teacher Kay Baker, to death. Warren previously announced that he would not be seeking the death penalty because Baker's family asked him not to.

"Without warning, I was forced out of my office by an armed deputy, removed from my elected position, and replaced by a Ron DeSantis accomplice," Warren said during the news conference announcing the lawsuit.

The lawsuit also notes that the US Supreme Court ruled that elected officials "be given the widest latitude to express their views on issues of policy" and that the First Amendment protects them from "retaliatory actions after the fact for having engaged in protected speech."

The lawsuit also points to a tweet by DeSantis' official spokesperson before the suspension as proof that it was politically motivated.

DeSantis has not responded to the lawsuit at press time.

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Pence Says He Would 'Consider' Testifying Before the January 6 Committee

By - Mary Manley

On Wednesday, former Vice President Mike Pence said he would "consider" participating in the House January 6 committee, which was created to investigate the January 6, 2021 attack on the United States Capitol Building by a mob of former President Donald Trump's supporters.

While speaking at an event titled Politics and Eggs at Saint Anselm College in New Hampshire, [Pence](#) said he would consider an invitation to participate in the January 6 committee, but not without "due consideration."

"If there was an invitation to participate, I would consider it. But you've heard me mention the Constitution a few times this morning," Pence told listeners at Saint Anselm College on Wednesday. "[Through] the Constitution, we have three co-equal branches of government and any invitation that would be directed to me, I would have to reflect on the unique role I was serving as vice president."

"It'd be unprecedented in history for a vice president to be summoned to testify on Capitol Hill, but as I've said, I don't want to prejudge, so if there was ever any formal invitation rendered to us, we'd give it due consideration."

Pence defied Trump during the 2020 presidential election and confirmed then President-elect Joe Biden as the winner, crushing Trump's efforts to overturn the results of the election. Pence's

support of American democracy was in defiance of Trump and his supporters who had been falsely claiming that Pence had the power to overturn the outcome.

On January 6, Pence was rushed to safety by security after Trump supporters broke into the Capitol Building, with some rioters yelling, “Hang Mike Pence!”

“President Trump is wrong,” [Pence](#) said in a speech in early February of this year to the conservative Federalist Society in Florida. “I had no right to overturn the election.”

“Frankly there is no idea more un-American than the notion that any one person could choose the American president,” he added. “Under the Constitution, I had no right to change the outcome of our election. And Kamala Harris will have no right to overturn the election when we beat them in 2024.”

When asked if the House committee planned on requesting Pence to participate in the hearings, a spokesperson for the team declined to comment.

Despite Pence’s claim that it would be “unprecedented” for a vice president to testify before a congressional committee, some presidents and vice presidents have done so between the years of 1862 and 1983, including then-President Gerald [Ford](#) (who was also a former Vice President), who testified before a congressional committee on his decision to pardon former-President Richard Nixon in the Watergate scandal.

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A\$AP Rocky Pleads Not Guilty to Assault Charges in Connection to Hollywood Shooting
By - Mary Manley

Rapper A\$AP Rocky was first arrested at Los Angeles International Airport in late April after he exited a private jet he was aboard with his partner, the singer and entrepreneur Rihanna, with whom he shares a son. Rocky was arrested in connection to a shooting that occurred in November 2021.

Rocky was arrested in late [April](#) in connection to a November 2021 shooting in the Hollywood area of Los Angeles but was released on a \$550,000 bond.

On Wednesday, Rocky pleaded not guilty to two counts of assault with a semi-automatic firearm. He was accused of allegedly firing a handgun twice in the direction of a former friend during a confrontation, says Los Angeles County District Attorney George Gascón.

“Discharging a gun in a public place is a serious offense that could have ended with tragic consequences not only for the person targeted but also for innocent bystanders visiting Hollywood,” Gascón said in [a statement](#). “My office conducted a thorough review of the evidence in this case and determined that the addition of a special firearm allegation was warranted.”

The DA’s office did not release the name of the alleged victim, but Rocky’s friend and longtime fellow rapper A\$AP [Relli](#) was exposed as the person suing Rocky over the alleged assault. A\$AP Bari, another A\$AP mob member—a rap group in which the three performed—exposed Relli as the victim online when he made a social media post accusing Relli of being a “rat” who “told on Rocky.”

Relli's legal team says since he has been exposed as the victim of the alleged assault he has been receiving death threats online, is traumatized and has had to attend therapy as a result. "It was unprovoked, it wasn't in self defense. It was unjustified," said Relli's attorney Jamal Tooson of the alleged assault against his client. "It's terrifying, it's shocking. [Relli] is emotionally traumatized. He is in a constant state of fear."

"On November 6, 2021, around 10:15 p.m., an argument between two acquaintances occurred in the area of Selma Avenue and Argyle Avenue, in the Hollywood Area," LAPD said in a released statement. "The argument escalated and resulted in the suspect firing a handgun at the victim. The victim sustained a minor injury from the incident and later sought his medical treatment."

This is not the first time the rapper has faced assault charges. In 2019, Rocky was found guilty of assault after he and two of his friends attacked 19-year-old Mustafa Jafari on a street in Stockholm, Sweden, in late June of that year. [Rocky](#) had to pay damages to the victim but did not face a jail sentence.

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More Remains Found at Lake Mead as Megadrought Continues
By - Mary Manley

In just this year alone, authorities have uncovered five different sets of skeletal remains at Lake Mead, the United State's largest reservoir in terms of water capacity. The lake, which is a major water source for millions of Americans, has been depleting due to a seemingly endless megadrought in the western U.S.

A fifth set of human remains was recovered at Lake Mead on Monday night when National Park Service rangers were called to respond to a report at around 8 p.m. It is the fifth set of human remains recovered since May and it is the third set of remains to be found at the lake's Swim Beach location.

"Park rangers have set a perimeter to recover the remains with the support from Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department's dive team," the National Park Service said in a [statement](#), before adding that the investigation is ongoing.

The Washington Times reported on Wednesday that the latest remains have been sent to a Clark County coroner for examination. [Reportedly](#), that same coroner, Melanie Rouse, is also investigating whether or not the first two remains discovered at Lake Mead's Swim Beach location belong to the same body, as both sets are only partial remains.

"At this time, the investigation into these remains includes working to determine whether the two sets of remains are from the same person or not," the coroner's office told the Las Vegas Review-Journal last week.

The first set of human remains was discovered on May 1 and is believed to belong to a homicide victim who died sometime between the mid-1970's and the early 1980's. The victim appeared to have been shot and placed inside of a barrel that had since corroded until a witness discovered the grim finding this year.

Researchers have determined the period between 2000 and 2022 to be the driest the West has been in 1,200 years. While droughts are a naturally occurring phenomenon, researchers found the human-caused climate crisis to have worsened the drought by [72%](#). A megadrought, according to experts, is any drought which lasts two decades or longer. This megadrought, which is depleting the West's water sources, has surpassed the longest megadrought on record, which was in the 1500s.

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Jonah Hill Says He Will No Longer Be Promoting His Work Due to Anxiety
By - Mary Manley

The 38-year-old American actor, known for films such as "Superbad," "21 Jump Street," and "The Wolf of Wall Street," is launching his new documentary "Stutz," which he filmed in secret. Jonah Hill is taking a step back from interviews as he prepares to release his new film "[Stutz](#)," in which he showcases the anxiety attacks he has experienced in the film industry—specifically, in having to promote his work.

