

**9/22/22 Thursday**

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Judge Blocks Indiana's Abortion Ban Over Possibility State Constitution Protects Freedom of Choice

By - Fantine Gardinier

With federal abortion protections removed by the US Supreme Court, anti-abortion conservatives have felt the wind beneath their wings and rushed to pass new bans in states across the country. Meanwhile, liberals have attempted to buttress existing abortion protections and accommodate "refugees" from states where the practice is banned.

Special Judge Kelsey B. Hanlon, a judge of the Owen County Circuit Court in Indiana, issued a preliminary injunction on Thursday, blocking the state's abortion ban that went into effect last week from being used.

Judge Hanlon argued in her ruling that while the Indiana state constitution doesn't explicitly mention abortion, and that while abortion was illegal when it was written, there is nonetheless "a reasonable likelihood" that its language protects decisions about family planning, including the right to abort a pregnancy early, [according to the Indianapolis Star](#).

Judge Hanlon wrote that the Indiana Constitution can be read "as protecting bodily autonomy, including a qualified right by women not to carry a pregnancy to term."

She added that the ban, which strips abortion clinics of their licenses to practice, "materially burdens the bodily autonomy of Indiana's women and girls by significantly and arbitrarily limiting their access to care."

The decision was made after a lawsuit was filed against the law by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), Planned Parenthood of Indiana, and a group of clinics and abortion providers. The law took effect last week and bans essentially all abortions in the state, providing narrow exceptions for rape or incest, which critics [blasted as a "death sentence"](#) for people who can become pregnant. It is the first such ban passed since the US Supreme Court in June overturned Roe vs. Wade, a 1973 decision that created the right to an abortion nationwide.

"We knew this ban would cause irreparable harm to Hoosiers, and in just a single week, it has done just that," [read a joint statement](#) by a group of ACLU and Planned Parenthood divisions from different US states.

"We are grateful that the court granted much needed relief for patients, clients, and providers but this fight is far from over. Indiana lawmakers have made it abundantly clear that this harm, this cruelty, is exactly the reality they had in mind when they passed SB 1," the designation used for the bill while it was in the legislature.

"Our office remains determined to fight for the lives of the unborn, and this law provides a reasonable way to begin doing that," Republican Attorney General Todd Rokita said in a statement, indicating his office intends to appeal the decision.

Rokita attracted special ire in July after he spread false information and [threatened charges against](#) an Indiana abortion provider after she helped a 10-year-old girl abort a pregnancy

conceived when she was raped. The girl had traveled to Indiana from Ohio for the procedure because that state's abortion ban is so severe it does not allow terminating a pregnancy, even if it's caused by rape.

Since the high court's June decision, a tense legal battle has played out across the country as states [saw old abortion bans](#) never removed from the books suddenly reactivate, as well as so-called "trigger bans," or laws that lay dormant until Roe was overturned, at which time they immediately activated, banning abortions in that state. Close to [one-third of American women](#) have or are likely to soon lose abortion access in their home state.

In neighboring Michigan earlier this month, a state judge [struck down that state's abortion ban](#) that dates to 1931, saying it violates the Michigan state constitution even if it doesn't violate the US Constitution.

In other states where Democrats hold political sway, lawmakers and governors have moved to [solidify abortion access](#), including expanding coverage to compensate for so-called "refugees" coming there from states with abortion bans in order to receive the procedure. The Biden administration has also ordered the Department of Veterans Affairs to [offer abortion and counseling services](#) to pregnant veterans in all 50 states, including those where state law has banned the procedure.

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Boeing Charged With Misleading Investors Over 737 Max Safety, Fined \$200Mn  
By - Fantine Gardinier

The US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) revealed on Thursday it had arrived at an agreement for aircraft manufacturer Boeing to pay \$200 million for misleading investors in the wake of two deadly crashes by its 737 Max passenger aircraft.

The SEC said it had charged the Boeing Company and its former CEO, Dennis A. Muilenburg, with making "materially misleading public statements" after Boeing 737 Max airliners crashed in 2018 and 2019.

"There are no words to describe the tragic loss of life brought about by these two airplane crashes," SEC chairman Gary Gensler [said in a news release](#).

"In times of crisis and tragedy, it is especially important that public companies and executives provide full, fair, and truthful disclosures to the markets. The Boeing Company and its former CEO, Dennis Muilenburg, failed in this most basic obligation. They misled investors by providing assurances about the safety of the 737 MAX, despite knowing about serious safety concerns.

The SEC remains committed to rooting out misconduct when public companies and their executives fail to fulfill their fundamental obligations to the investing public," Gensler said.

The settlement requires Boeing to pay a \$200 million fine - or about [0.06% of the profits it made](#) last year - and for Muilenburg to pay a separate \$1 million fine.

In [a separate statement](#) on Thursday, the plane maker noted it "does not admit or deny" any of the SEC's fact by agreeing to the settlement.

"We will never forget those lost on Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, and we have made broad and deep changes across our company in response to those accidents - fundamental changes that have strengthened our safety processes and oversight of safety issues, and have enhanced our culture of safety, quality, and transparency," the company said. "The settlement announced today fully resolves the SEC's previously disclosed inquiry into matters relating to the 737 MAX accidents. The settlement specifics that Boeing does not admit or deny the findings in the SEC's statement of facts, which concern company statements made in late 2018 and early 2019. Today's settlement is part of the company's broader effort to responsibly resolve outstanding legal matters related to the 737 MAX accidents in a manner that serves the best interests of our stakeholders, employees, and other stakeholders."

The crashes of both aircraft occurred shortly after takeoff and were caused by the 737 MAX's Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS), which serves as a flight control system designed to enhance the jet's pitch stability so that it feels and flies like other 737s. However, pilots [were not told about the modifications](#) by Boeing and thus didn't know how to respond when the computer system pushed the plane's nose down toward the ground. In the two crashes, 346 people died.

After the crashes, all Boeing 737 Max airliners were grounded and the company was forced to fix the problems and completely [recertify the aircraft](#) with the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). It has paid a large amount of fines, [including \\$2.5 billion](#) to the US Department of Justice for fraud conspiracy, which included monetary damages to customers and a crash-victim beneficiaries fund. It also paid [\\$225 million to shareholders](#) in another lawsuit.

Further [investigations revealed](#) that the FAA and Boeing had colluded on recertification of the aircraft, tried to cover up important information, and that the FAA had retaliated against whistleblowers.

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Tanzania, Mozambique Pen Deal for Joint Security, Defense Cooperation Amid Daesh-Aligned Insurgency

By - Fantine Gardinier

At a meeting in the Mozambican capital of Maputo on Thursday, Presidents Samia Suluhu Hassan of Tanzania and Filipe Nyusi of Mozambique agreed to two memoranda of understanding (MoUs), along with a host of other bilateral deals between the two East African nations.

One MoU provides for cooperation on peace and security, while the other covers defense cooperation, [according to AFP](#). They were signed by defense ministers Stergomena Tax of Tanzania and Cristovao Chume of Mozambique.

The MoU's are aimed at addressing ongoing security problems along their mutual border, most especially by Islamist insurgents in Mozambique's northernmost Cabo Delgado province. The group known locally as Al-Shabab ("The Youth"), of no relation to the Somali group of the same

name, has terrorized the province since 2017, although it was only in 2020 that it attracted attention outside of Mozambique, when it pledged allegiance, at least formally, to Daesh.\* At its height, Al-Shabab controlled much of the province, including the port city of Mocimboa da Praia, and raided the major city of Palma in April 2021. However, the group has also launched cross-border raids, attacking [Tanzania's port of Mtwara](#), a major oil and gas export hub just north of Cabo Delgado.

The situation led Nyusi to [reluctantly request outside help](#), with his own military so hamstrung by budget cuts caused by restrictions connected to International Monetary Fund (IMF) loans that it could not handle the uprising itself. The South African Development Community (SADC) responded with a rapid intervention force, and [Rwanda separately sent](#) a force to fight as well. Maputo also received help from the European Union, United States, and Portugal, the former colonial ruler, in training its troops, medics, and other staff.

Al-Shabab has since been routed from Cabo Delgado, but retreated to the interior of the continent, where [it has regrouped](#). The war has killed roughly 3,000 people and displaced more than 800,000. It has also created a food crisis in the impoverished region, which has created opportunities for corruption, including authorities [coercing needy women into sex](#) in exchange for food aid.

#### Repairing Bilateral Trade

The situation has caused cross-border trade to steadily dwindle, declining from 53 billion Tanzanian shillings (\$22.84 million) in 2020 to 46 billion (\$19.82 million) in 2021, according to [The East African](#).

However, according to a June report by Turkey's [Anadolu Agency](#), "informal business through porous border routes goes on unabated in some areas thanks to strong networks and relationships that persist without the knowledge of the authorities."

"We encourage people to engage in lawful business. They should not use informal border crossings to bring their commodities," Mariam Chaurembo, the commissioner of Tanzania's Nanyumbu district, told Anadolu. "Nobody is allowed to transact illegal business. Our law is very clear on that."

That is why Suhulu and Nyusi also penned deals on Thursday to enhance trade and investment, energy, tourism, and education, including beginning the teaching of Swahili in Mozambican schools. The language is spoken across East Africa and is an official language in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda, while being recognized as a minority language in Mozambique, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

An embarrassing situation arose during the Cabo Delgado war as Rwandan soldiers [often had to translate](#) between Swahili-speaking locals and Mozambican troops, emphasizing the alienation between the province and the rest of the country.

The deals follow discussions about enhancing cooperation at the 15th Joint Permanent Commission on Cooperation (JPCC) between Tanzania and Mozambique last month.

"For the past years, we have been collaborating on various issues. But, now we want to boost the economy and strengthen partnerships in agriculture, natural gas and the blue economy because Mozambique has been doing well in those sectors," [said Joseph Sokoine](#), Tanzania's permanent secretary for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and East African Cooperation, at the summit.

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Equality for Native Americans Means Diplomatic Relations, Not 'Full Representation' - Activist  
By - Fantine Gardinier

Although Native Americans are just 1% of the US population and face high rates of poverty, police violence, and discrimination, they are often left out of the conversation about racism, a Native activist told Sputnik. That makes it hard for many to understand what righting the wrongs of the past looks like when it comes to indigenous people.

In a recent Twitter post celebrating the swearing-in of Rep. Mary Peltola (D-AK), an Alaska Native from the Yup'ik people, US Rep. Kaiali'i Kahele (D-HI) said that "it has taken 233 years for the US Congress to be fully represented by this country's indigenous peoples."

There are now six indigenous people in Congress, including Native Americans, a Native Hawaiian, and now a Native Alaskan. In addition, the head of the US Department of the Interior, which contains the Bureau of Indian Affairs and manages the conservation of federal lands, [Deb Haaland](#), is also Native American.

However, this situation bears more scrutiny than it does joy, John Kane, Mohawk activist, educator, and host of the Let's Talk Native podcast and co-host of Resistance Radio on WBAI Pacifica Radio NY, told [Radio Sputnik's Political Misfits](#) on Thursday.

[Listen to the interview here](#) [begins at 40:00].

Kane said [the six Native lawmakers](#) are "the most assimilated people of Native descent that could possibly exist. I mean, these guys were assimilated enough that white people would vote for them."

"They aren't there representing us, they're representing Alaska, Hawaii, and Kansas - that's who they represent," he pointed out, adding that analyzing their congressional districts only deepens his case. He also compared the situation to claiming that Associate Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas represents Black Americans on the high court simply because he is Black. Kane noted there is "a certain level of animosity that comes among the most high-achieving political figures in the non-white communities. You're going to basically get people carrying water for the Democratic Party or the Republican Party and they don't want to have a conversation about how their policies that either party, or both parties, are responsible for have contributed to the abject poverty that exists on Native territories. I mean, we weren't born poor, the poverty on Native territories is, again, a function of racist policies from the federal government regardless of who is in office."

'What Was Taken Was Land and Autonomy'

Kane said that Native Americans are often "excluded from the conversation about racism," pointing out how the consciousness about racism in the US public often only includes an awareness of how discrimination and hatred play out against Black Americans.

"The only explanation for the treatment Native people receive is overt racism," he pointed out.

"I think there is really an effort to erase us as a group that still opposes this kind of subjugation," he said, noting that statistics show, for example, that Native Americans are [the most likely of any race](#) to die from police shootings are "easy to ignore ... when we are not just such a

marginalized people, but a depopulated people. I mean, we were once 100% of the population on this continent, now we're less than 1% of the population."

That, he said, is ultimately why the six members of Congress cannot be said to represent Native people, but must primarily be elected by non-Native populations.

"If you wanted us to be represented in places like the federal government, we would literally have diplomatic relations. They would be political conversations," he noted.

When the United States was founded, the fledgling government engaged with Native nations on the basis that they were [foreign powers](#), conducting diplomacy and agreeing to treaties. Only later, during the country's rapid westward expansion, did the [Supreme Court redefine Native Americans](#) as "wards of the state" and end recognition of Native sovereignty. What followed was not only the [wholesale seizure of Native land](#), but also attempts to eliminate Native identity by placing Native children in residential schools, where they were [reeducated in Western ways](#), denied the right to practice their religion, speak their language, or dress as their people did, before being placed with adopting white families.

"Don't even talk to me about 'reconciliation,'" Kane said. "Let's look at what was taken during that 150 years of residential schools: what was taken was land and autonomy. You want to talk about reconciliation? We need restoration of land and we need restoration of our political and our cultural autonomy. And that's a conversation that nobody in US politics wants to talk about from either party."

Zinke 'Served at the Pleasure' of 'Overt Racist' Trump

Ryan Zinke, who served as Interior Secretary from 2017 to 2019 under then-US President Donald Trump, has been found by separate investigations by the department's inspector general to have both engaged in corrupt dealings while in office and to have investigators looking into the malpractice. He is now the Republican nominee for US Representative from Montana.

One IG report [released in February](#) found that Zinke misused his position to shelve considerations to approve a casino for two Native American tribes in order to privately advance another project in which he has invested. Another, [released last month](#), found that Zinke obstructed the first IG probe by lying to investigators about his conversations with lobbyists and an unnamed US senator who were against the Native casino, as well as making false claims that he had shelved that casino's paperwork after talking with department lawyers.

When asked to comment on the issue by hosts Michelle Witte and John Kiriakou on Wednesday, Kane said that "we have to decide if it's Ryan Zinke's or Trump's corruption."

"First, let me just say that Trump hates Native people. He blames his failure as a casino mogul specifically on Native gaming. [He went before Congress](#), and here's this guy with more makeup and hair work than a drag queen saying that the Native people he was arguing about didn't 'look Indian to him.' The absurdity level is off the charts."

"These guys, Zinke and Trump, have worked really cooperatively to rail against Native gaming," Kane said. "I'm not going to give Ryan Zinke a pass, but let's be clear: he served at the pleasure of Donald Trump, who is an overt racist and has expressed much of that racism towards Native people."

He noted that “we didn’t get a whole lot of help out of Deb Haaland, even though she again, supposedly broke that glass ceiling by being the first Native cabinet secretary. So, it’s hard to separate the roles of these cabinet members and the president.”

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Michael Cohen Says Lawsuit Will Sink Trump Organization

By - Ian DeMartino

Donald Trump and the Trump Organization are facing legal challenges on multiple fronts. The fraud lawsuit brought by the New York State Attorney General comes with significant financial penalties.

Former Trump lawyer Michael Cohen says [he believes](#) the civil fraud lawsuit brought against the Trump Organization will destroy the company.

On Wednesday, New York Attorney General Letitia James announced the civil fraud lawsuit after a three-year investigation into the Trump family and their businesses. It alleges that the Trump Organization inflated and deflated property values to mislead and attract investors, as well as gain tax and loan benefits.