The actor, whose film will make its debut this fall, wrote in an open letter to fans that he would be leaving the marketing aspect of the film industry: no more interviews, no more press tours, and no more public events. The reason? Hill's year-long battle with crippling [anxiety](#) and panic attacks.

"I have finished directing my second film, a documentary about me and my therapist which explores mental health in general called Stutz. The whole purpose of making this film is to give therapy and the tools I've learned in therapy to a wide audience for private use through an entertaining film," the actor wrote in his open letter.

"Through this journey of self-discovery within the film, I have come to the understanding that I have spent nearly 20 years experiencing anxiety attacks, which are exacerbated by media appearances and public-facing events."

Hill, who was only 19 years old when first appeared on screen in "I Heart Huckabees," says he hopes his new film will help those struggling with anxiety and mental health issues, but added that his fans would miss out on seeing the actor promote his new film as he is taking the "important step to protect" himself.

"If I made myself sicker by going out there and promoting it, I wouldn't be acting true to myself or to the film," the actor added. Hill also acknowledged the privilege he has in being able to take time off of work for his mental health, but says he hopes that being transparent about his anxiety will "make it normal for people to talk and act on this stuff."

"I hope the work will speak for itself and I'm grateful to my collaborators, my business partners and to all reading this for your understanding and support," Hill concluded.

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US, Taiwan Formally Begin New Trade Talks – Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – The United States and Taiwan reached a consensus on a negotiating mandate for their new US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade on Wednesday, according to a release.

"Today, we begin negotiations with Taiwan under the auspices of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO) that will deepen our trade and investment relationship, advance mutual trade priorities based on shared values, and promote innovation and inclusive economic growth for our workers and businesses," US Deputy Trade Representative Sarah Bianchi said in the release.

The mandate sets out the broad objectives for trade negotiations, of which the first round is expected to occur in the early fall. The agenda includes trade facilitation; good regulatory practices; strong anti-corruption standards; enhancing trade between small and medium enterprises; deepening agriculture trade; removing discriminatory barriers to trade; digital trade; robust labor and environmental standards; as well as ways to address distortive practices of state-owned enterprises and non-market policies and practices, the release said.

The US and Taiwan had announced on June 1 that they would develop a new plan for trade talks under the banner of the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade.

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Guterres Visits University of Lviv Ahead of Talks With Zelenskyy, Erdogan

UNITED NATIONS, August 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres visited the National University of Lviv on Thursday, ahead of his meeting with Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

"I was delighted to accept the invitation of the director of this faculty of international relations of the very old and very respected [National] University of Lviv," Guterres told reporters.

He noted that the university has made very important contributions to the Charter of the United Nations.

"One of the members was part of the drafting of the charter and its values were discussed here. Also in research about the Holocaust, and in contributions in relation to several very important aspects of the analysis of violations of human rights and genocide," he said.

After visiting Lviv, Guterres will head to Odesa, one of the three ports from which Ukraine exports grain under the UN-brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative.

On Saturday, Guterres will visit the Joint Coordination Center (JCC) in Istanbul. The JCC is in charge of overseeing the shipments of Ukrainian grain via the country's Black Sea ports.

Guterres is expected to meet with Russian, Ukrainian and Turkish representatives at the JCC.

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RPT: PREVIEW - UN Chief Begins Trip to Ukraine, Turkey for Talks on Moscow-Kiev Tensions, Grain Shipments

UNITED NATIONS, August 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres begins a three-day mission that will take him to Lviv, Odessa, and Istanbul in a bid to lower tensions in the region over the conflict in Ukraine and to review progress on the Black Sea initiative.

Guterres starts his trip in Lviv on Thursday in what are expected to be bilateral and trilateral meetings with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The UN said they are expected to discuss the need for a political solution to the conflict, among other issues. UN spokesperson Farhan Haq on Wednesday outlined some of the top items on Guterres' agenda.

"He's dealing with issues including the movement of ships and the food and grain issue, the concerns about the nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia, the concerns about the fact-finding activity concerning... Olenivka prison, and also his overall efforts to do what he can to essentially lower the temperature as much as possible with the various authorities," Haq said during a press briefing.

On whether it is a problem that Russia will not be participating in the talks, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters Guterres had a good conversation with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu on Tuesday about the Zaporizhzhia NPP, Black Sea Initiative, and the Olenivka fact-finding mission.

Guterres' visit comes amid a dispute over a potential visit by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (NPP). Russia said the UN Secretariat canceled the trip while IAEA chief Rafael Grossi and the UN Secretariat said they needed to secure the consent of all sides.

After visiting Lviv, Guterres will head to the Odessa port, one of the three from which Ukraine exports grain under the United Nations-brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative. The UN said Guterres' goal is to review in person the results of efforts to broker a deal between Russia and Ukraine on getting grain and other foodstuffs out of Ukraine.

On Saturday, Guterres will visit Istanbul's Joint Coordination Center (JCC). The JCC oversees the shipments of Ukrainian grain via the country's Black Sea ports. According to the United Nations, Guterres is expected to meet with Russian, Ukrainian, and Turkish representatives at the JCC.

More details on Guterres's visit are to be announced on Thursday. The UN office refused to comment on the mode of transportation but confirmed he travels "not by ship."

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RPT - US Court Likely to Convict Russian Dubnikov on Financial Crime Charges - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The chances of extradited Russian citizen Denis Dubnikov being convicted by a US court for alleged financial and cyber crimes are high, former Dubnikov lawyer Arkady Bukh told Sputnik.

"The client at the time of arraignment is not guilty, but statistically US courts on cyber cases have a 99.7% or 99.8% conviction rate, so it's almost a 100% conviction rate on cyber cases extradited to the United States," Bukh said on Wednesday.

An "all for all" prisoner swap between the United States and Russia would also not be surprising, Bukh said. However, the United States holds many more Russians in its custody than Russia does Americans, he added.

Bukh also said he has no information at this time about a possible exchange involving Dubnikov. Dubnikov was extradited from the Netherlands to the United States to make his initial appearance at a US federal court in Oregon earlier on Wednesday. Dubnikov alongside co-conspirators is alleged to have laundered the proceeds of ransomware attacks on US individuals and organizations, the Justice Department said in a statement.

Dubnikov faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted on the charges against him, the statement added.

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Russian National Dubnikov Still in Custody But Will Be Released Tonight - Police

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Russian national Denis Dubnikov who was extradited to the United States from the Netherlands earlier this week over cryptocurrency laundering charges is still in police custody in the state of Oregon but will be released later tonight, the Multnomah County Sheriff's Office told Sputnik.

"He's currently in custody, [but] he's getting released tonight," the sheriff's office said on Wednesday.

The sheriff's office said that US Marshals said Dubnikov should be released, but they do not know the reason for it.

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Russian Dubnikov Extradited to US Not Part of Prisoner Swap - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Russian national Denis Dubnikov, who was extradited to the United States from the Netherlands over cryptocurrency laundering charges, will not be part of a prisoner swap being negotiated between Moscow and Washington, his lawyer David Angeli of the Angeli Law Group told Sputnik.