Speaking on MSNBC’s “All In with Chris Hayes” Wednesday night after the announcement, Cohen said the investigation is “going to put an end to the entire company.”

James is asking the court to impose at least \$250 million in penalties and a permanent ban on Trump and his family members from serving as an officer or director in any New York-based company. She also said she expects the penalties to rise up to \$750 million as the case uncovers the full extent of the organization’s alleged crimes.

Cohen joined the Trump Organization in 2006 and served as the former president’s personal lawyer from 2006 to 2018. In 2018, Cohen pleaded guilty to several crimes, including tax evasion, making false statements to a financial institution, and several other charges. In a separate case, also in 2018, he was convicted of lying to the Senate and House Intelligence Committee.

During Wednesday morning’s announcement of the lawsuit, James stated that her investigation began after Cohen testified in front of Congress about the Trump Organization’s business practices.

“When [James] mentioned my name, I was obviously quite elated, to be honest, because I’m finally getting the recognition for what I’ve been sitting on the mountain tops yelling for three and a half, four years,” Cohen said on MSNBC. “Which is that the Trump Organization is a criminal enterprise and that I got thrown under the bus by dear old Donald.”

When announcing the lawsuit, James also said she referred several alleged federal violations to the IRS and the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York.

Trump’s two sons, Eric Trump and Donald Trump Jr., have blasted the investigation, calling it a witch hunt. Trump [echoed those statements](#) on his social media platform Truth Social, calling James “racist” and “perhaps the worst crime fighter in the Country.”

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Trump's Support Unchanged By Justice Dept. Investigation  
By - Ian DeMartino

Trump supporters are famous for their loyalty to the former reality TV star. The views Americans hold of Donald Trump seem to be unaffected by the various controversies and court cases surrounding the former president.

According to the most recent New York Times/Siena College poll, voters' views of Trump remain unchanged from July, when the same poll was last taken. Respondents were asked if they had a favorable or unfavorable view of Trump, who they'd vote for in a hypothetical matchup between Trump and President Joe Biden, what they thought about Trump's actions after the 2020 election, and if they thought Trump had committed any "serious federal crimes."

The poll was taken after news broke that the Justice Department is investigating Trump's handling of classified documents, but before the New York State Attorney General announced that she is suing Trump and his businesses.

According to the poll released Thursday, which mirrors the July poll, 44% of Americans hold a favorable view of Trump, compared to 53% who hold an unfavorable view of him.

Thirty-eight percent of respondents said that the former president was "just exercising his right to contest the election" by his actions after the 2020 election, while 54% said "he went so far that he threatened American democracy."

Meanwhile, 51% of respondents think Trump committed serious federal crimes, while 38% did not.

Oddly, some respondents either feel conflicted about Trump, welcome attempts to end democracy or feel Biden represents an even greater threat. Fourteen percent of respondents indicated that they would vote for Trump in 2024 and also thought his actions after the 2020 election were a threat to American democracy, according to The Times' summary of the poll. In a hypothetical matchup between Biden and Trump in 2024, 42% said they would likely vote for Trump, while 45% picked Biden. Fourteen percent indicated they were undecided, wouldn't vote, or would support a third-party candidate.

The loyalty of Trump supporters has long been a characteristic of his campaign and presidency. During the 2016 campaign, then-candidate Trump bragged that he "could stand in the middle of Fifth Avenue and shoot somebody" without losing any voters. During his presidency, Trump's supporters backed the president through a myriad of scandals and an impeachment trial. While Trump's unfavorability ratings ebbed and flowed with the news, his favorability rating remained largely unaffected.

Trump has hinted that he plans to run in 2024, though no announcement is expected until after November's midterm elections.

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## Another Social Media Giant is Making its Play for the Metaverse Future

By - Ian DeMartino

ByteDance, the parent company of TikTok, purchased the Chinese VR manufacturer Pico in 2021. Focused on enterprise headsets and the Chinese consumer market, it started making inroads in the West with the release of the Pico Neo 3 Link in Europe earlier this year.

ByteDance, the company that owns popular social video sharing app TikTok, [announced a new virtual reality headset](#) on Thursday, giving Meta\* its first real competition in the VR space since it took over the market with the Oculus Quest stand-alone headset in 2019.

Pico has been making stand-alone headsets for even longer than Meta has, but they previously either lacked features to compete with Meta's offerings or were focused on the enterprise market. They also avoided selling them in the West until recently.

That changed in May with the launch of the Pico Neo 3 Link, which was essentially a clone of the Meta Quest 2, with a similar price point and feature set. It was also their first foray out of Asia, with the headset being sold in Europe for the first time. Their new headset, the Pico 4, was announced in a video stream and press release on Thursday and goes one step further by beating the Meta Quest 2 on paper in terms of specs and features while keeping the price point lower.

The Pico 4 will be released on October 18th in 13 European territories, along with Japan and South Korea. A Singapore and Malaysia launch is expected later this year, and its release in China will be announced on September 27. The device will launch with two variants in Europe, a 128GB model for €429 and a 256GB model for €499. The Quest 2 starts at €449 in Europe, with its 256GB model coming in at €549. No US release has been announced, though [a job posting](#) at Pico and [FCC regulatory](#) filings indicate that it may happen eventually.

The most striking change from the Neo 3 Link and Meta Quest 2 is the much slimmer design. The Pico 4 uses pancake lenses and moves the battery to the back of the user's head, resulting in a much slimmer (35.8mm thick at its thinnest part), lighter, and balanced headset. The Pico 4 will weigh a mere 295 grams without the strap, with Pico comparing it to the weight of a soda can. The Quest 2 weighs 503 grams without its strap.

Most headsets use older fresnel style lenses and keep the battery on the front of the head behind the display. Not only will the new design be lighter and more comfortable, separating the battery from the rest of the headset should result in cooler running temperatures for the CPU.

The display is also getting an upgrade, increasing to a per-eye resolution of 2160 x 2160, compared to the Quest 2's 1832 x 1920. Pico also claims that the field of view of the headset has been increased, jumping to 105° compared to just 89° with the Quest 2.

While both the Meta Quest 2 and the Pico 4, along with the Pico 3 and Meta's upcoming Quest Pro, all use the same Qualcomm Snapdragon XR2 chipset, ByteDance is increasing the RAM of the Pico 4 to 8GB (Quest 2 and the Pico Neo 3 have 6GB of RAM).

The controllers are also getting an upgrade, moving the tracking ring down and over the hands of the user, which should allow the user to move their hands closer together without tracking interference. The design is reminiscent of the newly revealed Playstation VR2 controllers. Along those same lines, Pico says it upgraded the vibration feedback of the controllers to allow more

precise emulation of physical actions. Whether the controllers will match those seen in the far more expensive Playstation VR2 system remains to be seen.

Finally, the Pico 4 will also include motorized and more precise interpupillary distance (IPD) adjustment, supporting eye distances of 62 - 72mm. That may not seem like a big deal, but if a VR headset's lenses are not lined up with the user's eyes, it can cause double vision and intense nausea. The Quest 2 has only three IPD adjustment levels, and while it is close enough for most people, those with abnormal eye distances were essentially unable to use the headset. The Pico 4 IPD system should open up the hardware to more people.

ByteDance also announced the Pico 4 Pro at the same event, though details are scarce on that device. It will include face and eye tracking, which should increase the price significantly. Meta's Quest Pro, like the Pico 4 Pro, will also include pancake lenses and face and eye tracking, but that device is expected to cost "well-over" \$800, according to a Meta insider. It will be interesting to see how the Pico 4 Pro compares price-wise when it is revealed, possibly at the Chinese Pico event later this month.

Meta has been dominating the VR space since the release of the original Quest in 2019. That was the first consumer standalone headset to include inside-out tracking, six degrees of freedom (6DoF) for both the headset and controllers and came in under \$500. The Quest 2 was released in 2020 and initially launched for \$300 (Meta increased the price this year, raising the cheapest model to \$400).

As of July, it was estimated that Meta had sold just under 15 million Quest 2 headsets, making it by far the most popular consumer headset of all time. It shifted the VR industry from one focused on headsets tethered to a PC to standalone devices like the Quest. Meta has had virtually no competition since, especially in the West.

This was in large part because Meta sold the Quest 2 with a huge subsidy, losing money on every headset sold. While Meta certainly hopes that software sales will offset that, it was also designed to grab as much market share as possible in an industry that was still growing. No other VR companies could hope to compete with the price of the Quest 2, because few could afford to sell at a loss.

ByteDance is the first VR competitor of Meta that has the financial backing and desire to compete with the social media giant on an even playing field. If the Pico Neo 3 Link was the first shot in the Metaverse war, then the Pico 4 and 4 Pro is the first real battle. Meta has the first mover advantage, but it is now facing a well-funded, fast-moving competitor that, as Meta has with Facebook, has an in-built advertising platform through a major social media platform. If the metaverse is set to be an internet-level change to how we work and live, as VR industry proponents say, this battle could set the stage for how we interact with it and who builds it.

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Egyptologist Close to Identifying Nefertiti, Who May Have Ruled Egypt 1300 Years Before Cleopatra

By - Ian DeMartino

While ancient Egypt has been studied by modern archaeologists since the 1800s, it is estimated that only about 30% of artifacts present underground have been found. However, climate change, tourism, and the continued construction of modern Egypt are putting those artifacts at risk.

Egyptologist Zahi Hawass believes [he is close](#) to proving that the body of a mummy first discovered in the 1800s is Queen Nefertiti, the wife of Pharaoh Akhenaten and mother of Tutankhamun, better known as King Tut. Nefertiti lived between roughly 1370 and 1330 BC. "I'm sure I'll reveal Nefertiti's mummy in a month or two," Hawass told Spanish newspaper El Independiente (via Newsweek) in an interview published on Tuesday.

Hawass also believes that another mummy found in the same tomb is Ankhesenamun, the wife of Tutankhamun. He says he will be able to confirm his theory in October. Hawass is preparing an exhibition called "Daughters of the Nile" that will focus on the women of ancient Egypt during the pharaonic period.

In addition to being the wife of Akhenaten and mother of Tutankhamun, many Egyptologists believe that Nefertiti ruled Egypt for a short time after the death of Akhenaten, though others disagree. If true, she would have taken the throne roughly 1300 years before Cleopatra. Hawass believes a mummy of a ten-year-old boy found in a different tomb (KV35) could be the brother of Tutankhamun and the son of Akhenaten. If that can be determined, then Hawass believes the mystery of Nefertiti will be solved.

Both female mummies were found in a tomb named KV21. It [was discovered](#) in 1817 by prolific Italian explorer and early Egyptian archaeologist Giovanni Belzoni. It was later mapped by another famous early Egyptologist James Burton in 1825, who noted that it was well preserved and suffered no water damage.

However, by the time the tomb was reinvestigated in 1989 during the Valley of the Kings project by Pacific Lutheran University, it had [suffered significant damage](#). Water damage could be seen on the walls, indicating flooding. Bat guano was also present in the tombs, graffiti adorned the walls, and pieces of the mummies, which had been intact, were damaged and some parts were strewn across the room.

In 1990, the tomb [was secured](#) with a steel gate, the mummies were reassembled as much as possible, and the valuables inside were put into protective coverings. In 1994, water entered the tomb again, but none of the objects inside were damaged.

In the 2010s, Hawass started performing CT scanning and DNA analysis on the mummies, though initially they were not intact enough to determine their identities, only that they were from the 18th dynasty. Both mummies were found with their left arm over the chest, a pose reserved for queens.

Akhenaten and Nefertiti sat on the Egyptian throne during a wealthy period in Egypt's history that also saw a [religious revolution](#) spearheaded by Akhenaten and Nefertiti. Under Akhenaten's rule, Egypt switched from being a polytheistic religion to a monotheistic religion that worshiped only the sun god Aten. He also moved the capital city from Thebes to Amarna, possibly to weaken the power of the old priests. Those reforms were reversed shortly after Akhenaten's death, either during Nefertiti's theorized reign or early on in Tutankhamun's reign as a child king.

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United States Secretary Sanctions Iranian Police Amid Mahsa Amini Outrage and Protests  
By - Mary Manley

Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old woman, died while in the custody of the Islamic republic's "morality police" last week after she allegedly broke hijab rules. In what has been compared to the United State's George Floyd protests, protesters in Iran have been demonstrating for a week, with some women cutting their hair and setting their hijabs on fire.

Protests ignited across Tehran after news broke of a 22-year-old's brutal death at the hands of Iran's "morality police" after she allegedly broke conservative dress codes relating to her hijab. Amini died on Friday in northern Tehran after being arrested on Tuesday and taken to hospital shortly thereafter. She suffered multiple blows to the head, one source [reported](#), leaving her brain dead.

On Thursday, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued sanctions against Iran's notorious morality police and seven senior security officials within the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the Army's Ground Forces, Basij Resistance Forces, and Law Enforcement Forces, for what they're labeling as abuse and violence against Iranian protestors and for the death of [Amini](#).

"Mahsa Amini was a courageous woman whose death in Morality Police custody was yet another act of brutality by the Iranian regime's security forces against its own people," said Janet L. Yellen, the secretary of the Treasury. "We condemn this unconscionable act in the strongest terms and call on the Iranian government to end its violence against women and its ongoing violent crackdown on free expression and assembly."

"Today's action to sanction Iran's Morality Police and senior Iranian security officials responsible for this oppression demonstrates the Biden-Harris Administration's clear commitment to stand up for human rights, and the rights of women, in Iran and globally," Yellen added.

The statement adds that the [sanctions](#) imposed on Iran's military police and senior security officials is in accordance with Executive Order 13553, which first came into effect under former President Barack Obama's administration in 2010, and blocks the property of certain people "with respect to serious human rights abuses by the government of Iran and taking certain other actions."

Protests have broken out across cities and towns in Iran, with protestors chanting "Death to the Dictator" and damaging police vehicles. On Thursday, it was reported by the Associated [Press](#) that at least nine people had been killed during the protests, though that number is estimated to be higher. Internet watchdog Netblocks said on Wednesday evening that mobile networks were shut down in the country amid the protests, with disruptions to Instagram and WhatsApp occurring, and that Iran's biggest telecom operator shut down a majority of mobile internet access again on Thursday.

During a United Nations General Assembly on [Thursday](#), Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said Amini's death would be investigated but also claimed that her death was not caused by police abuse.

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Canada Braces for 'Canadian Version of Hurricane Sandy' Come Saturday  
By - Mary Manley

Hurricane Fiona, which ripped through Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic earlier this week, has killed at least five people and left more than a million people without power or running water. It is the first hurricane of this year's Atlantic season and may reach a Category Four level. A Category [Four](#) hurricane can cause catastrophic damage with wind gusts between 130 and 156 mph. According to the National Weather Service (NWS), this kind of hurricane has the capability to knock down roofs, the exterior walls of some buildings, snap or uproot trees and down power poles with power outages lasting "weeks to possibly months." Hurricane Fiona is now tracking north, with sustained winds at 130 mph sideswiping the East Coast with waves possibly reaching heights of 8 to 10 feet, and is expected to reach the Canadian Maritimes. Meteorologists are predicting it to be the strongest storm in history for the area.

The hurricane will transition into a bombogenesis by the time it hits the area. A bombogenesis or "bomb cyclone" is a "mid-latitude cyclone that rapidly intensifies, dropping at least 24 mb (millibar) in 24 hours," according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric [Administration](#). Millibars are a measure of atmospheric pressure.

The state of [Maine](#) will experience wind gusts of up to 50 mph and may also experience power outages with five to 10-foot waves a few hundred miles offshore, as the state will experience Fiona in its Category Three stage. The storm has moved about 1,200 miles southwest of Halifax as of Thursday morning and will hit Nova Scotia, where locals have been told to begin preparing for the storm's destruction, which is expected to hit Saturday morning.