"He's not part of a prisoner swap," Angeli said on Wednesday when asked if Dubnikov could be part of a prisoner swap between the United States and Russia.

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RPT: PREVIEW - UN Chief Begins Trip to Ukraine, Turkey for Talks on Moscow-Kiev Tensions, Grain Shipments

(Repeat to fix dateline to United Nations)

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Guterres starts his trip in Lviv on Thursday in what are expected to be bilateral and trilateral meetings with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The UN said they are expected to discuss the need for a political solution to the conflict, among other issues. UN spokesperson Farhan Haq on Wednesday outlined some of the top items on Guterres' agenda.

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After visiting Lviv, Guterres will head to the Odessa port, one of the three from which Ukraine exports grain under the United Nations-brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative. The UN said Guterres' goal is to review in person the results of efforts to broker a deal between Russia and Ukraine on getting grain and other foodstuffs out of Ukraine.

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US Court Likely to Convict Russian Dubnikov on Financial Crime Charges - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The chances of extradited Russian citizen Denis Dubnikov being convicted by a US court for alleged financial and cyber crimes are high, former Dubnikov lawyer Arkady Bukh told Sputnik.

"The client at the time of arraignment is not guilty, but statistically US courts on cyber cases have a 99.7% or 99.8% conviction rate, so it's almost a 100% conviction rate on cyber cases extradited to the United States," Bukh said on Wednesday.

An "all for all" prisoner swap between the United States and Russia would also not be surprising, Bukh said. However, the United States holds many more Russians in its custody than Russia does Americans, he added.

Bukh also said he has no information at this time about a possible exchange involving Dubnikov. Dubnikov was extradited from the Netherlands to the United States to make his initial appearance at a US federal court in Oregon earlier on Wednesday. Dubnikov alongside co-conspirators is alleged to have laundered the proceeds of ransomware attacks on US individuals and organizations, the Justice Department said in a statement.

Dubnikov faces up to 20 years in prison if convicted on the charges against him, the statement added.

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Alleged Russian Cryptocurrency Launderer Extradited to US From Netherlands - Justice Dept.
(Adds details in paras 4,5)

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Russian national Denis Dubnikov, arrested on suspicion of involvement in cybercrimes, has been extradited to the United States from the Netherlands and is facing up to 20 years in a US prison, the Justice Department said in a press release.

"An alleged cryptocurrency money launderer was extradited this week from the Netherlands to the United States to face charges in the District of Oregon," the release said on Wednesday.

"Denis Mihaqlovic Dubnikov, 29, a Russian citizen, made his initial appearance in federal court today in Portland. A five-day jury trial is scheduled to begin on Oct. 4."

If convicted, Dubnikov faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison, according to the Justice Department.

Dubnikov and co-conspirators, the release added, allegedly laundered ransom payments extracted from victims of Ryuk ransomware attacks.

In July of 2019, Dubnikov allegedly laundered more than \$400,000 in Ryuk ransom proceeds, according to the statement.

Dubnikov has already pleaded not guilty, according to court documents, while authorities told Sputnik no bail has been set.

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Russian National Dubnikov Held in Oregon Detention Facility Without Bail - Center Rep.

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Russian national Denis Dubnikov, extradited to the United States from the Netherlands, is being held at Oregon detention facility without bail, and will remain there until the next hearing in October, a Multnomah County Detention Center (MCDC) representative told Sputnik.

"Yes. He is in our custody," the representative said when asked about Dubnikov.

The representative added that Dubnikov will remain in their custody until the next hearing which is scheduled for October 4.

Asked whether he was allowed to be release on bail, the representative said, "No. It is no bail."

Dubnikov, arrested on suspicion of involvement in cybercrimes, has been extradited to the United States from the Netherlands and is facing up to 20 years in a US prison, the Justice Department said in a press release.

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Russian Citizen Dubnikov Pleads Not Guilty to Laundering Charges in US Court - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Russian National Denis Dubnikov pleaded not guilty in US court to cryptocurrency laundering charges after he was extradited to the United States from the Netherlands, a court filing revealed.

"First Appearance, Arraignment, and Detention Hearing before Magistrate Judge Jolie A. Russo as to Defendant Denis Mihaqlovic Dubnikov (7) held on 8/17/2022... Not guilty plea(s) entered," the filing said on Wednesday.

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Influential Quebec Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Potential Pope Heir Accused of Sexual Assault

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The influential Cardinal of Quebec Marc Ouellet, which has been considered by many to be a potential successor to Pope Francis, has been named in a lawsuit for sexual assault, the pursuant lawyers told Sputnik.

"I confirm that the name of Cardinal Marc Ouellet is mentioned in our judiciary procedure," the pursuant law firm said on Wednesday.

In documents submitted to the court and provided by the law firm to Sputnik, the cardinal's name appears under the title of "The case of F." by a woman who accuses Ouellet as well as Abbot Leopold Manirabarusha of sexual assault. The woman, born in 1984, has decided to remain anonymous.

The alleged abuses were carried out repeatedly between 2008-2010 when Ouellet was still Archbishop of Quebec and mostly occurred during public events attended by both individuals, the documents said.

The abuses began when the woman was 23 and took form of non-consensual kisses, touches and caresses, the documents said.

The woman reportedly came forward to the committee in charge of reviewing sexual misconduct allegations within the Quebec Diocese after falling victim to Manirabarusha, ten years after Ouellet, the documents added.

Sputnik reached out to the Quebec Diocese for comment but said will "strictly" not provide any comments on the matter.

"We take note of the allegations against Cardinal Marc Ouellet. We will strictly not comment on this," the Quebec Diocese said.

The class action taken against the Catholic institution happens after over 101 victims came forward to denounce the abuses committed by 88 clergymen, including Ouellet, since 1940.

The news of the alleged sexual abuse comes after Pope Francis visited Canada and denounced the abuses perpetrated by the Catholic Church in the country.

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US Marines Get New Simulator to Train Heavy Lift Helicopter Pilots - Lockheed Martin

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin is supplying the US Marine Corps with an additional Containerized Flight Training Device (CFTD) with options for three more, the company announced in a press release.

"Lockheed Martin will provide an additional CFTD to the US Navy with options for three more under the terms of a recent contract award," the release said on Wednesday. "The United States Marines will gain additional training opportunities preparing them to operate the Sikorsky CH-53K heavy lift helicopter."

The aircraft is the most modern and powerful helicopter in the Defense Department inventory capable of moving troops and equipment from ship to shore, and to higher altitude terrain, more quickly and effectively than ever before, the release said.

"Marine pilots have smoothly transitioned from the training device to the actual CH-53K's fly-by-wire cockpit and completed missions in the fleet environment - such as air-to-air refueling" Lockheed Martin Vice President of Training and Simulation Solutions Flash Kinloch said in the release.

The Marine Corps achieved Initial Operational Capability for the CH-53K helicopter in April following a successful test period that resulted in more than 3,000 mishap free hours flown in challenging environments and terrain, according to the release.

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Wall Street Falls 1st Time Since Start of Week as Fed Minutes Stir Debate on Rates

NEW YORK, August 18 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street fell broadly for the first time since the start of this week after minutes from the Federal Reserve's July meeting stirred debate on the direction for US interest rates.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which comprises stocks of 30 large US corporations, fell 0.5% on the day. It had gained 4% in five previous trading sessions.

The S&P 500 index, which represents the top 500 US stocks, slid 0.7%, after gaining some 2.3% over three previous sessions.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee names in technology such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, was the only US stock barometer down for a second day in a row this week, after Tuesday's decline of 0.2%.

Stocks fell as the Fed did not give a clear direction on in its July meeting minutes published on Wednesday.

The US central bank's interest rate hikes could slow at some point if inflation continues retreating from the four-decade highs seen earlier this year.

But it also said some policy-makers on its Federal Open Market Committee wanted rates to be retained at a "sufficiently restrictive level" for an appreciable period of time to stop inflation in its tracks.

"The data-dependent central bank is looking at a strong economy that could handle at the very least a couple more massive 75 basis-point rate hikes if inflation does not cool quickly," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading brokerage OANDA, said.

Until the Fed's July meeting minutes released on Wednesday, traders have been betting on the central bank raising interest rates by just 50 basis points at its next meeting in September, versus previous wagers for a 75 basis-point hike.

The Fed has carried out four rate hikes since March, bringing key lending rates from nearly zero to as high as 2.5% by July.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), however, remains at more than four times the central bank's annual target of 2%. The CPI grew at 8.5% during the year to July. Prior to that, the CPI expanded at its fastest pace in four decades, growing 9.1% during the year to June.

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US, European Allies Request Open Meeting on Ukraine at UN Security Council on August 24

UNITED NATIONS, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, Albania, France, Ireland, Norway and the United Kingdom have requested an open meeting on Ukraine to be held on August 24, a diplomat at the United Nations told Sputnik.

The goal of the meeting is to discuss the impact of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, given that six months have passed since the beginning of the conflict, the diplomat said on Wednesday.

This last UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine was held on August 11 at the request of Russia and discussions covered the developments concerning the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant.

The UN Security Council member states try to hold regular meetings on Ukraine to review the situation in the country and keep the issue on the agenda.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) -

ARMS CONTROL

* Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said that he intended to find out in meetings at the Defense and State departments whether Washington was really ready to talk with Moscow about arms control and a treaty to replace New START accord.

ENERGY MARKETS

* US attempts to divide energy markets into "good" and "bad" are leading to destabilization of the sector, as well as jumps in fuel prices and inflation, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said Wednesday.

* Russia is a reliable supplier of energy, no matter how hard the United States tries to convince everyone of the opposite, Antonov said.

* Germany may decide to launch the Nord Stream 2 pipeline before the end of this year if the country faces severe consequences of the energy crisis, Deputy Chairman of the Russian Federation Council's Committee on International Affairs Vladimir Dzhubarov told Sputnik.

* Underground gas storage facilities (UGS) in the European Union are filled by 75%, the association of gas infrastructure operators, Gas Infrastructure Europe (GIE), said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Ukrainian troops opened massive fire on Enerгодar in the Zaporizhzhia region, the city administration reports.

* UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres aims to decrease tensions between Russia and Ukraine during his trip to Lviv, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said to reporters.

* The Russian administration of the Kherson region said it had approved a new territorial division that would streamline its integration and economic development.

KOSOVO TENSIONS

* The NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) is ready to intervene if stability at the Kosovo-Serbia border is jeopardized, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said on Wednesday.

* Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic said that conducting a military operation in Kosovo and crossing the administrative line is ruled out.

* Vucic said during a meeting with Stoltenberg that Belgrade will remain neutral and does not need foreign military bases.

TURKEY-ISRAEL RELATIONS

* Turkey has decided to appoint an ambassador in Israel and restore diplomatic relations, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said on Wednesday.

* The restoration of full diplomatic ties with Turkey will contribute to strengthening economic relations and friendship between the Israeli and Turkish peoples, Israeli President Isaac Herzog said.

* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said in a phone conversation with Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid that he would soon appoint a new country's ambassador to Israel.

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Russia in 'Serious Dialogue' With IAEA, UN on Visit to Zaporizhzhia NPP - Foreign Ministry

UNITED NATIONS, August 17 (Sputnik) - Russia is involved in a deep dialogue with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the UN Secretariat to make sure that IAEA is able to visit the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, Deputy Director of the Department for Non-Proliferation and Arms Control of the Russian Foreign Ministry Igor Vishnevetsky said on Wednesday.

"I will explain right now, during these very days, Russia is involved in some very serious dialogue with the IAEA and the UN Secretariat in order to ensure that a delegation of the IAEA headed by Director General Grossi, so that the delegation could visit the Zaporizhzhia power plant and ensure safeguards actions in line with its mandate, and we're very interested in that happening and we already said that that was practically organized," Vishnevetsky said during a debate in the United Nations.

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Oil Prices Rebound From 6.5 Month Lows as US Crude Exports Hit Record Highs

NEW YORK, August 17 (Sputnik) - Oil prices climbed more than 1% on Wednesday, rebounding from six-and-a-half month lows, after the US government reported record crude exports for last week.

Gains in crude prices were, however, cut short by expectations that a 2015 nuclear deal with Iran might be revived soon to make way for the removal of US sanctions that could return some 1 million barrels of oil per day from the Islamic Republic to the market.

Also limiting crude's rally was a report suggesting a surfeit of oil exports from Russia this year. Higher oil export volumes, coupled with rising gas prices, will boost Russia's earnings from energy exports to \$337.5 billion this year, a 38% rise from 2021, according to an Economy Ministry document seen by Reuters.

West Texas Intermediate (WTI), the benchmark for US crude, settled up \$1.58, or 1.8%, at \$88.11 per barrel. Earlier, it hit a session high of \$89.12, surging from Tuesday's bottom of \$85.73 that marked its lowest since January 26.

Brent, the London-traded global benchmark for crude, settled up \$1.31, or 1.4%, at \$93.65. Its session high was \$95.95. On Tuesday, Brent fell \$91.72, its lowest since February 16. Oil rallied after weekly inventory data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed stockpiles of US crude tumbling by some seven million barrels last week, after record high exports and a smaller-than-usual release from the nation's emergency oil reserve. Exports of crude oil hit an all-time high of 5 million barrels during the week that ended on August 12, while the Biden administration released just under 3.5 million barrels from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve compared with its typical weekly release of five-to-six million barrels that are aimed at bridging supply shortfalls in the market. "It's a story of exports, exports, exports for US crude," John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said. "The smaller-than-usual SPR release combined with that to bring down stockpiles from the previous two weeks." Stockpiles of crude had ballooned by around 10 million barrels during the weeks of August 5 and July 29 combined. For the latest week, industry analysts polled by US media had expected a crude drawdown of 275,000 barrels instead. US oil production also ticked lower last week, to an estimated 12.1 million barrels per day from a previous 12.2 million, helping reduce crude stockpiles. In the case of gasoline, the top automobile fuel in the United States, inventories tumbled by 4.64 million, adding to the previous week's outsized drawdown of 4.98 million barrels last week. Analysts had expected a gasoline stockpile drop of just 1.1 million barrels for last week. US consumption of gasoline slumped in mid-June as pump prices hit record highs of \$5 per gallon, prompting Americans to conserve fuel. Prices have fallen since to just below \$4 per gallon, encouraging demand again. As per the EIA data, demand for gasoline at US pumps stood at 9.34 million barrels last week, versus the previous week's 9.12 million and the year-ago level of 9.33 million. Distillate stockpiles were about the only negative thing in the weekly inventory numbers released by the EIA. Distillates - the oil variant required for making the diesel needed for trucks, buses and trains, as well as the fuel for jets - rose by 766,000 barrels last week, on top of the previous week's build of 2.17 million. Analysts had forecast a build of 440,000 barrels.