"Every Nova Scotian should be preparing today and bracing for impact," John Lohr, the minister responsible for the provincial Emergency Management Office, said in a [Thursday](#) news conference. "The storm is expected to bring severe and damaging wind gusts, very high waves, and coastal storm surges, intense and dangerous rainfall rates and prolonged power outages. The time to get ready is now before Fiona hits tomorrow evening."

"This could be Canada's version of (Hurricane) Sandy," added Chris Fogarty, a meteorologist for Canada's hurricane center in reference to a hurricane which destroyed 24 states and caused \$78.7 billion in damage.

Meteorologists have used weather forecasting models that predict Fiona will bring pressure of 925 to 944 millibars, putting it in the category of a Category Four hurricane as it moves from Nova Scotia to the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

"We need to make sure that there's going to be a center for people to go to prior to the storm because we know that there are different types of housing that are not going to be able to withstand the winds, the flooding, the way other buildings may," said Amanda [McDougall](#), who is the Cape Breton regional municipality mayor. McDougall adds that the area's officials are preparing for the storm and are working to ensure the residents' safety.

On Wednesday, the White House approved of a federal disaster declaration for Puerto Rico over the course of the next month after the US territory was destroyed by Hurricane [Fiona](#). The hurricane, which unloaded up to 30 inches of rain in some parts of the territory and cut off access to power and clean water, has spiraled into a Category Four monster.

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Aw Shucks Zuck! - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall

The conservative think tank the Center for Renewing America has filed a complaint against Facebook and Meta\* CEO Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan alleging that the two funneled \$500 million into the 2020 election in order to sway voters towards Joe Biden. The conservative group is a right-leaning nonprofit organization spearheaded by Russell Vought, who was the director of the Office of Management and Budget under former President Donald Trump. According to InfluenceWatch, [CRA's](#) staff is made up of several former Trump administration officials. The news of the complaints comes just hours after it was revealed that former President Donald Trump may be allowed to return to Facebook and Instagram after he was suspended for two years following the January 6, 2021 riots on Capitol Hill.

The CRA filed two [complaints](#) with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), one against Zuckerberg and Chan, and the second against three groups including the Center for Tech and Civic Life (CTCL), the Center for Election Innovation and Research (CEIR) and the National Vote at Home Institute (NVAHI). The complaints allege that Zuckerberg hired political and business strategist David Plouffe—who ran former President Barack Obama's 2008 campaign—to lead the scheme.

The CRA has accused Chan and Zuckerberg of creating million-dollar grants and having Plouffe send the money to Democratic groups in swing states, while Plouffe used the CTCL, the CEIR, and the NVAHI, which are nonprofit groups, to pull off the "scheme". Those three groups are tax-exempt, but the CRA argues that the exemption is improper in the case of these grants and that taxes should have been paid on the hefty donations.

"It is beyond disgraceful to imagine federal taxpayers subsidizing the partisan preferences of billionaires who easily could have given to a Democrat super PAC in 2020," said the CRA.

"But, of course, then they would not have been able to take a tax deduction, so they disguised the political nature of their donations and shuffled them through 'charitable' intermediaries, making ordinary Americans foot the bill," the CRA added.

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'Queen of Latin Music' Shakira Defends Against 'Salacious' Press Campaign Aimed at Fraud Claims

By - Allison Dubois

Latin pop star Shakira was charged with tax fraud in December 2018, when it was alleged she failed to pay millions to the Spanish government between 2013 and 2014, years they claim she was a “resident of Spain for tax purposes.”

Now, in her first interview since announcing her separation from Gerard Pique, her partner of 11 years, Shakira has opened up about her personal and legal struggles.

Even though she’s about to release her first album since 2017’s Grammy-winning *El Dorado*, the pop artist has described her situation in a recent interview as her “darkest hour.”

Appearing on the cover of [Elle Magazine](#) in a little black dress by fellow Columbian Johanna Ortiz, the singer discussed the “collapse” of her relationship, her family’s tendency towards perseverance and her continued reliance on music as a bastion of human connection.

Though she was relatively tight-lipped about the details leading to her early-summer [breakup](#), she was far from quiet about her feelings towards what she’s calling “false accusations” made by Spanish prosecutors who charged her with tax fraud, telling the interviewer that she has to “fight for what [she] believe[s].”

“First of all, I didn’t spend 183 days per year at that time at all. I was busy fulfilling my professional commitments around the world. Second, I’ve paid everything they claimed I owed, even before they filed a lawsuit. So as of today, I owe zero to them.”

The singer insinuated she was singled out by Spanish tax authorities because of her high-profile status, and pointed toward a trend she calls “threat(s) of reputational damage” made against defendants in order to pressure settlement agreements.

“They saw that I was dating a Spanish citizen and started salivating. It’s clear they wanted to go after that money no matter what,” she claimed, pointing out that she was on tour during the years in question.

“Even for the next few years, I was traveling the world, working nonstop while pregnant or with Milan as a baby, when my C-section had barely closed. They knew I wasn’t in Spain the required time, that Spain wasn’t my place of work or my source of income, but they still came after me, with their eyes on the prize.”

Unwavering in her faith regarding due process, and advised by one of the largest accounting firms in the world, PricewaterhouseCoopers, Shakira [turned down a plea deal](#) in favor of a tax fraud trial.

If the Spanish government gets its druthers, she’ll be facing up to 8 years in prison.

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US House OKs Overhaul of Electoral Count Act in Bid to Avert Jan. 6 Repeat

By - Allison Dubois

The House chamber’s legislation earlier saw opposition from Republicans, many of whom cited the fact that the bill failed to go through standard committee process as their reasoning.

Cheney’s involvement in the process also proved to be a thorn in the party’s side.

In its first major action in response to the Jan. 6, 2021 assault on the US Capitol, the House of Representatives voted mostly along party lines to overhaul a centuries-old election law to prevent future presidential candidates from attempting to subvert election procedures.

The [Presidential Election Reform Act](#), written by Liz Cheney (R-WY) and Zoe Lofgren (D-CA,) cites the Capitol attack as a reason to amend the Electoral Count Act of 1887, which governed, along with the US Constitution, how states and Congress certify electors and declare presidential election winner

The bill passed on a 229-203 vote, with only nine Republicans (none of whom will be returning to Congress next year) crossing the aisle to support the bill. Cheney, a vocal Trump critic who was defeated in her primary last month, had this to say about the bill:

“Our oath of office is to support and defend the Constitution, which provides the method by which we elect our president. Legal challenges are not improper. But Donald Trump's refusal to abide by the ruling of the courts certainly was ... in the future our election process [will] reflect the will of the people.”

Trump had [falsely](#) told his followers that former Vice President Mike Pence had the power to overturn presidential election results, while Pence maintained at the time [that he had no such authority](#).

"Our bill reaffirms what the Constitution and existing law make plain: The vice president has no authority or discretion to reject official state electoral slates," Cheney said before the vote.

In addition to reaffirming the vice president's role in the electoral process as ceremonial, the bill also clarifies that state legislatures can't retroactively change election results and increases the number of lawmakers in each chamber needed to object to the verification of electors from one member to one-third of the body.

The 38-page bill also makes explicit the role governors play in the election, appearing to single out the faux election certificate scheme that saw electors in seven battleground states sign documents stating Trump had won their states.

On the House floor Wednesday, Lofgren had this to say: “Ultimately, this bill is about protecting the will of the American voters, which is a principle that is beyond partisanship. The bottom line is this — if you want to object to the vote, you better have your colleagues and the Constitution on your side. Don't try to overturn our democracy,” she added.

The Biden administration supports the bill, saying in a statement that the administration looks forward to working with Congress “to ensure lasting reform consistent with Congress' constitutional authority to protect voting rights, tally electoral votes, and strengthen our democracy.”

A similar reform bill has been introduced in the Senate and has obtained the backing of at least 10 Republican lawmakers. However, the bill does include some differences, such as requiring just one-fifth of of lawmakers in the chamber to sign on. Talks within the chamber on how to best reconcile the legislation are ongoing.

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UPDATE - Blinken's Father Dies Aged 96

(Specifies Blinken's schedule in para 5)

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) – Donald Blinken, a former US diplomat and father of Secretary of State Antony Blinken, has died at the age of 96, his son said.

"My family lost a parent and grandparent, a source of love and inspiration — my father Donald Blinken. A member of the U.S. Army Air Corps, a U.S. Ambassador, president of the Mark Rothko Foundation, chair of the State University of New York dad served his city, state and country," Blinken wrote on social media late on Thursday.

He also credited his father, who served as US ambassador to Hungary from 1994 to 1997, for inspiring him to work in public service.

Blinken noted that his father had "built a wonderful life" and given him one too.

According to NBC News, the secretary of state rushed from the United Nations to be with his family on Long Island on Thursday. Blinken is due to meet with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi later on Friday, according to the State Department's schedule.

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UK Chancellor of Exchequer Unveils Economy Growth Plan Amid Rising Cost of Living

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - UK Chancellor of the Exchequer Kwasi Kwarteng on Friday unveiled a new growth plan to support the country's economy amid rising cost of living, the government said.

"The Chancellor today [Friday 23 September] unveiled his Growth Plan to release the huge potential in the British economy by tackling high energy costs and inflation and delivering higher productivity and wage," the government said in a statement.

Kwarteng confirmed that the British government would primarily support people, businesses and the public sector. Due to volatile energy prices, energy companies can also count on the support of the government.

"To tackle this the government's Energy Price Guarantee will save the typical household £1,000 a year on their energy bill with the Energy Bill Relief Scheme halving the cost of business energy bills, reducing peak inflation by about 5 percentage points," the statement read.

The chancellor also announced new tax cuts. New measures include canceling the planned rise in corporation tax, keeping it the lowest in the G20 at 19%. This change will save 920,000 businesses almost £10,000 (\$11,075) on average next year.

At the same time, the government is negotiating with local authorities in various regions to establish special "investment zones," where enterprises will enjoy tax incentives. This measure will help to attract investment to the relevant regions and promote economic growth.

Revealing further tax reforms, Kwarteng announced certain tax cuts for individuals.

"From April 2023, the basic rate of income tax will be cut to 19% and will mean 31 million people will be better off by an average of £170 per year," the government emphasized, adding that the chancellor has also abolished the additional rate of tax and a single higher rate of income tax of 40% will replace it.

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the West has stepped up sanctions pressure on Russia, which has led to an increase in prices for energy and food in Europe and the United States. The rising cost of living has hit millions of households in the United Kingdom.

On Thursday, the Bank of England raised its interest rate by 50 basis points to 2.25% from 1.75% per annum — the highest level since December 2008. According to the bank's forecasts, the British economy will fall into recession in the fourth quarter of 2022.

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UK May Revoke About 570 EU Environmental Laws - Reports

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The parliament of the United Kingdom is studying the possibility of revoking 570 environmental laws from the national legislation system, UK media reported on Friday.

The UK parliament is studying the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill 2022 that is aimed at dealing with the pending EU legislation by either assimilating it into national legislation or abolishing it altogether.

"The Bill will sunset the majority of retained EU law so that it expires on 31st December 2023. All retained EU law contained in domestic secondary legislation and retained direct EU legislation will expire on this date, unless otherwise preserved," the UK government said in a statement.

According to The Guardian newspaper, if the bill is adopted then the current 570 environmental laws as well as hundreds more covering different spheres could be removed or rewritten. This could leave key aspects of wildlife protection deregulated and unprotected, which goes against the post-Brexit promise of the government to halt the decline of nature by 2030, the newspaper reported.

Experts believe that the December 2023 deadline is too tight for the government to mitigate all consequences of the law-scraping procedure, according to the newspaper.

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Russian Gas Exports to Europe Drop by Over 82% in One Year - Spanish Deputy Prime Minister

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Gas deliveries from Russia to Europe decreased by more than 82% in a year, Spanish Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Ecological Transition Teresa Ribera said on Friday.

"In just a year, the flow of gas from Russia fell by more than 82%. In fact, in January 2021, supplies from Russia accounted for about 40% of the gas consumed in Europe. At the moment, this figure does not reach 10%," Ribera told Spanish broadcaster RTVE.

Spain has sufficient resources to help its closest neighbors, France and Italy, in the current energy crisis, Ribera added.

On Thursday, the Spanish government said the country prepared the technical base to increase gas supplies to France and is also going to invest in infrastructure to send more gas to Italy. At the moment, Spain is actively positioning itself as a major gas hub capable of resolving the European energy crisis caused by the reduction in Russian gas supplies.

Last week, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said that Russian gas exports to the European Union will drop by 50 billion cubic meters this year. According to the International Energy Agency, the EU imported 155 billion cubic meters of natural gas from Russia in 2021, which is 45% of European imports and 40% of its total gas consumption.

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Belarus Demands From Estonia to Reduce Its Embassy Staff in Minsk - Foreign Ministry

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Belarus has demanded from Estonia to reduce its embassy staff in Minsk to one diplomat and one technical worker, the Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

"Given the disrespectful attitude to the sovereignty of our country on the part of the Estonian leadership, Belarus, in accordance with the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, does not see the point of a broad diplomatic presence of Estonia on its territory. In this regard, from October 1, 2022, the staff of the embassy of this country should be limited to one diplomatic employee to perform consular functions and one employee of administrative and technical personnel," the ministry said in a statement.

The ministry added that Belarus will also reduce its diplomatic presence in Estonia and recalls the ambassador "to Minsk for consultations."

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Blinken's Father Dies Aged 96

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He also credited his father, who served as US ambassador to Hungary from 1994 to 1997, for inspiring him to work in public service.

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According to NBC News, the secretary of state has rushed from the United Nations — where he was due to meet with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi — to be with his family on Long Island.

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South Africa Presents Attack Drone Expected to Be Key Competitor to Turkey's Bayraktar

PRETORIA, South Africa, September 23 (Sputnik) - South African defense company Milkor Ltd has presented the Milkor 380 reconnaissance and attack unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) expected to become a competitor to Turkey's Bayraktar and Anka drones, a holding representative told Sputnik.

The presentation took place at the Africa Aerospace and Defence 2022 international arms exhibition being held in the South African municipality of Tshwane from September 21-25. Before that, developers have only shown the drone's mock-up at the IDEX-2021 defense exhibition in Abu Dhabi.

Milkor 380 is a medium-altitude long-range UAV, whose functions can be used both for reconnaissance and combat actions, the company spokesperson told Sputnik, adding that the drone was being created not only for the South African air force but also for export.

The maximum flight range of the South African drone is 2,000 kilometers (1,242 miles). Milkor 380 can fly at altitudes up to 9 kilometers at the maximum speed of 250 kilometers per hour. The maximum flight duration is 35 hours. The UAV weighs 1.3 tonnes, while the payload can reach up to 210 kilograms (463 pounds). Milkor 380 is armed with various air-to-surface missiles, including laser-guided systems.

Main competitors of the South African vehicle, in addition to Turkey's Bayraktar and Anka, will also include drones created by US firm General Atomics, according to the Milkor Ltd spokesperson.

The advantage of Milkor 380 is that the entire component base of the drone is produced by South African companies, the spokesperson said. Moreover, the developer is ready to train operators of customer countries to manage these UAVs.

According to the company spokesperson, the South African drone is currently at the final stage of testing.

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Toyota Closes Plant in St.Petersburg Over Shortage of Car Components - Reports

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Toyota has failed to arrange auto parts supplies to Russia forcing it to shutter its plant in the southern St. Petersburg suburb of Shushary, Russian newspaper Kommersant reported on Friday, citing sources.

The Japanese automaker's assembly line has been idle since the beginning of March. The plant will now be suspended and, perhaps, sold in the future, and will not resume production for Toyota, according to the report.

At the same time, the company will continue maintenance operations for cars that have already been sold, sources told Kommersant.

In March, Toyota announced the suspension of car production in Russia and vehicle imports to the country in response to Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine.