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CORRECTION - Two US Judges to Pay \$206Mln for Role in Scheme to Send Kids to For-Profit Jails - Filing

(Corrects the sum in headline and lede)

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - Two former US judges from the state of Pennsylvania have been ordered to pay more than \$206 million to the victims of a scheme they helped orchestrate when they helped facilitate the building of two for-profit jails and sent children to them for minor infractions, a court document revealed on Wednesday.

"It is hereby ORDERED that: Judgment is ENTERED in favor of the plaintiffs listed in the court's Damages Appendix against [Mark] Ciavarella and [Michael] Conahan in the amount of

\$106,296,945.53 in compensatory damages," US District Judge Christopher Conner said in the court document. "Punitive damages are assessed against Conahan and Ciavarella in the amount of \$100,000,000.00."

The court document said Ciavarella and Conahan were paid more than \$2.7 million by the builder and co-owner of the two for-profit jails after the two judges helped shutdown a county-run juvenile detention center.

The former judges reportedly sent a large number of juveniles, some as young as eight years old, to the for-profit detention centers for minor infractions.

The fine the former judges are ordered to pay will go to more than 300 people who are part of the civil action lawsuit.

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Pink Floyd Co-Founder Roger Waters at Rally in Washington Calls for Freeing Assange

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - Pink Floyd co-founder Roger Waters at a protest in front of the Justice Department in Washington on Wednesday called for freeing Julian Assange and warned that the US government could kill him.

In June, the UK approved the extradition of Assange to the United States, where he is facing a possible sentence of up to 175 years on espionage and charges. Assange has appealed the ruling to the High Court in London.

Meanwhile, court documents on Monday revealed that the CIA and former chief Mike Pompeo have been sued for allegedly illegally spying on attorneys and journalists who visited Assange when he stayed in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London.

"Julian is still in [London's] Belmarsh prison, he is still on the way to be extradited to the United States where the government of the United States can kill him in private," Waters said. "Merrick Garland, do the right thing. Free Julian Assange at lunch time today, please."

Waters pointed out that those keeping Assange in the prison are making the WikiLeaks founder sicker and pushing him closer to death.

He also called on all the people who gathered and those listening to him to "never, never shut up" and keep doing what they are doing in efforts to free Assange.

"Free Assange," Waters shouted and the crowd shouted back.

The participants were holding banners with slogans like "Free Assange, Free Press," and "Roger, we live your politics." Other signs called on the Justice Department to stop oppressing the press and drop the charges.

Waters was greeted with applause and lots of by-standers stopped to listen to his address.

Wearing casual clothes he spoke without any notes.

During the speech Waters was standing on a banner with the sign of the Justice Department which said the department was "criminalizing journalism."

During the rally a small truck car was driving back and forth with sayings on its sides like "First Amendment. If he goes it Goes. Save him. Save it." "US commits war crimes in Iraq and

Afghanistan and then persecutes the journalist who exposed it. Jail the killers not the messenger."

Waters made the appearance while being on his 2022 "This Is Not a Drill" Tour. Some US politicians have been critical of Waters for his recent comments accusing President Joe Biden of fueling the conflict in Ukraine.

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US Asks Israel to Review Rules of Engagement in W.Bank After Abu Akleh's Killing - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is pressing Israel to reassess its "rules of engagement" for military operations in the West Bank following the killing of Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, Axios reported on Wednesday, citing Israeli and US sources in the know.

On May 11, Abu Akleh was shot and killed while reporting on an Israeli raid in the West Bank. Witnesses said that Israeli soldiers shot the journalist, who was wearing a vest identifying her as press. During her funeral procession, Israeli police beat the mourners with batons.

The Biden administration wants Israel to change the list of circumstances when its military can use live fire in the West Bank, the report said.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken, following his meeting with the Abu Akleh family in Washington in July, reportedly called Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz to ask him to publish the final conclusions of the Israeli military's investigation into the journalist's death as soon as possible.

Blinken told Gantz the fact that Abu Akleh was shot while she was wearing a bulletproof vest marked "press" means that either the rules of engagement were not followed or they need to be reviewed. He added that the review would be a step toward accountability in the Abu Akleh case, the sources said.

Gantz replied that situations on the ground are not always black and white during military operations in the West Bank, according to the report.

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Two US Judges to Pay \$200,000 for Role in Scheme to Send Kids to For-Profit Jails - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - Two former US judges from the state of Pennsylvania have been ordered to pay more than \$200,000 to the victims of a scheme they helped orchestrate when they helped facilitate the building of two for-profit jails and sent children to them for minor infractions, a court document revealed on Wednesday.

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State Dept. Says No Meetings to Preview With Antonov, Russian Officials on Thursday
(Adds details, background in paras 4,5)

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday that there are no meetings to preview for Thursday between US officials and Russian officials, including Russian Ambassador Anatoly Antonov.

Earlier in the day, Antonov said he will visit the State Department on Thursday to meet with US officials to discuss issues about facilitating visas for Russian officials who will travel to New York City to attend high-level week at the United Nations in September.

"I don't have any meetings with Russian officials, including the Ambassador to read out for tomorrow, but if we have anything to share tomorrow, we will," Price said during a press briefing. With respect to foreign diplomats traveling to the United Nations, Price said that the United States, as the host country of the UN, has a special obligation to facilitate the travel of those taking part in UN activities.

Antonov said the Russian Embassy in the United States has urged the White House and the State Department to immediately issue visas to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and all members of the Russian delegation for a visit to the UN General Assembly in September.

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Children Born Near Fracking Sites Face Increased Odds of Leukemia - Study

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - US children who were born near fracking sites are two to three times as likely to develop acute lymphoblastic leukemia (ALL) as their peers, according to a study published in Environmental Health Perspectives on Wednesday.

The study examined whether a link exists between residential proximity to unconventional oil and gas development (UOG, fracking) sites and ALL, the most common form of childhood leukemia.

"Children with at least one UOG well within 2km of their birth residence during the primary window [3 months preconception to 1 year before diagnosis] had 1.98 times the odds of developing ALL in comparison with those with no UOG wells," the study said. "Children with at least one vs. no UOG wells within 2km during the perinatal window [preconception to birth] had 2.80 times the odds of developing ALL."

Fracking developments are a risk factor for childhood ALL, the study found based on the results. The data provide additional support for more stringent setback policies and public health measures to reduce exposures to UOG sites, the study said.

Researchers studied 405 children aged two to seven-years old in Pennsylvania with ALL and 2,080 controls matched on birth year. Over 10,000 fracking wells were drilled in Pennsylvania between 2002 and 2017, according to the study.

The study was conducted by researchers at Yale University and the Georgetown Lombardi Comprehensive Cancer Center.

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US Rate Hikes Might Slow at Some Point as Inflation Cools - Fed July Meeting Minutes

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - US rate hikes could slow at some point if inflation continues retreating from the four-decade highs seen earlier this year, according to the Federal Reserve's July meeting minutes published on Wednesday.

"Some participants indicated that, once the policy rate had reached a sufficiently restrictive level, it likely would be appropriate to maintain that level for some time," the Fed said in the minutes of its July 26-27 meeting where it referred to participants from its policy-making Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC).

But the Fed also said that FOMC members were wary of overdoing rate hikes and felt that slowing rate hikes may be appropriate during softer economic conditions.

"Downside risks included the possibility that a further tightening in financial conditions would have a larger negative effect on economic activity than anticipated as well as the possibilities that the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the COVID-related lockdowns in China would have larger-than-expected effects on economic growth," the central bank added.

The Fed has carried out four rate hikes since March, bringing key lending rates from nearly zero to as high as 2.5% by July.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), however, remains at more than four times the central bank's annual target of 2%. The CPI grew at 8.5% during the year to July. Prior to that, the CPI expanded at its fastest pace in four decades, growing 9.1% during the year to June.

Traders are betting that the Fed will raise rates by just 50 basis points at its next meeting in September, versus bets previously for a 75 basis-point hike.

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US to Take Steps in Coming Weeks to Counter Chinese Activity Around Taiwan - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The United States will take steps in the coming weeks and months to counter China's military and economic activity around Taiwan, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"We will continue to take steps that are resolute but also calm to uphold peace and stability in the face of Beijing's ongoing efforts to undermine the status quo," Price said during a press briefing. "These steps across a range of areas will unfold over the coming weeks and months because we recognize that this challenge is a long term."

Price said the United States expects China to continue alleged military intimidation and coercive economic tactics against Taiwan in the coming weeks. Price added that China has maintained a heightened military air and maritime posture around Taiwan despite the end of exercises. Moreover, Price said any US moves to counter China's activity around Taiwan will be consistent with the One China policy, the Taiwan Relations Act, and other measures.

The visit of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to Taiwan in early August triggered a new round of tensions in the Taiwan Strait and in the region. On August 4, Beijing launched large-scale military exercises in the vicinity of the island, which included live-fire drills and military aircraft overflights close to Taiwan's airspace.

On Tuesday, China staged military exercises in five areas of the South China Sea off the coast of the southeastern Guangdong province. Several zones of the Yellow Sea are also involved in the ongoing drills on August 17-19.

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"I don't have any meetings with Russian officials, including the Ambassador to read out for tomorrow, but if we have anything to share tomorrow, we will," Price said during a press briefing.

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Missouri Man Indicted for Threatening Arizona Election Official - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The US charged a Missouri man for allegedly leaving a threatening voice message on the personal cell phone of an Arizona election official related to an audit of ballots in the 2020 elections, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"A Missouri man was indicted yesterday for allegedly leaving a voicemail containing a threat on the personal cell phone of an election official in the Maricopa County Recorder's Office in Maricopa County, Arizona," the department said in a press release.

Arizona was one of the key battleground states in the 2020 election, which President Joe Biden won narrowly, although a ballot audit was called for by Republicans who alleged voter fraud, echoing former President Donald Trump's accusations. Auditors released a report in September of 2021 that confirmed Biden's victory.

Walter Lee Hoornstra, 50, in a personal voice mail on or about May 19, 2021, according to the release, said the election official will never make it to the next board meeting if there are "any more troubles" amid the forensic audit of returns.

If convicted, Hoornstra faces as much as five years in prison for making a threatening interstate communication and up to two years in prison for making a threatening telephone call.

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UN Will Continue to Facilitate Granting of Visas to Russian Delegations - Spokesperson
(Updates with additional information in para 3)

UNITED NATIONS, August 17 (Sputnik) - The United Nations will continue to work on facilitating the granting of visas to members of Russian delegations to attend events at the world body headquarters in New York, spokesperson Farhan Haq told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"We always work to facilitate the granting of visas to all those who need to attend UN events and we will continue to do so," Haq said.

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and other senior UN officials remain in close contact with the host country - the United States - and with the concerned missions at the world body, including the Russian mission, with regard to issues under the UN-US Headquarters Agreement, Haq added.

Russia has had a long-standing problem with its diplomats not being able to obtain US visas in time to attend UN events.

On July 27, media reports indicated that the United States did not issue visas to several Russian representatives intending to participate in the work of United Nations bodies.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov sent a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urging him to ensure that the United States fulfills its obligations as a host country of United Nations headquarters.

Lavrov said he was considering visiting the UN High Level Week in September but it was uncertain whether the United States would issue him the necessary US visa to participate in the event.

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First Cities Summit of the Americas to Open April 26-28, 2023 in Denver - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The first Cities Summit of the Americas will be held in the US city of Denver, Colorado, from April 26-28, the US State Department announced on Wednesday.

"On Wednesday, August 17, Colorado Governor Jared Polis, Denver Mayor Michael B. Hancock, and U.S. National Summit Coordinator Kevin O'Reilly announced that the first Cities Summit of the Americas will take place April 26-28, 2023, in Denver," the statement said. Back in June, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced the US commitment to host the Cities Summit.

"The Cities Summit will promote regional cooperation, convening sub-national leaders from across the entire Western Hemisphere with diverse and inclusive representatives of government, civil society, business, academia, youth, culture and the arts, and indigenous and under-represented groups," the statement added.

The leaders of cities and communities will be meeting throughout the week of April 24. Also, the official events are due to start April 26. The events at the summit will include plenary sessions, expert panels, networking sessions and public outreach activities.

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Washington Police Discovers Body of Russian Businessman Rapoport, Suspects No 'Foul Play'

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The Washington Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) issued a statement on Wednesday saying that it discovered the body of Russian investor and businessman Dan Rapoport after he allegedly committed suicide earlier this week and suspects "no foul play" in his death.

"At this time, we do not suspect foul play," the MPD said in the statement.

According to a death report provided by the MPD, shortly before 6:00 p.m. (22:00 GMT) on Sunday, Rapoport jumped out of the window of an apartment, located in a building in the Washington's neighborhood Georgetown.

The police recovered \$2,620 in cash, a cracked cell phone, a headphone, eyeglasses, orange flip-flops and a Florida driver's license, among other items, the report said.

An ambulance tried to provide emergency care to Rapoport on the way to an area hospital but he was pronounced dead shortly thereafter.

Rapoport, who was 52 at the time of his death, was born in Latvia in 1970 and emigrated with his parents to the United States in 1980, where he worked until the early 2000s and then moved to Russia. From 2012 to 2016, he lived in Washington with his wife Irina. In October 2016, he moved to Kiev, Ukraine.

In 2017, US corporate media reported that Rapoport sold his luxury house in Washington to former US President Donald Trump's daughter Ivanka for \$5.5 million.

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UN Chief Aims to Lower Tensions Between Russia, Ukraine in Lviv - Office

UNITED NATIONS, August 17 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres aims to decrease tensions between Russia and Ukraine during his trip to Lviv, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said told reporters Wednesday.