The Toyota plant in Saint Petersburg was built in 2007 and has been manufacturing such models as Camry and RAV4. Its production capacity is 100,000 cars per year.

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Gazpromneft Becomes Russia's First Company to Fuel Ships With LNG

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Russian energy company Gazpromneft said on Friday that it had refueled a ship with liquefied natural gas for the first time, under an agreement with Russian shipping company Sovcomflot.

"Gazpromneft LNG bunkering tanker Dmitry Mendeleev performed the first refueling of a ship with liquefied natural gas in Russia. Bunkering of the ice-class tanker Prospekt Koroleva took place in the Gulf of Finland as part of an agreement between Gazpromneft and Sovcomflot to expand the use of marine fuels with a low carbon footprint," the company said in a statement. According to the statement, from September 2022, small-tonnage transportation and bunkering of LNG in the ports of the Baltic Sea will be carried out by the only tanker vessel of its class in Russia, Dmitry Mendeleev.

The vessel is capable of carrying up to 5,800 cubic meters of liquefied natural gas, the company said.

This event kickstarts the development of a new fuel segment in the Russian shipping industry, the statement added.

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Russian Ambassador Says Wants to Believe US, Russia Not Yet on Verge of Nuclear War

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Russian ambassador to the US, Anatoly Antonov, said on Friday that he wants to believe Russia and the US are yet not on the verge of a nuclear conflict despite all the difficulties in the relations.

"With each day, that little, which still glimmers in contacts between the two countries, is fading away. I want to believe that despite all the difficulties, Americans and we are yet to be on the verge of a nuclear conflict," Antonov said during a conference, marking 60 years since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

Russia is still committed to the principle that there is no winner in the nuclear war so it should never be instigated, the ambassador added.

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India Urges Citizens to Be Careful When Traveling to Canada - Foreign Ministry

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Indian foreign ministry urged citizens of the country on Friday to remain vigilant and exercise caution when traveling to Canada due to the increased cases of crimes and violence on religious grounds.

"There has been a sharp increase in incidents of hate crimes, sectarian violence and anti-India activities in Canada. The Ministry of External Affairs and our High Commission/Consulates General in Canada have taken up these incidents with the Canadian authorities and requested them to investigate the said crimes and take appropriate action," the ministry said in a statement.

The ministry added that the offenders have not yet been brought to justice.

"In view of the increasing incidences of crimes as described above, Indian nationals and students from India in Canada and those proceeding to Canada for travel/education are advised to exercise due caution and remain vigilant," the statement read.

The ministry also called on Indian nationals in Canada to register with the High Commission of India in Ottawa or Consulates General of India in Toronto and Vancouver, noting that this would help to enhance interaction with Indian citizens in Canada in case of any requirements or emergency.

The foreign ministry's statement was made after unknown people painted the walls of a Hindu temple in Toronto with anti-Indian slogans. Canadian lawmaker of Indian origin Chandra Arya said that Canadian supporters of the Khalistan separatist movement, seeking to create a homeland for Sikhs through the secession of the Punjab state from India, were responsible for the damage, adding that it was not an isolated incident.

According to media reports, 1.6 million people of Indian origin and non-resident Indians live in Canada. The country is also very popular among Indian students who want to continue their studies abroad.

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Swiss Foreign Ministry Summons Russian Ambassador Over Referenda in Donbas - Government

(Adds para 4 with quote, paras 5-7 with background information)

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Switzerland has condemned the decision to hold referenda on joining Russia in Donbas republics and summoned the Russian ambassador in Bern over this situation, the Swiss government said on Friday.

"The referendums currently taking place in Ukrainian territories partially occupied by Russia do not conform with the law and are illegal under international law. The Federal Council condemns this latest violation of Ukrainian sovereignty by Russia and will not recognise the results of any of these sham referendums ... The FDFA [Federal Department of Foreign Affairs] also summoned the Russian ambassador [on Thursday]," the government said in a statement.

Switzerland also is not ruling out aligning itself with new EU sanctions against Russia over the Donbas referenda, the government added.

"In view of these latest referendums the EU has announced new sanctions which, if implemented, the Federal Council will also consider adopting," the statement read.

On Tuesday, the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR and LPR) as well as the Russian-controlled parts of the Ukrainian regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson said that they would hold referendums on accession to Russia from September 23-27.

On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin voiced his support for referenda, causing a backlash from the Western countries. In particular, on Thursday, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell announced that the bloc would impose new sanctions on Russia's leadership and people involved in organizing referenda.

The DPR and LPR proclaimed their independence from Ukraine in 2014 after holding self-determination referendums. In February 2022, Russia recognized the DPR and LPR and launched a military operation in Ukraine in response to calls for help from the two breakaway republics.

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US Uses Nuclear Blackmail, Pushing Kiev to Move Hostilities to Russia - Senior Diplomat

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is not capable of negotiating and pushing Kiev to move hostilities to the Russian territory, while using nuclear blackmail, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Friday.

"The US is not capable of negotiating in general and is pushing Kiev together with London and other NATO countries to move hostilities to our territory, trying to fight until the last Ukrainian to inflict what they call a 'strategic defeat' on Russia. Nuclear blackmail has also started to be used," Ryabkov said during a conference, marking 60 years since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

The US deliberately lowered the nuclear threshold, thus, posing threat to Russia's nuclear security, the diplomat added.

At the same time, Ryabkov stated that Moscow is not threatening anyone with nuclear weapons, but warns of risk of interfering with the special military operation.

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UPDATE - Over 20 Chinese Tourists Missing After Boat Capsizes Off Cambodia's Coast - Reports

(Adds paras 5-6 with comments from the Chinese foreign ministry)

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - As a result of a storm that capsized a wooden boat off Cambodia's southwestern coast 23 Chinese citizens went missing, Cambodian newspaper Khmer Times reported on Friday, citing maritime police.

The boat was caught in a storm and capsized on Thursday night. Cambodian rescuers, police officers and fishermen managed to save 18 Chinese citizens, according to the report.

In total, 41 Chinese citizens were on board the wooden ship, sailing from the port city of Guangzhou to the Cambodian coastal city of Sihanoukville. All of the passengers were heading to Cambodia as tourists, the report said.

The group had left the port of Guangzhou on September 11 on a speedboat and then they were transferred to a wooden boat on September 17, accompanied by two Cambodian guides. The wooden boat had a leak and started to flounder in heavy waters. Soon another boat came to pick up the two Cambodians but left the 41 Chinese on the damaged wooden boat, according to one of the rescued passengers.

Beijing has asked Phnom Penh to make every effort in carrying out search and rescue operations.

"China and Cambodia are in close communication over this. We have asked the Cambodian side to make all-out search and rescue efforts. We are doing everything we can to find out more about the details of the incident and verify them as quickly as we can," Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin told a briefing.

Search and rescue operations are continuing at the site.

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US Marine Corps to Train in Finland for 2 Months - Finnish Navy

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The United States Marine Corps Logistics Group is expected to arrive in Finland for training for two months, the Finnish navy said on Friday.

"A unit from the United States Marine Corps' 2nd Marine Logistics Group will be coming to Finland to train with Finnish units. It will be training with the Nyland Brigade from October until early December," the navy said in a statement.

The majority of US marines will be arriving in Finland early next week.

"The entire unit of 150 persons will be accommodated in Nyland Brigade and mainly operates in the brigade's training area. In November-December the unit will participate in the Finnish Navy's main exercise of the autumn, Exercise Freezing Winds 22," the statement read.

In the past several months the cooperation between the navies of Finland and the US has increased. The military drills that took place in May and August have improved the interoperability of units and familiarized US forces with the environment of the Finnish coast, according to the navy.

On May 18, three months after Russia launched its military operation in Ukraine, Finland and Sweden submitted their NATO membership applications, abandoning decades of neutrality. Finland and Sweden are awaiting the ratification of their NATO applications. As of September 23, 27 countries out of 30 have already completed the formal procedure to welcome Finland and Sweden to the alliance. The applications have not yet been ratified by Slovakia, Turkey, and Hungary.

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

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Schools in Poland Plan to Distribute Potassium Iodide Pills Amid Nuclear Threat - Reports

WARSAW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Schools in Poland are preparing to distribute potassium iodide tablets in case of a potential radiation exposure, Polish newspaper Rzeczpospolita reported on Friday, citing education authorities.

Potassium iodide protects the thyroid gland from the accumulation of radioisotopes of iodine during radiation damage.

Local authorities oblige school administrations to distribute tablets in case of a possible threat, the report said, adding that in some cases, school principals are told that they will have six hours to distribute potassium iodide following the emergency alert.

Meanwhile, the capital city hall confirmed the fact of tablet distribution preparations, according to the newspaper.

According to Warsaw City Hall spokesman Jakub Leduchowski, the distribution of the pills will start after the adoption of the decision by Mazovian governor.

Foreign ministers of France, Germany, Italy, the UK and senior officials from allied countries on Thursday expressed concerns over safety and security threats emerging at nuclear facilities located in combat zones, at the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (ZNPP) in particular.

Located on the left bank of the Dnieper River, the ZNPP is the largest nuclear power plant in Europe in terms of the number of units and output. During hostilities in Ukraine ongoing since February 24, the nuclear plant and surrounding area fell under the control of Russian forces.

The NPP has recently been targeted by multiple shelling, raising international concerns over a possible nuclear accident. Russia and Ukraine blame the attacks on each other.

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US Has Been Warning Russia of Nuclear Strike Consequences for Several Months - Reports

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The United States has been warning Russia for several months of the consequences of a nuclear strike, the Washington Post reported, citing officials familiar with the matter.

The administration of US President Joe Biden has been engaging in "strategic ambiguity" by sending vague signals to Russia about the consequences of a nuclear strike to keep Moscow in the dark about Washington's possible response, the newspaper said.

The US State Department has also been consistently engaged in private communications with Moscow over recent months, however there are no other details on the content of the talks, the newspaper said, citing anonymous officials.

On September 17, Biden said there would be consequences if Russia decides to use chemical or tactical nuclear weapons against Ukraine, adding that the US response would depend on the extent of what Russia does, but it would be consequential. The US president did not disclose details about what the United States' contingency plans are if Russia uses chemical or nuclear weapons in Ukraine.

On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced the partial mobilization amid the Russian military operation in Ukraine. He also voiced support for referenda on joining Russia announced on Tuesday in the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR, LPR) as well as in the Russian-controlled parts of Ukraine. The Russian leader accused the West of using the threat of nuclear weapons to blackmail Russia, and warned that Moscow will use all means at its disposal if its territorial integrity is threatened.

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NATO Secretary General to Meet With EU Commission President on September 26

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg will hold a meeting with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in Brussels on September 26, NATO said on Friday.

"On Monday 26 September 2022, the NATO Secretary General, Mr. Jens Stoltenberg, will meet with the President of the European Commission, Ms. Ursula von der Leyen, at the Berlaymont building of the European Commission. There will be no media opportunity," the statement read. The EU and NATO were supposed to sign a cooperation declaration in late 2021 but the work on the document still continues. Its contents have not been disclosed by the parties.

On July 12, the EU expressed its readiness to forge ahead in negotiations with NATO on the joint declaration after the approval of the European defense strategy, the Strategic Compass, and the adoption of a new strategic concept at the Madrid summit. Secretary General of the EU

External Action Service Stefano Sannino said that the EU-NATO declaration should reflect the "geopolitical context," new areas of cooperation, including on hybrid threats, space, disruptive technologies, the impact of environment and climate change on security, the fight against disinformation and interference in internal affairs, as well as cooperation in the areas of defense planning.

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German Toilet Paper Makers Could Go Down the Drain Amid Energy Crisis - Reports

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - German toilet paper manufacturers are facing bankruptcy as rising energy prices upend their fuel-intensive business model, with Hakle, one of the country's best known brands, filing for insolvency at the beginning of September, the Financial Times reports.

"It pressed us too much and we were losing too much money," Volker Jung, Hakle's managing director, said of the price rises, as quoted by the newspaper. "I don't think the wave of insolvencies can be stopped unless we have an [energy price] cap."

German manufacturers have been hit by rising transport costs, the strength of the dollar, as well as the closure of Nord Stream 1, the gas pipeline from Russia that used to power German industry, amid disputes over sanctions the EU imposed on Russia in response to its military operation in Ukraine.

Toilet roll makers are among those hardest hit as the energy crisis unfolds. To produce a single 2-meter-wide 'mother roll' of toilet paper at its Mainz-Kostheim plant, Hakle's competitor Essity requires enough gas to heat a family home for weeks in winter. For now, the hygiene products has managed to find alternative sources of fuel and raise prices, with Lotus toilet rolls selling for 18% more.

In addition, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz has put together a 65 billion euro (\$63.5 billion) anti-inflation package. However, paper industry insiders say this may not be enough to ward off de-industrialization, .

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Erdogan Instructs Ministers to Work Out Alternatives to Mir Payment System - Reports

(Adds details in para 2, background information in para 4)

ANKARA, September 23 (Sputnik) - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has instructed ministers to work out alternatives to the Russian payment system Mir together with Moscow, Turkish broadcaster A Haber reported on Friday.

Negotiations have already been conducted by the relevant Turkish and Russian ministries, the broadcaster said, adding that Erdogan will hold consultations on the subject within the next few hours.

The broadcaster did not specify what kind of alternatives are being considered by Turkey and Russia.

On September 15, the US Treasury said that sanctions would be applied against financial institutions supporting the Mir payment network outside Russia. Some Turkish banks broke ties with Mir after the threat, while others continued to services the Russian cards.

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Turkey Looking for Alternatives to Russian Mir Cards, Considering Available Options - Head

ANKARA, September 23 (Sputnik) - Turkey is looking for alternatives to Russian payment system Mir and considering all available options, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Friday.

Earlier in the day, the A Haber broadcaster reported that Erdogan had instructed ministers to work out alternatives to the Russian Mir payment system together with Moscow.

"We will focus not only on developments concerning [Mir] cards but also on alternatives. We will continue to work on what we can do, what steps to take, what options we have in hand," Erdogan told reporters.

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Medvedchuk on Way to Russia From Turkey - Erdogan

ANKARA, September 23 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian opposition politician Viktor Medvedchuk, who was released from the Ukrainian captivity as a result of prisoner exchange between Moscow and Kiev, went to Russia via Turkey, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Friday.

"During the exchange of prisoners, we had 200 names. We have all their names. These are all our guests. [Russian President Vladimir] Putin especially mentioned one of them [Medvedchuk]. We sent him to Russia," Erdogan told reporters.

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Indonesian Trial Over 2014 Shootings Should Prompt Further Human Rights Abuses Probes-NGO

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - A trial that opened this week in Indonesia against former military officer over fatal shootings in 2014 should prompt further prosecutions of serious human

rights abuses in the country's easternmost province of Papua, a human rights watchdog said on Friday.

On Wednesday, an Indonesian court of human rights brought to justice a former military officer for alleged crimes against humanity during a 2014 massacre in the Papuan district of Paniai when Indonesian soldiers fired on about 800 protesters and killed four teenagers.

"The Indonesian authorities should not squander this important opportunity to finally hold someone accountable for crimes committed during the Paniai massacre," Phil Robertson, deputy Asia director at Human Rights Watch, said in a statement, adding that "this should be the start of further prosecutions of serious human rights abuses in Papua, and not a 'one-off' effort to close the book on Paniai."

The trial against retired Maj. Isak Sattu began on September 21, 2022. Prosecutor Errly Prima Putera Agoes charged Sattu with four articles that presuppose penalties from 10 to 25-year imprisonment.

On December 8, 2014, Indonesian troops shot off the rioters for approximately seven minutes in the public square in the town of Enarotali in Paniai regency, killing four teenagers, and wounding at least 17-21 others, including women and children. Another protester Abia Gobay died elsewhere under unclear circumstances.