"He [Guterres] has made clear the issues that have been of concern regarding Ukraine. So, he's dealing with issues including the movement of ships and the food and grain issue, the concerns about the nuclear power plant in Zaporizhzhia, the concerns about the fact finding activity concerning all the Olenivka prison and also his overall efforts to do what he can to essentially lower the temperature as much as possible with the various authorities," Haq said during a press briefing.

More details about his trip will hopefully be available on Thursday, Haq said.

After visiting Lviv, Guterres will then head to Odesa, one of the three ports from which Ukraine exports grain under the United Nations- brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative.

On Saturday, Guterres will visit the Joint Coordination Center (JCC) in Istanbul. The JCC is in charge of overseeing the shipments of Ukrainian grain via the country's Black Sea ports. Guterres is expected to meet with Russian, Ukrainian and Turkish representatives at the JCC, according to the United Nations.

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US Weekly Crude Stocks Tumble 7Mln Barrels on Record Exports, Smaller Reserves Release

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - Stockpiles of US crude tumbled by some seven million barrels last week as record high exports and a smaller-than-usual release from the nation's emergency oil reserve helped offset two weeks of bloated inventories, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed Wednesday.

Exports of crude oil hit an all-time high of five million barrels during the week ended August 12 while the Biden administration released just under 3.5 million barrels from the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) compared with its typical weekly release of five-to-six million barrels that are aimed at bridging supply shortfalls in the market.

"It's a story of exports, exports, exports for US crude," John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said. "The smaller-than-usual SPR release combined with that to bring down stockpiles from the previous two weeks."

Stockpiles of crude had ballooned by around 10 million barrels during the weeks of August 5 and July 29 combined. For the latest week, industry analysts polled by US media had expected a crude drawdown of 275,000 barrels instead.

US oil production also ticked lower last week, to an estimated 12.1 million barrels per day from a previous 12.2 million, helping reduce crude stockpiles.

In the case of gasoline, the top automobile fuel in America, inventories tumbled by 4.64 million, adding to the previous week's outsized drawdown of 4.98 million barrels. Analysts had expected a crude stockpile drop of just 1.1 million barrels for last week.

US consumption of gasoline slumped in mid-June as pump prices hit record highs of \$5 per gallon, prompting Americans to conserve fuel. Prices have fallen since to just below \$4 per gallon, encouraging demand again.

As per the EIA data, demand for gasoline at US pumps stood at 9.34 million barrels last week, versus the previous week's 9.12 million and the year-ago level of 9.33 million.

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Leading US Abortion Rights Group to Spend Record \$50Mln in Midterm Elections - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - Planned Parenthood on Wednesday said it will invest \$50 million to elect candidates that support abortion rights during the midterm elections with a focus on states that could ban the practice.

"Today, Planned Parenthood advocacy and political organizations launched the 2022 electoral program 'Take Control,' which represents the groups' largest ever investment in an electoral cycle," the group said in a press release. "The \$50 million program will help elect champions for sexual and reproductive health care and rights, including abortion, up and down the ballot and all across the country. The strategic investments will focus on states positioned to either ban or expand access to sexual and reproductive health care."

The program comes after the US Supreme Court in June overturned *Roe vs. Wade*, which sent abortion policy decisions to the states. On August 6, Indiana became the first state to ban abortion just days after Kansas in a referendum voted against such a restriction.

The Planned Parenthood campaign will reach up to 6 million voters through volunteers, paid canvassing, and phone banking, along with mail, TV, and digital advertising, the release said. The group will initially invest in nine states while running robust electoral campaigns in four others, according to the release.

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Canada Loans \$348Mln to Ukraine to Purchase Winter Heating Fuel - Finance Ministry

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has disbursed a C\$450 million (US\$348 million) loan to Ukraine as the country requires funding to purchase heating fuel before winter, Canada's Ministry of Finance said in a statement on Wednesday.

"Today, the Honorable Chrystia Freeland, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, announced the disbursement of \$450 million in loans to Ukraine to support the purchase of necessary heating fuel before winter," the statement said.

This loan completes the \$1.51 billion Canada had planned for Ukraine in its 2022 federal budget, the statement said.

Kiev will receive the through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) multi-donor administered account for the Ukraine, the statement said, adding that Ottawa has now fulfilled the commitments it made during the Group of Seven (G7) finance ministers and prime ministers meetings in May and June.

During the G7 finance ministers meeting on May 18-20, Canada's Finance Minister Chrystia Freeland pledged \$193 million in loans to Ukraine to be disbursed through the IMF.

During the G7 prime minister meeting on June 26-28, Canada's Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced loan for Ukraine in the amount of \$155 million that would also be disbursed through the IMF, thus fulfilling the country's promise to provide \$348 million.

At the end of July, the Trudeau government said that, along with other Western leaders, it intends to suspend Ukraine's debt until the end of 2023.

Canada has committed \$2.6 billion in form of financial and military assistance to the Ukrainian government.

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UN Envoy Meets With Myanmar Military Chief, Requests Meeting With San Suu Kyi

UNITED NATIONS, August 17 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy for Myanmar Noeleen Heyzer met with the nation's military chief Min Aung Hlaing in Naypyidaw on Wednesday and requested a meeting with jailed politician Aung San Suu Kyi.

"Special Envoy of the Secretary-General on Myanmar Noeleen Heyzer met with State Administration Council (SAC) Chairman Senior General Min Aung Hlaing in Nay Pyi Taw today, in her first visit to Myanmar as Special Envoy, to communicate in person the pragmatic steps to de-escalate the violence, address the multidimensional crisis and advance unfettered humanitarian assistance free of discrimination to all people in need," the envoy's office said in a statement.

The visit is part of UN efforts to support a Myanmar-led path to return to civilian rule, the statement noted.

During the talks, Heyzer called for an immediate cessation of all forms of violence, respect for human rights and the rule of law in the country. She also raised the issue of the Rohingya refugee crisis.

In addition, the envoy requested a meeting with former State Counsellor San Suu Kyi following her latest sentencing.

In February 2021, the military ousted the civilian government in Myanmar using a constitutional mechanism of transferring power in an emergency situation. The military arrested government officials, accusing them of rigging the November general election. The move spurred major civil unrest, which has since resulted in multiple casualties and arrests.

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Canada, UK, US Rank as States Having Biggest Problems With Mounting Debt - Report

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States are countries having the biggest problems with mounting debt globally, an Invezz report revealed on Wednesday.

The report analyzed global data using several debt-related factors, including credit card ownership, household debt and government debt in order determine which countries have the highest level of debt.

"Canada has the biggest overall debt problems, with a combined debt score of 8.42 out of 10, having appeared in the top 10 countries for each factor we looked at while also topping the table for credit card ownership," the report said.

In addition, Canada has the highest credit card ownership and household debt, the report said. The United Kingdom's overall debt score is 7.92, while the United States came in third place, having received an overall debt score of 7.75, the report said.

"The UK has the most debt-conscious population, with the most searches per 100,000 people for debt and credit-related terms. The UK also made the top 10 for government debt, placing tenth, as well for credit card ownership, for which it placed seventh," the report said.

Similarly, the United States ranked in the top ten countries for debt and credit-related searches, government debt and credit card ownership, the report added.