The protest was sparked by a fighting on the evening of December 7, 2014, when soldiers assaulted teenager Yulianus Yeimo after he and his friends shouted at a military vehicle to turn on its headlights as it passed the group. The reason for deployment of lethal weapons remains unclear.

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Ukraine Foreign Minister Says Chinese Counterpart Called for Settling Conflict Peacefully

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi reaffirms Beijing's respect for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and rejects the use of force to settle the crisis in Ukraine, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said in a message posted Friday on Twitter.

"I met with State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi to discuss relations between Ukraine and China. My counterpart reaffirmed China's respect for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as its rejection of the use of force as a means of resolving differences," Kuleba said on Twitter.

On Wednesday, Wang called on all parties to the Ukrainian conflict to negotiate a ceasefire, expressing readiness to cooperate with the international community to deescalate current tensions, taking into account the legitimate security concerns of each side

Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24 in response to calls by the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics for protection from Ukrainian troops. The Russian Defense Ministry said the goal of the operation, which targets Ukrainian military infrastructure, is to "demilitarize and denazify" Ukraine, and to push the Ukrainian troops out of the whole Donbas.

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Russian Constitution to Be Valid in Donbas If It Joins Federation - Kremlin

(Corrects typo in title, adds background information in paras 3-4)

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Russian constitution will be valid in Donbas, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions if they become part of the federation following referendums, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday when asked about possible Ukrainian attacks on these territories.

"Certainly. In these territories [in case of accession to Russia following a referendum], the constitution of the Russian Federation will go into force. Everything is very clear on this," Peskov told reporters.

On Tuesday, the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR, LPR) as well as the regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson said that they would hold referendums on accession to Russia from September 23-27.

The DPR and LPR proclaimed their independence from Ukraine in 2014 after holding self-determination referendums. In February 2022, Russia recognized the DPR and LPR and launched a military operation in Ukraine in response to their calls for help in fending off Ukrainian attacks.

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Kyrgyz, US Foreign Ministers Discuss Situation at Border With Tajikistan

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Zheenbek Kulubaev and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the escalation of the situation at the Kyrgyz-Tajik border that took place last week, the Kyrgyz foreign ministry said on Friday.

"On September 22, 2022, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic Zheenbek Kulubaev met with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken in New York. Minister Zh.Kulubaev informed him on the events that took place on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border," the statement said.

Blinken expressed concern over the escalation and underscored the importance of a peaceful solution, according to the ministry.

"During the meeting, the parties also discussed certain issues of strengthening cooperation between Kyrgyzstan and the United States both within the framework of the bilateral agenda and at regional platforms, including 'Central Asia + the United States,'" the ministry's statement read.

Large-scale clashes on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border flared up on September 14. On September 16, Kyrgyzstan announced that the fighting had spread across the entire border line, accusing Tajikistan of shelling and escalating the situation. Both sides agreed to a ceasefire several times, however, the agreements were not respected and mutual shelling continued.

Kyrgyzstan reported 59 people dead and 198 injured, while Tajikistan said 41 people were killed and 30 injured as a result of the fighting.

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Energy Crisis Risks Destroying European Unity Ahead of Looming Winter - IEA Head

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The scramble for energy resources between the EU countries this winter could destroy European unity and trigger social unrest, the Financial Times newspaper reported on Friday, citing International Energy Agency (IEA) head Fatih Birol. "The implications will be very bad for energy, very bad for the economy, but extremely bad politically," Birol said, as quoted by the newspaper.

According to the newspaper, the growing energy crisis in Europe raises concerns that some countries may conclude third-party deals for imports from Russia or restrict the export of electricity to their neighbors. In this case, European countries will cease cooperation with each other and everyone will be on their own, Birol said.

"If Europe fails this test in energy, it can go beyond energy implications," Birol added.

In addition, the IEA head cautioned against the EU complacency after the European Union managed to accumulate natural gas reserves ahead of impending winter. According to Birol, even if Europe avoids negative surprises in gas supplies, such as a colder than expected winter, it will face other consequences in the coming months, including an economic downturn and significant damage to household budgets.

The start of hostilities in Ukraine in February exacerbated the energy crisis unfolding in Europe over the past year. Disruptions in logistical and financial operations due to the conflict and Western sanctions against Russia have undermined supply chains and led to a spike in energy prices worldwide.

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Central Asian States Foreign Ministers Discuss Territorial Integrity With Blinken- Bishkek

BISHKEK, September 23 (Sputnik) - Foreign ministers of the Central Asian countries have discussed issues of strengthening sovereignty and maintaining the territorial integrity of states with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry told Sputnik on Friday. The meeting took place in New York on Thursday.

"The main topic of the meeting was the strengthening of sovereignty and territorial integrity of countries, food security, as well as economic cooperation," the ministry said.

Kulubaev emphasized the importance of implementing specific infrastructure and general projects that contribute to strengthening economic connectivity in order to strengthen regional cooperation between Central Asian countries themselves and with the United States.

In addition, the minister called for the establishment of a dialogue and counseling on the issues of the sanctions policy between the relevant bodies to minimize consequences on the level and quality of life of the population.

Meanwhile, the US initiated the allocation of \$25 million for the realization of projects aimed at improving the educational level of the population, as well as the export potential of the Central Asian countries.

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Number of Doping Convictions of Russian Athletes Reaches 138 - WADA

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Seventeen more Russian athletes were convicted for using doping in the 2019 case, bringing the number of convictions in doping violations to 138, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) said Friday.

"Cases resulting from WADA's retrieval of data and samples from the Moscow Laboratory in 2019 continue to proceed. It was highlighted to the ExCo [WADA's Executive Committee] that a further 17 cases between May 2022 and the end of July 2022 successfully resulted in convictions, bringing the total to 138 so far, with more expected as all cases are being followed up," WADA said in a statement

WADA said it was closely monitoring the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) to be able to assess whether it meets all the conditions for reinstatement.

"The ExCo received an update in relation to the December 2020 decision by the Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) regarding the assertion of non-compliance on the Russian Anti-Doping Agency (RUSADA) for a period of two years. WADA is closely monitoring RUSADA to be able to assess whether it meets all the reinstatement conditions at the end of the two-year period," the statement read.

In December 2019, WADA labeled RUSADA as non-compliant with the world anti-doping code and suspended Russian athletes from competing in major international competitions under the national flag for four years, along with imposing a range of other restrictions. RUSADA challenged the decision at the CAS.

The court sided with WADA in barring Russia from international sports events but limited the ban to two years, down from the proposed four. Until December 16, Russian athletes will only be allowed to compete in the status of neutral participants after vigorous checks. The CAS ruling also obligates RUSADA to meet a number of conditions, including conducting an audit, to prove restoring compliance with the anti-doping code.

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Flights From Russia to Northern Cyprus Via Turkey's Antalya to Start in November – Reports

ANKARA, September 23 (Sputnik) - Flights from Russia to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus via Turkey's Antalya are set to start in November and operate on a daily basis, Turkish newspaper Yeni Safak reported on Friday, citing sources.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is expected to fly aboard the first flight to Northern Cyprus, the report said.

On Thursday, Erdogan said he had discussed with Russian President Vladimir Putin the possibility of launching direct flights from Russia to Northern Cyprus.

Cyprus has been de facto divided since 1974, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was declared in 1983 with Turkey's backing. Negotiations on the reunification of Cyprus have been underway almost from the moment of its division. The United Nations has attempted brokering reunification talks, but the negotiation reached an impasse. In late June, Cypriot President Nikos Anastasiades expressed readiness to resume negotiations on the settlement of the Cyprus issue under the auspices of the United Nations.

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Russian Constitution to Be Valid in Dobnas if It Joins Federation - Kremlin

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Russian constitution will be valid in Donbas, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions if they join the federation following referenda, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday when asked about possible Ukrainian attacks on these territories. "Certainly. In these territories [in case of joining and becoming part of the Russian Federation following a referendum], the constitution of the Russian Federation will come into force. Everything is very clear on this," Peskov told reporters.

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Kremlin Says No Decisions Made on Direct Flights From Russia to Northern Cyprus

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Moscow has not made any decision on direct flights from Russia to the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday.

On Thursday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that he had discussed with Russian President Vladimir Putin a possible launch of direct flights from Russia to the self-proclaimed republic.

"So far, no decisions have been made in this regard," Peskov told reporters.

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### Putin, Parliament to Act Promptly if Referendums End Positively - Kremlin

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin and the parliament will act promptly and sign all necessary documents if people in Donbas, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions vote to join Russia at the ongoing referendums, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday.

"Of course, a certain decision of both our parliament and the president will be required, the signing of the necessary documents, a number of procedures. Everything will be done in strict accordance with the current legislation," Peskov said, adding that he is sure that referendums will be recognized promptly.

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### Kremlin Says No Initiatives From Paris on Conversation Between Putin, Macron

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - There have been no initiatives from Paris on a possible conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and French President Emmanuel Macron, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday.

In an interview with CNN, Macron said that he had "no rational explanation" why Putin decided to launch the special military operation in Ukraine and suggested that Moscow is pursuing "a strategy of hegemony in the region."

"So far, there have been no initiatives to organize the conversation, most likely, the French president will probably first return home from New York, then, perhaps, the initiatives he spoke about will follow. There is no agreed conversation in the schedule," Peskov told reporters.

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### Lukashenko Says Plans to Meet With Putin in Near Future

MINSK, September 23 (Sputnik) - Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko announced on Friday his plans to meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the near future.

"I will meet with the Russian president in the near future," Lukashenko said, as quoted by the state-run Belta news agency.

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### Kremlin on Beijing's Statements on Ukraine: Russia Proceeds From Outcome of Putin-Xi Talks

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Russia proceeds from the outcome of talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday when commenting on Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi's call to resume Moscow-Kiev talks.

"We proceed primarily from the spirit that, in fact, prevailed at the last meeting between President Putin and President Xi in Samarkand, on the sidelines of the SCO summit. It was a very important, very meaningful meeting," Peskov told reporters.

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Swiss Foreign Ministry Summons Russian Ambassador Over Referenda in Donbas - Government

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Switzerland has condemned the decision to hold referenda on joining Russia in Donbas republics and summoned the Russian ambassador in Bern over this situation, the Swiss government said on Friday.

"The referendums currently taking place in Ukrainian territories partially occupied by Russia do not conform with the law and are illegal under international law. The Federal Council condemns this latest violation of Ukrainian sovereignty by Russia and will not recognise the results of any of these sham referendums ... The FDFA also summoned the Russian ambassador [on Thursday]," the government said in a statement.

Switzerland also is not ruling out aligning itself with new EU sanctions against Russia over the Donbas referenda, the government added.

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Belarus Not Planning to Launch Military Mobilization - President

MINSK, September 23 (Sputnik) - Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko said on Friday that contrary to the speculations being peddled around by some opposition groups, no military mobilization in the country is planned.

"There will be no mobilization. This is a lie," Lukashenko was quoted as saying by the Pool Pervogo Telegram channel.

The Secretary of State of Belarusian Security Council, Alexander Volfovich, said on Wednesday that there is no need for mobilization in the country, as people are prepared to serve without being called up.

On September 21, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced a partial military mobilization in the country. According to Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, Russia had a mobilization resource of 25 million people, while the partial mobilization requires only 1% of that number, or about 300,000 reservists.

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Death Toll From Migrant Shipwreck Off Syrian Coast Rises to 51 - Lebanese Diplomat

CAIRO, September 23 (Sputnik) - The death toll from the crash of a ship with migrants off the coast of the Syrian city of Tartus has reached 51 people, while 20 people have been rescued, Lebanese Charge d'Affaires in Syria, Talal Daher, said on Friday.

"The bodies of 51 migrants have been recovered so far," Daher said as quoted by LBCI broadcaster.

Twenty people, including five Lebanese citizens, have been rescued so far, the diplomat added. On Thursday night, the head of Syrian seaports administration, Samir Kubrusli, told Syrian Sham FM radio that rescue operations were suspended overnight due to high waves adding that the Lebanese authorities did not warn Damascus about the missing boat with migrants and contacted Syrian authorities only after the incident.

According to Syrian media, the ship left Lebanon a few days ago, and on board were citizens of Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, as well as people with unknown citizenship. One survivor said the number of passengers was around 150, Syrian media added.

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South Korean Stock Market Takes Biggest Fall of Year Amid Global Recession Fears - Reports

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Seoul's benchmark Korea Composite Stock Price Index fell by 42.31 points, or 1.81%, on Friday to its lowest level for 2022, as interest rate hikes by the US Federal Reserve fed fears of a worldwide recession, Yonhap News agency reported.

"Today's decline is attributed to lack of buying interest amid the weakening Korean won and soaring bond yields," Seo Sang-yeong, an analyst from Mirae Asset Securities, said, as cited by Yonhap.

Samsung Electronics went up 0.18% while Hyundai Motor lost 1.55% and top battery maker LG Energy Solution tumbled 5.73%. As yields went up, bond prices closed lower.

The South Korean currency was up 0.4 won against the dollar from close of business on Thursday, when it fell to below 1,400 won to the dollar, its lowest level in 13 years, following bad news from the United States.

The Fed announced on Wednesday it was raising its target interest rate by 75 basis points for the third time in a row. On Thursday, Wall Street was down, generating concern among Korean investors that the Fed's aggressive monetary policy could exacerbate a global slowdown.

On Friday, South Korea's finance minister vowed to move to stabilize the volatile bond market.

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WADA Temporarily Excuses Ukrainian Anti-Doping Center for Non-Conformity With Code

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Executive Committee of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) on Friday decided to temporarily excuse the National Anti-Doping Center of Ukraine (NADC) for non-conformity with the Anti-Doping Code.

The committee specified that such decision was made due to force majeure following the start of the hostilities in Ukraine.

"This approach is in line with Article 8.4.3 of the ISCCS [International Standard for Code Compliance by Signatories]. WADA will continue to monitor the situation and the CRC [Compliance Review Committee] will reassess the case once force majeure no longer applies. The ExCo was informed also that the individuals identified in WADA's report outlining the non-conformities in Ukraine are no longer involved in the NADC," the committee said in a statement.

In October, WADA said that an investigation launched in 2019, known as "Operation Hercules," found evidence that the NADC has been conducting unwarranted advance sample collection from athletes upon prior notice.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik)

REFERENDA ON JOINING RUSSIA

\* The referendum on joining Russia has begun throughout the territory of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), Vladimir Vysotsky, the head of the DPR central election commission, told Sputnik on Friday.

\* The referendum on joining Russia has begun throughout the territory of the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), the LPR central election commission told Sputnik on Friday.

UKRAINE-RELATE ISSUES

\* States from the collective West are hesitant to provide US and German made M-1 Abrams and Leopard tanks because of operational differences requiring training and logistics, Politico reported.

\* The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCOR) is calling on world leaders to persuade Kiev to negotiate with Russia rather than encourage the conflict to continue, ROCOR Archbishop of Montreal and Canada Gabriel (Chemodakov) told Sputnik.

\* Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has urged Berlin to provide Ukraine with battle tanks to set an example for other nations and "win a victory."

#### ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN TENSIONS

- \* Azerbaijan has violated the ceasefire regime on the border with Armenia on Friday morning, the Armenian defense ministry said.
- \* Recognition of Armenia's territorial integrity in its internationally recognized boundaries by Azerbaijan could allow both countries to sign a peace treaty, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said on Friday.
- \* Armenia has shelled Azerbaijani positions in three border regions, the Azerbaijani defense ministry said on Friday.

#### ENERGY ISSUES

- \* Pakistan and Russia must still formulate a framework on the construction of a gas pipeline, Federal Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb told reporters in response to a question by a Sputnik correspondent on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.
- \* Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said that gas and oil producers should stay together in order to achieve a stabilized energy market.

#### SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- \* Budapest sees no "rational reason" to pursue another package of sanctions against Russia and will not give its consent to anything that is against its national interests, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijarto said on Friday.
- \* The Norwegian authorities have suspended the agreement with Russia on the simplified visa regime, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration said.
- \* The European Union is struggling to find any more Russians to sanction as all "big fish" have already been targeted, the EUobserver online newspaper reported on Friday, citing sources.

#### UNSC REFORM

- \* French President Emmanuel Macron said in an interview that his country is in favor of a UN Security Council reform that would include an increase in the number of African and other "emerging" countries.
- \* Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa agree that the multilateral global system must be reformed and improved, including though the reform of the United Nations and other international organizations, BRICS foreign ministers said in a joint statement on Friday.

#### SPACE

- \* The Double Asteroid Redirection Test (DART) spacecraft is on course to crash into the tiny asteroid Dimorphos on Monday in a historic first test to see if spacecraft can use their kinetic energy to change the orbits of celestial bodies to deflect them from crashing into the earth in the future, NASA scientists told a press conference.

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## US, South Korea Agree to Work on Balancing Out Inflation Reduction Act - Reports

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The United States and South Korea have agreed to make joint efforts to balance out the impact of the US Inflation Reduction Act that provides tax credits for the purchase of electric vehicles assembled in North America, South Korean news agency Yonhap reported on Friday, citing the Ministry of Trade, Industry and Energy.

The Inflation Reduction Act, which US President Joe Biden signed in August, provides tax credits worth \$7,500 to consumers for the purchase of electric vehicles assembled solely in North America, which has caused distress of major South Korea automakers, putting them at a disadvantage. The South Korean Trade Ministry said in late August that it would work with the EU on a joint response to what Korean lawmakers referred to as discrimination.

The US and South Korea have agreed to launch a consultation channel on the matter to come up with some tangible solutions, according to the report. The decision was made following the meeting between South Korea Minister for Trade Ahn Duk-geun and US Trade Representative Katherine Tai in Bali on the sidelines of G20 trade, investment and industry ministerial meeting. Earlier in the week, South Korean Trade, Industry and Energy Minister, Lee Chang-yang, visited Washington to discuss the matter with US Secretary of Commerce Gina Raimondo and other officials. The counterparts agreed that South Korean concerns were valid and decided to seek solution for the issue. Lee stated that his government will consider all legislative and executive countermeasures in tackling the situation if it does not change.

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## Over 20 Chinese Tourists Missing After Boat Capsizes Off Cambodia's Coast - Reports

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - As a result of a storm that capsized a wooden boat off Cambodia's southwestern coast 23 Chinese citizens went missing, Cambodian newspaper Khmer Times reported on Friday, citing maritime police.

The boat was caught in a storm and capsized on Thursday night. Cambodian rescuers, police officers and fishermen managed to save 18 Chinese citizens, according to the report.

In total, 41 Chinese citizens were on board the wooden ship, sailing from the port city of Guangzhou to the Cambodian coastal city of Sihanoukville. All of the passengers were heading to Cambodia as tourists, the report said.

The group had left the port of Guangzhou on September 11 on a speedboat and then they were transferred to a wooden boat on September 17, accompanied by two Cambodian guides. The wooden boat had a leak and started to flounder in heavy waters. Soon another boat came to pick up the two Cambodians but left the 41 Chinese on the damaged wooden boat, according to one of the rescued passengers.

Search and rescue operations are continuing at the site.

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Erdogan Instructs Ministers to Work Out Alternatives to Mir Payment System - Reports

ANKARA, September 23 (Sputnik) - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has instructed ministers to work out alternatives to the Russian Mir payment system together with Moscow, the A Haber broadcaster reported on Friday.

The broadcaster did not specify what kind of alternatives are considered by Turkey and Russia.

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Japanese, S. Korean, US Top Diplomats Discuss Global Situation, North Korea - Tokyo

TOKYO, September 23 (Sputnik) - Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi and his South Korean counterpart Park Jin during a meeting with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken have stressed the unacceptability of attempts to change status quo in the Asia-Pacific by force and expressed their readiness to retaliate against North Korea's possible nuclear missile launches, the Japanese Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

"The sides condemned North Korea's repeated missile launches this year, which violate the provisions of UN Security Council resolutions and pose a serious threat to the region. The parties confirmed that any nuclear test by North Korea will entail a powerful response from the international community," the ministry said in a statement.

The officials called for trilateral cooperation to strengthen the international economic system and agreed to work toward a multilateral global order to enable the countries to choose their own path without any external pressure, it also said.

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France Has 28 Nuclear Reactors in Operation - Energy Minister

PARIS, September 23 (Sputnik) - France currently has 28 active nuclear reactors and plans to produce 45 gigawatts of electricity by January, Energy Transition Minister Agnes Pannier-Runacher said on Friday.

"Currently we have 28 nuclear reactors in operation," Pannier-Runacher told French broadcaster Sud Radio. "Their number is being increased every week as winter approaches. Our main goal is to achieve the production of 45 gigawatts of electricity by January."

Earlier in September, French Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne said that the government expected the state-owned energy company EDF to meet the deadlines for the repair of nuclear reactors so that the country could avoid the need to restart a coal-fired thermal power plant.

On August 25, EDF postponed the launch of four out of 12 nuclear reactors that had been shut down for maintenance over corrosion in May. The energy company stated that, at the time, 32 out of 56 nuclear reactors in France remained shut down.

Since 2021, energy prices in Europe have been growing as part of a global trend of post-COVID recovery. After the beginning of Russia's military operation in Ukraine and the adoption of several packages of sanctions against Moscow by the West, fuel prices have accelerated the growth, pushing many European governments to resort to contingency measures.

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#### EU Struggles to Find More Russian Individuals to Target With Sanctions - Reports

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The European Union is struggling to find any more Russians to sanction as all "big fish" have already been targeted, the EUobserver online newspaper reported on Friday, citing sources.

"There are no big fish left," one of the sources told the newspaper, adding that "we've already got the full collection of oligarchs and everybody in the political and defence establishments." Despite the fact that European diplomats are considering the possibility of imposing sanctions against media workers, the EU "does not like to blacklist media people," according to the source.

Another source said that Russia lacks "unicorns" that the EU could potentially sanction. The "unicorn" is a start-up company that reached a valuation of \$1 billion without being listed on the stock market.

The EU has introduced seven packages of sanctions against Russia since the start of hostilities in Ukraine in late February. Among other targets, restrictions applied to Russian government and military officials, business people, and a number of prominent media officials, including Sputnik and RT Editor-In-Chief Margarita Simonyan.

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#### Uzbekistan Suspends Services for Russia's Mir Cards Citing Maintenance

TASHKENT, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Uzbek national banking service Uzcard is suspending the processing of the Russian payment system Mir's cards starting Friday, citing technical issues, after the United States threatened secondary sanctions.

On September 15, the US Treasury said that sanctions would be applied against financial institutions supporting the Mir payment network outside Russia.

"The Common Republican Processing Center notifies that due to the necessary technical procedures on the participant's side of the Uzcard payment system, from 9 a.m. [04:00 GMT] on September 23, it suspends the service of Mir cards in the infrastructure of the Uzcard payment system and the operation of Uzcard co-branded Mir cards abroad," the center said in a statement.

At the same time, co-branded Mir cards continue to operate in standard mode on the territory of Uzbekistan, the center specified.

At the beginning of March, Uzcard announced the suspension of Mir cards acceptance, except for co-branded, due to maintenance. However, the center resumed the acceptance of Mir cards not long after.

Banks in Uzbekistan started accepting Mir cards in 2020, following the agreement between Mir and Uzcard payment systems in March 2019. In June 2020, Mir launched cross-border transfers to any banks participating in the Uzcard payment systems.

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#### ECOWAS Leaders Decide to Introduce Progressive Sanctions Against Guinea

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The leaders of Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) countries decided at an extraordinary summit on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly to introduce progressive sanctions against Guinea over military coup, according to a joint statement released following the summit.

"We have decided to impose progressive sanctions against individuals and the junta in Guinea... In a short period of time the ECOWAS president and head of commission will determine the list of persons who will be subjected to sanctions, and we will gradually introduce the sanctions," the statement read, as quoted by the French radio station RFI.

Additionally, ECOWAS leaders also decided to send a high-level mission, which will include the presidents of Togo, Senegal and Ghana, to Mali very soon, the radio station reported, adding that this trip could take place on September 27. The heads of ECOWAS countries demand the immediate release of 46 Ivorian soldiers detained in Mali in July.

On September 5, 2021, Col. Mamady Doumbouya came to power through a coup in Guinea.

The military dismissed the government, abrogated the constitution, and closed borders.

Then-President Alpha Conde was arrested and, according to Doumbouya, placed in a safe place under military supervision. ECOWAS suspended Guinea's membership in the organization and demanded the president be released. Doumbouya was sworn in as transitional president by the Supreme Court on October 1 and pledged to remain committed to the country's sovereignty and to fulfill his functions in the interests of the Guinean people.

In May of last year, the Malian armed forces led by then-Vice President Assimi Goita removed interim President Bah Ndaw and acting Prime Minister Moctar Ouane from office after accusing them of breaking transition rules. A military council took control of the country and announced its intention to hold presidential and parliamentary elections in 2022. In June 2021, the Constitutional Court of Mali declared Goita the interim president.

In July 2022, the authorities of Mali made the decision to suspend the rotation of the military in the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), including those already announced and planned. The decision was made against the background of the detention of 49 soldiers from the Ivory Coast, who, according to the Ivorian authorities, arrived as part of a UN mission. Malian authorities said that the soldiers were allegedly mercenaries and planned a coup. In early September, three women from the detained military were released.

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Four Russian Lawmakers Submit Applications to Join Special Operation - Upper House

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Four lawmakers of the Russian lower house from the United Russia party have submitted applications, asking to send them to the special operation zone, First Deputy Speaker of the Russian upper chamber Andrei Turchak said on Friday. "I have received applications of the first four lawmakers of the State Duma from the United Russia party with a request to send them to serve in the special military operation zone as part of the Russia armed forces have been received," Turchak said in a statement. The applications will be considered by the Russian Ministry of Defense, the lawmaker added.

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Over 60 Properties, Assets Worth \$500M In Seized Abroad at Russia's Request - Prosecutor

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Russian Prosecutor General Igor Krasnov said on Friday that over 60 properties and other assets worth \$500 million have been seized abroad at Russia's request, despite a tense international circumstances. "Despite the tense international agenda, the Russian prosecutor general's office currently safeguards and monitors the preservation of more than 60 real estate objects, as well as financial assets in the amount equivalent to \$500 million by the competent authorities of foreign states," Krasnov said at the 20th Meeting of the SCO Prosecutors General in Astana, Kazakhstan.

The official emphasized, with regards to the recovery procedures of the funds, illegally withdrawn from the country, that this is the joint work of the prosecutor's office, investigative agencies, operational services, financial intelligence, banking and fiscal control.

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Indian Rupee Hits Historic Low of 81.18 Against US Dollar in Early Trade

NEW DELHI, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Indian rupee on Friday continued to lose its value against the US dollar, nosediving to 81.18 rupee per dollar in early trade, according to trading data.

The BSE Sensex domestic stock market index fell by 591.68 points or 1%, to 58,528.04 points, while the broader NSE Nifty dropped by 175.30 points, or 0.99%, to 17,454.50 points.

On Thursday, the rupee fell to 80.38 against the dollar, recording a drop of 42 paise compared to the last close, the trading data showed.

The rupee fell after the US Federal Reserve on Wednesday raised its key interest rate by 75 basis points to a record 3.25%, maximum since 2008. The US could go for a further 125 basis point rate hike by the end of the year, according to Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell. BSE Sensex, also known as the S&P Bombay Stock Exchange Sensitive Index, consists of 30 largest and most actively traded stocks. Sensex is the oldest stock market index in India, founded in 1986.

The NSE NIFTY 50 index is a key index of the Indian Stock Exchange. It represents the weighted average of 50 of the largest Indian companies listed on the National Stock Exchange.

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Azerbaijani Defense Ministry Claims Armenia Shelled Positions in 3 Border Regions

BAKU, September 23 (Sputnik) - Armenia has shelled Azerbaijani positions in three border regions, the Azerbaijani defense ministry said on Friday.

"From the evening of September 22 until the morning of September 23, Armenian armed forces units on the Azerbaijani-Armenian state border fired at the positions of the Azerbaijani army in the direction of the settlements of [three border regions] ... The Azerbaijani army units took adequate response measures," the ministry said in a statement.

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US' Sullivan, Serbia's Vucic Discuss Energy Sources Diversification at UNGA - White House

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has held a meeting with Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic on the margins of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in New York to discuss diversification of Serbia's energy sources and boosting the country's energy security, the White House said on Friday.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met today with President Aleksandar Vucic of Serbia in New York City on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly. They talked about efforts to promote regional stability and prosperity in the Western Balkans. Mr. Sullivan

welcomed Serbia's efforts to diversify its energy sources and increase energy security," the statement read.

The senior officials also discussed Serbia's progress in attracting foreign investment, ensuring the resiliency of its supply chains, and strengthening regional economic cooperation, it said.

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Cargo Traffic at Russia-China Border Crossing Increases by 60% - Russian Consulate

BEIJING, September 23 (Sputnik) - The volume of goods transported through the Poltavka-Dongning border crossing between Russia and China has increased by 60% in the first eight months of 2022, almost reaching the pre-pandemic level, the Russian Consulate General in Harbin said on Friday.

Russian Consul General in Harbin Vladimir Oshchepkov visited the city of Dongning in the southeastern Chinese province of Heilongjiang on Wednesday. The official met with the leadership of the city and got acquainted with the work of the Chinese side of the land border crossing.

"During a meeting with city mayor Zhou Zhenhai, the Chinese side said that the volume of goods transported through the Poltavka-Dongning checkpoint in the eight months of this year showed an increase of 60%, and in value terms a record 225%," the diplomatic mission said in a statement.

The mission noted that the capacity of the border crossing has currently almost reached pre-pandemic levels, with about 130 vehicles crossing the border every day.

The growth of bilateral trade stimulates China to improve the cross-border infrastructure and technologies for import and export, the mission added.

In February, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Chinese counterpart, Xi Jinping, set a goal to reach \$200 billion in bilateral trade by 2024, after the previous threshold of \$100 billion was attained in 2018. At the end of 2021, bilateral trade between the two countries increased by 35.8% to a record of \$146.887 billion.

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BRICS Countries Support UN Reform - Joint Statement

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa agree that the multilateral global system must be reformed and improved, including though the reform of the United Nations and other international organizations, BRICS foreign ministers said in a joint statement on Friday.

"The Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to strengthening and reforming the multilateral system, especially of the UN and its principal organs, in order to make the institutions and

instruments of global governance more inclusive, representative, participatory, reinvigorated and democratic and to facilitate greater and more meaningful participation of developing and least developed countries, especially in Africa, in global decision-making processes and structures and make it better attuned to contemporary realities," BRICS foreign ministers said in a joint statement after a meeting on the sidelines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly.

The minister also reaffirmed their commitment to reform the multilateral trading system.

"The Ministers reaffirmed their commitment to multilateralism and to the multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core. They reiterated the strong and necessary need to strengthen and reform the multilateral system, including the UN, the WTO, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and other international organizations," the statement read.

All countries should refrain from applying any economic, financial or trade measures that are not in accordance with the international law and impede the economic and social development of other countries, the ministers said.

"The Ministers urged all States to refrain from promulgating and applying any economic, financial or trade measures not in accordance with the rules of the WTO, international law and the UN Charter that impede the full achievement of economic and social development, particularly in developing countries," the statement said.