The United States ranks sixth in credit card ownership at 66.70% and fifth in terms of debt-to-GDP that stands at 108.8%, according to the report.

The Congressional Budget Office projected in late July that the US federal debt will reach 185% of GDP by 2052.

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Giuliani Stays Silent on What He Will Tell Grand Jury in Trump Election Probe

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - Former Donald Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani on Wednesday refused to comment to reporters when he arrived to testify to a grand jury in Atlanta about allegations that Trump sought to discredit and overthrow the 2020 US presidential election result in the state of Georgia.

"We will not talk about this until it's over," Giuliani said. "It's the grand jury and grand juries, as I recall, are secret. I'm not going to comment on the grand jury investigation. They ask the questions and we'll see."

On Monday, US corporate media reported that Giuliani has been informed that he is the target of a criminal investigation into election interference in Georgia.

The report said the criminal investigation is related to the 2020 US presidential election and Giuliani was called to testify on the matter.

Giuliani helped lead Trump's efforts to put under question the results of the 2020 presidential election based on claims of voter and election fraud.

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Air Canada Says to Operate at 79% of Pre-Pandemic Capacity This Summer

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) – Air Canada plans to increase its flight operations to 79% of the pre-pandemic levels as it steadily recovers from the effects of COVID-19, the airline said on Wednesday.

"Air Canada has been prudently restoring its schedule as it recovers from the effects of COVID-19 and this summer it plans to operate 79 per cent of its pre-pandemic capacity as the industry stabilizes," Air Canada said in an update.

Air Canada carried well over 6.4 million passengers between June 27 and August 14, the company added.

The Canadian airline currently operates on average around 1,100 flights daily, carrying 135,000 passengers. The rise in demand has prompted the company to recall its laid off employees, the update said.

The company currently has 34,000 staffers, close to 34,700 it had prior to the pandemic.

Air Canada is the country's largest airline, serving 188 airports worldwide.

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OPEC Chief Says Organization Trusts Russia, Separates Market Management From Politics

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) trusts Russia as a partner and tries to keep separate politics and energy market management, OPEC Secretary General Haitham Al Ghais said on Wednesday.

"Yes," Al Ghais said when asked during an interview with US media whether he trusts Russia.

"We try always in our meetings to separate the politics and the political aspect from what we do in terms of managing the market balance... The relationship is solid in terms of managing the market."

Russia accounts for approximately 10% of the global oil production and plays a role in the wider oil cooperation framework, Al Ghais said.

Earlier in August, Al Ghais said OPEC and Russia are cooperative partners and engage in constant dialogue.

Al Ghais noted that OPEC is set to meet with the European Union next week to discuss energy issues. European nations have been seeking greater energy security amid Western sanctions against Russia and a shift away from Russian energy products upon which they have traditionally relied.

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Former US Vice President Pence Says Would Consider Testifying Before January 6 Committee

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - Former US Vice President Mike Pence on Wednesday said he would consider testifying before the January 6 investigative committee if asked, but that such an invitation would be unprecedented.

"If there was an invitation to participate, I would consider it," Pence said during an event in New Hampshire when asked whether he would provide testimony to the panel of lawmakers. "It

would be unprecedented in history for a vice president to be summoned to testify on Capitol Hill."

The committee, tasked with investigating the events surrounding the breach of the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, has held a series of interviews and public hearings on the matter.

One public hearing focused on an alleged pressure campaign against Pence by former President Donald Trump to get the vice president to stop the certification of election results on January 6. Pence as President of the Senate was responsible for overseeing the certification that day.

Trump denied allegations emerging from the committee that he called Pence a "wimp," but said that the former vice president "did not have the courage to act."

Pence on November 15 is set to release a memoir recounting his time as vice president of the Trump administration. The book will include details about the severing of relations between Trump and Pence following the events of January 6, according to publisher Simon and Schuster.

Trump has roundly condemned the work of the committee and the lawmakers on it, including Representative Liz Cheney. Cheney late on Tuesday conceded defeat to primary election challenger Harriet Hageman, who is backed by Trump.

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Republicans, Democrats Show Record Voting Enthusiasm Ahead of Midterm Elections - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - Republican and Democrat voters in the United States are increasingly enthusiastic about the upcoming midterm elections in November, a new Morning Consult/Politico poll revealed on Wednesday.

The past month has seen a record surge in excitement about the midterm elections with some 65% of Republicans and 62% of Democrats saying now they are either "very" or "extremely" enthusiastic about voting, the poll results showed.

At the same time, Republican voters are more likely than Democratic voters to say they are "extremely" enthusiastic about voting in November (44% vs. 36%), the poll results also showed.

The recent events in the United States, including the controversial FBI raid of former President Donald Trump's residence in Florida and the Democrats passing the Inflation Reduction Act of 2022 are among the primary triggers of the growing interest in voting, according to the poll.

With respect to Biden's performance in office, 56% of the poll's respondents say they disapprove of the president's performance and 42% approve.

The poll was conducted on August 12-14 among a representative sample of 2,005 registered voters, with an unweighted margin of error of plus or minus 2%.

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US Airstrike Kills 13 Al-Shabaab Terrorists in Somalia – AFRICOM

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The United States killed 13 al-Shabaab terrorists in an airstrike in Somalia last week, the Africa Command (AFRICOM) said on Wednesday.

The airstrike was carried out on August 14 in a remote location near Teedaan, Somalia.

"The command's initial assessment is that the strikes killed 13 al-Shabaab terrorists and that no civilians were injured or killed," AFRICOM said in a statement, noting that US forces are authorized to conduct strikes in defense of designated partner forces.

Somalia collapsed as a unified nation in 1991 with the downfall of the Siad Barre's dictatorship.

The international community recognized the federal government as the only legitimate authority, which controls the capital Mogadishu and several areas of Somalia.

The al-Shabab terror group (affiliated with the al-Qaeda terror group, banned in Russia) is waging an armed struggle against the federal government and controls large areas of Somalia's southern and central parts.

In May, the United States decided to renew strikes against the terror group in order to combat the growing threat that it poses to US partner forces.

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US Circuit Court Says Biden Admin. Can Pause Oil, Gas Leasing in Reversal of Prior Ruling

WASHINGTON, August 17 (Sputnik) - The US Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals overturned the decision of a lower federal court to block the Biden administration from pausing oil and gas leases on public land, the court said on Wednesday in a ruling.

"The district court issued a nationwide preliminary injunction enjoining President Biden and various Department of Interior officials (the 'Government') from pausing oil and gas lease sales. Because the district court's order and accompanying memorandum lack specificity, we vacate and remand," the circuit court said.

In January 2021, the Biden administration issued an order that mandated a pause on new oil and gas leasing on federal lands, onshore and offshore, prompting 13 states to sue the federal government over the matter.

US Judge Terry Doughty of the District Court for the Western District of Louisiana ruled in June 2021 that the states which sued the Biden administration would face significant problems because of the government's decision to pause oil and gas leases in public land.

The Biden administration appealed the initial ruling and succeeded in getting a reversal from the circuit court. The Department of Interior contends that oil and gas leasing programs on public lands are responsible for significant greenhouse gas emissions and climate impacts.