BRICS foreign ministers underscored the importance of ensuring the inclusive and effective work of the global governance system, including the restoration of a well-functioning WTO dispute settlement mechanism by 2024, as mandated in the MC12 Outcome document.

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Turkish Cypriot Leader Says Gas Well Discovered Offshore Cyprus Should Be Shared

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - Turkish Cypriot President Ersin Tatar told Sputnik on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly that a discovery of 2.5 trillion cubic feet (TCF) of natural gas should be shared between Greek and Turkish Cypriots and does not accept the exclusive position of Cyprus on the matter.

"They should all be shared with the Greek Cyprus and Turkish Cyprus but they [Greek Cypriots] say... they represent all of them. Therefore, they will go ahead with all these activities and if there is good fortune worth after all these exploration activities their will keep our share in a bank," Tatar said. "If there is a solution one day they will pay us our share. This is not serious. We are not taking this very seriously. We don't accept their approach."

In August, the French energy company TotalEnergies and the Italian oil and gas company Eni announced a natural gas discovery at the Cronos-1 well offshore Cyprus. According to preliminary estimates, there are about 2.5 TCF of gas in place.

"We should be acting together, we should be involved in the activities, we should also be involved in committees to formally negotiate the sharing of the resources between the government, Cyprus and the companies, oil companies," Tatar said. "But unfortunately, they are not giving us an opportunity because their policies that Cyprus belong to the Cyprus government. They see themselves as masters of the land. We are co-owners of that."

Climate Action and Energy spokesperson Tim McPhie said in August that it was still premature for the European Commission to comment on Cyprus' announcement related to the well given that the issue needs further exploration and analysis.

Meanwhile, Cypriot Energy Minister Natasa Pilides said that the discovery could help secure gas supplies to Europe amid the energy crisis.

The island of Cyprus has been split since 1974 between Greek Cypriots, who represent the island nation in the European Union, and Turkish Cypriots, who are recognized by Turkey.

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Russia's Lavrov, Hungary's Szijjarto Discuss Energy Cooperation at UNGA - Foreign Ministry

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and his Hungarian counterpart, Peter Szijjarto, have discussed bilateral energy cooperation on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday. "The foreign ministers discussed promising directions of trade and economic cooperation between Russia and Hungary as well as practical tasks for further development in the energy sector amid the unfavorable international environment," the ministry said in a statement. The sides exchanged views on several issues of UN operations and current international problems of mutual interest, the statement read.

In September 2021, Hungary and Gazprom struck a deal involving supplies of 4.5 billion cubic meters of Russian gas annually for the next 15 years. The contract prompted an outcry among Western nations, while Kiev claimed that it undermined Ukraine's status as a transit country. In response, Budapest said that Hungary is a sovereign country and decides on its own where to buy gas and how to have it delivered.

In late August, Szijjarto said that Budapest came to an agreement with Gazprom on the supply of additional 5.8 million cubic meters of gas daily starting from September 1.

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Turkish Cypriot Leader Says Does Not Expect Progress on Settlement Issue After Elections

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - Turkish Cypriot President Ersin Tatar on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly told Sputnik that he does not foresee any progress on the settlement issue after the upcoming elections in Cyprus are completed.

"There are three people who are running for the presidency [in 2023] - they are all students of [Cyprus President Nicos] Anastasiades," he said. "If you look at their CVs, they all came from the same background as Anastasiades. Therefore, I don't expect anything to develop after the election because their election campaign is [run] more on nationalism. In fact, they are

competing with each other who is more radical and I expect the more radical one to win the election."

In April, Cypriot diplomat Menelaos Menelaou became the new chief negotiator of Greek Cypriots on the Cyprus issue, replacing Andreas Mavroyiannis. In June, Anastasiades met with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, on the sidelines of the NATO summit in Madrid and expressed his readiness to resume UN-brokered negotiations on Cyprus.

Tatar said his special representative does meet the envoy in Cyprus often, but no official talks are underway.

"We have no serious formal negotiations on the table," he said. "We are doing other work through the technical committees."

Northern Cyprus, he added, will not agree to negotiations until Cyprus recognizes their sovereign equality.

"What Mr. Erdogan hinted in Madrid is our common policy, that we will only start to resume to talk seriously in a formal manner... if and when the Greek Cypriots accept... Turkish sovereign equality," Tatar said. "This is very important for us."

Tatar said they have to protect themselves while being constructive and forward-looking.

"Greek Cyprus, I don't want to call them my enemies... because I respect their obvious fight for themselves," Tatar stated. "However, I expect them to respect me also, if they respect me, they should recognize the facts... there are two peoples - Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots. So we somehow have to reconcile this."

Under any agreement, Turkish Cypriots will insist Ankara's guarantee continues and some Turkish troops remain on the island as safeguards for their security, Tatar added.

"Otherwise, we will not be definitely feeling secure, because we will again be potentially attacked," he said.

Speaking of prospects of recognition by other nations, he said countries like Azerbaijan, other Turkish republics, and Muslim countries do very much sympathize with the Turkish Cypriots.

"However, the reason why they are not able to move forward is because they obviously have interests in relationship with other countries in terms of economic, in terms of other special arrangements. That would reflect unfairly on their relationships, therefore they're hesitant," he said.

Tatar believes, however, that one day these countries will start to get closer to North Cyprus and build economic relations with it.

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was declared in 1983 with Turkey's backing, although the island has been de facto divided since 1974. UN-brokered negotiations reached an impasse although there have been attempts recently to reboot the process.

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Turkish Cypriot Leader Says Appreciates Ankara's Efforts to Resolve Ukraine Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - Turkish Cypriot President Ersin Tatar told Sputnik that he values efforts by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan aimed at reaching peace between Russia and Ukraine.

"I very much appreciate how Turkish Republic and Erdogan has fulfilled his leadership role in terms of a brokerage for peace and reconciliation between Russia and Ukraine," Tatar said on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

Tatar described Turkey's relationship with Russia and President Vladimir Putin as "very critical" with respect to the conflict in Ukraine.

As far as the bigger politics are concerned, he said they are fully in unison with Turkey.

"Turkey is our motherland, our guarantor power, we have special relationship with Turkey," he said.

Erdogan on Tuesday urged the international community to support Turkey's efforts to peacefully resolve the conflict in Ukraine that is now approaching its seventh month. Erdogan said a fair peace process cannot result in a win-lose situation with one side proving triumphant over the other.

Erdogan also said earlier in the week that he does not lose hope to organize a meeting between Putin and Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

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Pashinyan Says Peace Treaty Possible If Baku Recognizes Armenia's Territorial Integrity

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Recognition of Armenia's territorial integrity in its internationally recognized boundaries by Azerbaijan could allow both countries to sign a peace treaty, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said on Friday.

"If Azerbaijan would recognize territorial integrity of Armenia, not theoretically, but concretely, I mean the integrity of our internationally recognized territory of 29,800 square kilometers [11,500 square miles], it would mean that we can sign a peace treaty by mutually recognizing each other's territorial integrity," Pashinyan said, addressing the 77th session of the UN General Assembly.

In any other case Azerbaijan will use the border delimitation issue to make new territorial claims and escalate the situation, the Armenian prime minister expects.

"Azerbaijan is keeping under occupation tangible territories of Armenia, and as I said the risk of new aggression by Azerbaijan remains very high," Pashinyan said.

Pashinyan considers a comprehensive settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict to be one of the key factors of regional stability, where the rights and security of Armenians living in the region must be guaranteed.

"We call to support the secure and unhindered access of UN humanitarian agencies to Nagorno-Karabakh in order to assess the humanitarian, human rights situation and ensure protection of cultural heritage on the ground," the Armenian prime minister said.

Armenia's aim is the establishment of long-term stability, security and peace and the country is committed to continuing diplomatic efforts to reach this goal, Pashinyan said.

Hostilities broke out on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in the early hours of September 13, in an area unrelated to the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Azerbaijan said it started an offensive responding to an Armenian "provocation." Armenia said Azerbaijani forces shelled Armenian civilian towns with no military infrastructure. Both countries agreed to a ceasefire later on September 13, which failed overnight. Another ceasefire went into effect late on September 14.

The long-standing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh flared up in September 2020, marking the most serious escalation in relations between Armenia and Azerbaijan in years. The hostilities ended with a Moscow-brokered trilateral declaration signed in November 2020. Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to completely cease fire and exchange prisoners. However, the situation in the region has remained tense, with intermittent clashes between the two countries.

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Armenian Defense Ministry Says Azerbaijan Violated Ceasefire on Border

YEREVAN, September 23 (Sputnik) - Azerbaijan has violated the ceasefire regime on the border with Armenia on Friday morning, the Armenian defense ministry said.

"At 07:40 [local time, 03:40 GMT] on September 23, Azerbaijani forces once again violated the ceasefire regime, opening fire ... at Armenian positions on the eastern direction of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border," the ministry said in a statement.

As a result of retaliatory actions, the fire was ceased, the statement said, adding that Armenia suffered no losses.

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US Lifting Cyprus Arms Embargo Will Fuel Weapons Buildup on Both Sides of Island - Tatar

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - The US decision to lift the weapons embargo on the Greek Cypriot administration will spark an arms buildup on the north and south sides of the island, Turkish Cypriot President Ersin Tatar told Sputnik on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

The State Department last week lifted all defense trade restrictions on Cyprus after determining it met US legal requirements by denying Russian vessels access to ports and implementing anti-money laundering reforms.

On Saturday, Turkey's defense ministry, in a statement condemning the move, said Ankara will continue to guarantee the existence, security and serenity of the Turkish Cypriots.

"This will obviously provoke us to ask for further arms from Turkey because we need to protect ourselves," Tatar said. "It will only amount to arming both the south and the north."

North Cyprus and Turkey, he added, protested this decision because it will provide more ammunition to Greek Cyprus, which already has plenty of arms.

"The Western world is rewarding Greek Cyprus by lifting this embargo so that they can buy any amount of guns and other artillery from the Americans," Tatar said.

Lifting the embargo has complicated the situation, he added, and does not help prospects for a solution in Cyprus.

"With increasing tension you don't have the right environment to be able to talk in a sensible manner to solve the long standing Cyprus problem," Tatar said.

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was declared in 1983 with Turkey's backing, although the island has been de facto divided since 1974. In late June, Cypriot President Nikos Anastasiades expressed his readiness to resume negotiations under UN auspices.

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RPT - Russian Companies Exploring Direct Flights to Northern Cyprus - Turkish Cypriot Leader

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - Russian companies are examining opportunities for direct flights to Northern Cyprus, but no official decision has been made yet, Turkish Cypriot President Ersin Tatar told Sputnik.

On Thursday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he has discussed with Russian President Vladimir Putin a possibility of launching direct flights from Russia to the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. CNN Turk reported, citing sources, that such flights may begin in November.

"From my Ministry of Transport, they tell me that one private company applied to... Turkish Cypriot civil aviation, that they might fly from Russia," Tatar said.

Tatar added he has not received any direct requests from the Turkish and Russian governments to authorize such flights.

"I think it might be those private companies who are trying to explore, explore the opportunities how to carry tourists, to Northern Cyprus, it might be, which I think is only fair," Tatar said. "If private companies want to fly their airplanes to North Cyprus to carry tourists to North Cyprus, this can only be welcome, because we in Cyprus, we are trying to obviously improve our economic situation and tourism is the main industry."

Tatar said the lack of direct flights to that part of the island has impeded the tourism industry. He also underscored that Turkish Cypriots really care about the Russian people because they chose to live in his country and have integrated into their society. North Cyprus universities have many Russian academics and students while thousands of children attend its elementary schools, he added.

Tatar said the conflict in Ukraine has led to complications with Russians coming to the country.

"The Greek Cypriot government in the south, because they're in line with the European regulations and the Western world, they're imposing embargoes and other isolations to the Russian people and to Russian economic developments," he added.

Tatar said if need be he will consult with Erdogan and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu to see how they would interpret any developments as far as these issues are concerned.

Tatar went on to say that North Cyprus is fighting for its equality, as through international agreements, it is a separate community.

"In theory, everybody knows, the United Nations knows, the Europeans know, they all know that there are two peoples in Cyprus. One is Turkish Cypriot, and the other is Greek Cypriot. There is no Cypriot nation as such," he said. "So, we are very much kind of disappointed by the international community that they still insist that the Republic of Cyprus, now that they're in Europe, represents the whole of Cyprus. This is not the case."

Tatar said although he would welcome Russian recognition of his country, he knows there are difficulties.

"I'm not trying to politicize the issue, because [it's] very easy to say, oh, Russia is going to recognize us tomorrow, [but] that can complicate things," Tatar stated.

Tatar said they deserve more respect and a more humanitarian approach as they fight for independence.

"We... have been able to demonstrate our strength of character to exist, to survive, to have our own state, to have our own self-determination," Tatar said.

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was declared in 1983 with Turkey's backing, although the island had been de facto divided since 1974. In late June, Cypriot President Nikos Anastasiades expressed his readiness to resume negotiations under UN auspices.

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RPT - Bangladesh Has Been Affected by Anti-Russia Sanctions, Import Problems - Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - Bangladesh has been very affected by the sanctions imposed against Russia and is calling on a peaceful dialogue to bring the Ukraine conflict to an end, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told Sputnik.

In August, Bangladeshi Ambassador to Russia Kamrul Ahsan told Sputnik that Bangladesh is trying to negotiate supply of oil with Russia despite Western sanctions as Dhaka is rocked by protests over fuel price hikes.

When asked how the talks on Russian oil imports are going, Momen said, "I don't want to say anything about it."

"The Ukrainian war is causing difficulties to many countries, including the country like Bangladesh which is far away from the war territory," Momen stated. "It's only because sanctions, it's because you know we used to import some products from both Russia and Ukraine and those stopped now."

The good news is, he added, they have resumed imports of products like corn.

"But it's disrupted the supply chain," he added. "The war has also disrupted the financial transaction chains which are very important."

Momen stressed that Bangladesh does not want the Ukraine conflict to continue.

"We want no war. We want the war should end as quickly as possible for the well-being of the people because when there is a war, people are suffering," he said. "Sanctions are imposed to punish Russia but unfortunately Russia is not being punished that way, it is punishing even those who imposed the sanctions - common people, the poor people these are the ones who are being affected. And therefore we would urge that there should be some dialogue for resolution of this problem amicably through peaceful means."

Though the United States and its allies have said that sanctions do not apply to food products and fertilizers, Russia points out that restrictions on bank settlements, insurance, and shipment of goods hinder its exports.

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Some Turkish Banks Continue to Service Russia's Mir Cards - Reports

ANKARA, September 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is threatening Turkish banks with sanctions for using Russian payment system Mir in the country, but some banks continue servicing Mir cards anyways, Turkish newspaper Yeni Safak reported on Friday.

Turkey's Ziraat Bank, Halkbank, and Vakıfbank, which the holders of the Mir bank cards prefer for operations, continue to use the Russian payment system in the country, the newspaper reported.

Transactions that do not use US dollars and euro are made exclusively in lire and rubles, the report said. Turkish banks allowed the use of the Mir bank cards in 2019 to make it easier for Russian tourists to pay for goods and services while visiting Turkey.

The newspaper noted that Turkey is normally complying only with UN sanctions, therefore it considers Western sanctions against Russia the same illegitimate as US sanctions against Iran. On Monday, Turkish banks İşbank and Denizbank confirmed to Sputnik that they had stopped servicing the Mir bank cards over US and UK sanctions against Russia.

On Thursday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said he might make a decision on the further use of Mir cards in Turkey after a meeting with cabinet ministers on Friday.

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Referendum on Joining Russia Starts in LPR - Election Commission

LUHANSK, September 23 (Sputnik) - The referendum on joining Russia has begun throughout the territory of the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), the LPR central election commission told Sputnik on Friday.

"Starting from 08.00 [Moscow time, 05:00 GMT], polling stations begin their work," the commission said.

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Referendum on Joining Russia Starts in DPR - Election Commission

DONETSK, September 23 (Sputnik) - The referendum on joining Russia has begun throughout the territory of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), Vladimir Vysotsky, the head of the DPR central election commission, told Sputnik on Friday.

"Today at 08.00 Moscow time [05:00 GMT], the process of holding a referendum on the DPR joining Russia as a subject began. Voting takes place according to the previously established form throughout the territory of the DPR, controlled by the authorities of the republic," Vysotsky said.

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EVENTS TO FOLLOW ON SEPTEMBER 23

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik)

DPR, LPR, KHERSON AND ZAPORIZHZHIA REGIONS TO START REFERENDUMS

The people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR, LPR), as well as the Russian-controlled parts of the Ukrainian regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson will launch referendum procedures on joining Russia that will run through September 27.

GERMAN CHANCELLOR TO HOLD TALKS WITH MOLDOVAN PRESIDENT IN BERLIN

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz will hold a meeting with Moldovan President Maia Sandu in Berlin on Friday.

AUSTRALIA TO HOST WADA EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE MEETING

The Executive Committee of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) will meet in Sydney on Friday.

The 14-member Executive Committee will be updated on WADA's progress on key priorities, take a number of decisions and make certain recommendations to the agency's Foundation Board. One of the items on the agenda is the approval of the list of prohibited substances and methods for 2023.

UN CHIEF, CYPRIOT PRESIDENT TO MEET IN NEW YORK

UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades will meet in New York on the sidelines of the 77th session of the United Nations General Assembly on Friday.

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Macron Says Has 'No Rational Explanation' for Russia's Military Operation in Ukraine

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - French President Emmanuel Macron said on Friday that he had "no rational explanation" why Russian President Vladimir Putin decided to launch the special military operation in Ukraine and suggested that Moscow is pursuing "a strategy of hegemony in the region."

"Look, I, it's hard for me to give an explanation. I think this is not the most rational decision for sure... I have no rational explanation. I think this is a series of resentments, this is a strategy of hegemony in the region, and I would say it is the post-COVID-19 consequence, isolation," Macron told CNN, adding that the Russian president "decided to put Russia in a situation to be the new imperial country and to launch a colonial war."

Macron added that Putin made "the first mistake, the huge one" when he decided to launch the special military operation in Ukraine on February 24 and "a new mistake" when Moscow announced the partial mobilization on Wednesday.

On February 24, Russia began a military operation in Ukraine, responding to calls for help from the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The West and its allies imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, with the European Union pledging to end its dependence on Russian energy supplies. The bloc has already approved seven packages of sanctions against Moscow, including a gradual phase-out of Russian oil. The Ukraine crisis and sanctions have resulted in disruptions of supply chains and a spike in energy prices worldwide.

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Russians Escaping Mobilization Cannot Obtain Visa in Czech Republic - Foreign Minister

PRAGUE, September 23 (Sputnik) - Russian citizens who flee the country to avoid mobilization do not qualify for humanitarian visas in the Czech Republic, Czech Foreign Minister Jan Lipavsky said on Thursday.

"I understand that Russians are fleeing from the increasingly desperate decisions of [Russian President Vladimir] Putin. But those who flee the country because they do not want to fulfill the obligations imposed by their own state do not meet the conditions for obtaining a humanitarian visa [in the Czech Republic]," Lipavsky told journalists.

In the meantime, Czech Prime Minister Petr Fiala told journalists on Thursday that potential Russian deserters would be treated equally to all ordinary asylum seekers.

"If someone comes [to the Czech Republic], their application will be considered in accordance with standard asylum procedures," Fiala said, adding that the republic's authorities have not yet seen any signals of an influx of Russians who would like to avoid mobilization.

On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered partial mobilization in the country, the day after the Donetsk and Luhansk breakaway republics, as well as the Russian-controlled parts of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, decided to stage referendums on joining Russia from September 23-27.

According to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, the partial mobilization in the country is prompted by the need to control the 1,000-kilometer (621-mile) contact line with Ukrainian

forces and the Russian-controlled territories. The measure requires only 1% of Russia's total mobilization resource, or about 300,000 reservists.

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Norway Temporarily Suspends Simplified Visa Regime With Russia - Immigration Authority

MURMANSK, Russia, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Norwegian authorities have suspended the agreement with Russia on the simplified visa regime, the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration said on Thursday.

"The agreement on simplified visa issuance procedures between Norway and Russia is temporarily suspended starting September 22, 2022," the directorate said in a statement. In this decision, Norway adheres to the general recommendations of the European Union, according to the statement.

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Over 150 Illegal Migrants Found in Abandoned Trailer in Southern Mexico - Police  
(recasts to fix migrants' region of origin in lede)

MEXICO CITY, September 23 (Sputnik) - Police officers in the Mexican state of Chiapas have found an abandoned trailer on the side of a highway with 153 illegal migrants from Central America inside, the state police said on Thursday.

"Foreigners, 144 Guatemalans, 6 Nicaraguans, and 3 Salvadoreans, have been rescued from the trailer of an abandoned Kenworth vehicle with Mexico City plates parked near a federal highway," the police said on the website.

The rescued migrants, who were on their way to the US border, have received medical and psychological assistance and then have been handed over to the migration authorities.

Over 2 million migrants have entered the United States illegally via the US southern border since October, breaking last year's record set under the US President Joe Biden administration's watch. The influx has severely strained local, state, and federal resources on the southern border that are trying to handle the situation.

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Seven People Injured in Knife Attack in Israel's Modi'in - Police Spokesman

TEL AVIV, September 23 (Sputnik) - Seven people have been injured in a knife attack by a terrorist in the Israeli city of Modi'in, Israeli police spokesman Mikhail Zingerman told Sputnik on Thursday.

"The attack took place at the Modi'in intersection. The terrorist has been neutralized by a police officer," Zingerman said.

According to the police, seven civilians have suffered varying degrees of injuries, including from tear gas dispersed at the site. One of the victims has been stabbed with a knife. Police are scouring the surrounding area looking for the attacker's associates.

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Hungary's Foreign Minister Gives High Rating to Cooperation With Russia's Gazprom

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto on Friday gave a high rating to cooperation with Russian energy company Gazprom.

"We have very comprehensive cooperation in the field of energy. For us, it is extremely important to ensure that the energy supply to the country is safe. We would like to avoid the situation when any Hungarian house, or family, or company would be limited in using gas or oil products," Szijjarto told journalists after the meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly.

The minister noted that Hungary's cooperation with Gazprom "has been going on in a very fair manner," adding that Budapest has been receiving "the increased volume of gas deliveries on daily basis" since September 1. Moreover, Szijjarto said that additional 5.8 million cubic meters of Russian gas have been coming via the TurkStream pipeline, adding that TurkStream "is basically the only safe, reliable, and predictable delivery root currently."

"Today, I have expressed my appreciation both to Bulgaria and Serbia for ensuring the safe transit, and, of course, to Turkish colleagues as well. And we hope that this cooperation with Gazprom will go on according to the contract we have signed," the foreign minister said. In September 2021, Hungary and Gazprom struck a deal involving supplies of 4.5 billion cubic meters of gas annually for the next 15 years. The contract prompted an outcry among Western nations, while Kiev claimed that it undermined Ukraine's status as a transit country. In response, Budapest said that Hungary is a sovereign country and decides on its own where to buy gas and how to have it delivered. In late August, Szijjarto said that Budapest came to an agreement with Gazprom on the supply of additional 5.8 million cubic meters of gas daily starting from September 1.

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Lavrov, Guterres Confirm Need for Full Implementation of Grain Deal - Foreign Ministry (adds additional information in paras 3-4)  
MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres have discussed the implementation of the Black Sea grain deal and confirmed the need for its full implementation, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

"[They] substantively discussed the implementation of the Istanbul agreements on the export of Ukrainian food products from the Black Sea ports and the unimpeded export of Russian agricultural products and fertilizers. The parties confirmed the need to ensure their package nature and full implementation," the ministry said in a statement following the meeting on the sidelines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly.

Moreover, the sides have discussed the cooperation between Russia and the United Nations and specific initiatives to improve the effectiveness of the organization and its secretariat. "[They] reaffirmed a mutual commitment to preserving the central coordinating role of the world organization, whose activities must be strictly based on its statutory goals and principles, including the sovereign equality of all member states," the ministry added.

On July 22, Russia, Ukraine, and Turkey signed an UN-brokered initiative to provide a humanitarian maritime corridor for ships with food and fertilizer exports from Black Sea ports. Three key Ukrainian ports — Odesa, Chornomorsk, and Yuzhne — were unblocked to resume exports. The Istanbul-based Joint Coordination Center (JCC) was set up to monitor the implementation of the initiative, including ensuring that cargo ships do not carry unauthorized goods or personnel.

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Hungary's Foreign Minister Says Will Meet With Russia's Rosatom CEO in Vienna Next Week

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said on Friday that he is planning to meet with Alexey Likhachev, the CEO of Russian state-run atomic energy agency Rosatom, next week to discuss the construction of new power units for the Paks II nuclear power plant in Hungary.

"In the meantime, we have received the final establishment permit for our new nuclear power plant, which we will construct based on the contract with Rosatom. I am gonna meet with the CEO, Mr. Likhachev, on Monday in Vienna on the margins of the IAEA Congress [International Atomic Energy Agency], and we will put together the schedule for the upcoming months and years basically in order to complete the project by 2030," Szijjarto told journalists after the meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly.

Hungary's only nuclear power plant, Paks, generates almost half of all electricity in Hungary, with the share expected to double after the planned commissioning of two new NPP's reactor units. The Hungarian leadership has repeatedly emphasized that nuclear energy is a way to ensure the country's energy security.

In late 2014, Russia and Hungary signed an agreement on the construction of two additional advanced reactors for the Paks II nuclear power plant. The sides agreed that Russia would allocate 10 billion euros (\$9.84 billion) in a loan to finance the construction of the units.

In late August, the Hungarian Atomic Energy Authority (HAEA) issued a number of permits for the construction of the fifth and sixth units of the NPP.

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Budapest Sees No Point in Pursuing New Sanctions Package Against Russia - Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - Budapest sees no "rational reason" to pursue another package of sanctions against Russia and will not give its consent to anything that is against its national interests, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said on Friday.

"Our position is crystal clear. And I do not say that only because I know where you are from.

This is our position that we do not see any rational reason to go for another package of sanctions, especially when it comes to energy," Szijjarto told journalists after the meeting with Russian Foreign Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly, adding that "energy is a clear red line for us. We are not ready to force Hungarian people to pay the price of a war which they are absolutely not responsible for."

The foreign minister said that Budapest will take part in the discussion on new sanctions against Russia, adding that "we will not give our consent to anything that is against our national interest."

Szijjarto noted that the European economy "is heading into a recession."

"And we think it is totally against the interest of Europe and the European people... We hope there is gonna be peace as soon as possible because this is our interest that would be a solution for everything. So we are praying for it," the foreign minister said.

On February 24, Russia began a military operation in Ukraine responding to calls for help from the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The West and its allies imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, with the European Union pledging to end its dependence on Russian energy supplies. The bloc has already approved seven packages of sanctions against Moscow, including a gradual phase-out of Russian oil. The Ukraine crisis and sanctions have resulted in disruptions of supply chains and a spike in energy prices worldwide.

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Zelenskyy Urges Berlin to Set Example for Other Countries by Supplying Battle Tanks

BERLIN, September 23 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has urged Berlin to provide Ukraine with battle tanks to set an example for other nations and "win a victory."

"I would like to appeal to Germany: you are independent of other countries, if you are ready to save people... then give us this equipment... If you do not want it, that is your opinion, but then do not say that the US first, and then Poland [should provide equipment] - no, everyone has to take responsibility. Battle tanks for us mean we can save more lives," Zelenskyy said in a video interview to German newspaper Bild.

He added that Ukraine is grateful for Germany's military and financial support, but it needs more "to win a victory."

"The United Kingdom has given us a lot, the US has given us a lot, you do not need to compare yourself with other nations. Germany has given us very good equipment, we are grateful for Mars II, for financial support... and we do not compare this support with that of other countries. On the contrary, you need to set an example for others by supplying tanks. Germany is the strongest economy in Europe, so it can also set a good example," Zelenskyy said. German Chancellor Olaf Scholz said earlier in September that Berlin would act together with its allies rather than take unilateral action when it comes to arms supplies to Ukraine. In late August, German media reported that Kiev had repeatedly asked Berlin to supply it with additional weapons but so far without success. The German defense ministry reportedly justified its refusal to provide heavy military aid to Ukraine, in particular, by the fact that the German armed forces needed weapons to fulfill allied obligations in NATO. On February 24, Russia began a military operation in Ukraine responding to calls for help from the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. Western countries responded by imposing comprehensive sanctions against Moscow while also ramping up their military support for Kiev. In April, Russia sent a note to NATO member states condemning their military assistance to Ukraine. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that any arms shipments on the Ukrainian territory would be "legitimate targets" for Russian forces.

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Germany, Canada Intend to Join Allies in Blue Pacific Initiative - US State Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Germany and Canada plan to join the United States, Australia and several other allies in the Partners in the Blue Pacific initiative, US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink said.

"Today we heard statements from the foreign ministers of Germany and Canada that they intend to join," Kritenbrink said during a conference call on Thursday.

US Deputy Assistant to the President Kurt Campbell said during the conference call that France, South Korea and other states have also indicated they wanted to join the allies in addressing the needs in the Pacific.

The Blue Pacific group is an initiative among the United States, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the United Kingdom to address urgent matters in the Pacific, including climate change and illegal fishing, among others.

In addition, the US officials said the Pacific countries' leaders were invited to convene soon in Washington for a two-day summit with President Joe Biden and other administration officials.

The US officials noted that the Blue Pacific agenda is not meant to be focused on China and its activity in the Pacific.

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## Online Last-Minute Sales Phase for World Cup Qatar 2022 to Begin on September 27 - FIFA

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The last stage of online tickets sales for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022 will begin at 12.00 p.m. Doha time (09:00 GMT) on September 27, the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) announced on Thursday.

"The online Last-Minute Sales Phase on FIFA.com/tickets starts at 11:00 CEST / 12:00 (midday) Doha time on 27 September 2022 and runs until the end of the competition on 18 December 2022," the association said on the website.

The organizing committee of the World Cup said earlier that some 2.45 million tickets had been sold for the first tournament in the Arab world. The majority of tickets had been bought by residents of Qatar, the United States, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, the United Arab Emirates, France, Argentina, Brazil, and Germany.

The first FIFA World Cup in the Middle East and the Arab world is scheduled to be held starting from November 20 until December 18. As expected, the World Cup in Qatar will be the most expensive in the history of football competitions. The Qatari authorities have previously reported that hosting the World Cup will cost the country about \$200 billion, taking into account the construction of stadiums, subways, new roads, hotels, and large-scale reconstruction of the entire infrastructure in the country.

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## Iranian President Calls on Gas, Oil Producers to Stay Together to Stabilize Energy Market

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said that gas and oil producers should stay together in order to achieve a stabilized energy market.

"Obviously, the oil and gas market is connected across the globe and in the region. We can not realistically determine and speak of prices of gas, oil, regarding one producer and say the price will depend upon another producer. So, all of the producers must be in close connection and contact with one another, so that the market can be managed, so that the producer will not suffer losses nor will the consumer suffer unsustainable losses," Raisi said during a press conference on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly.

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## Pakistan, Russia Still Must Formulate Framework on Gas Pipeline - Information Minister (Adds background in paras 4-6)

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - Pakistan and Russia must still formulate a framework on the construction of a gas pipeline, Federal Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb told reporters in response to a question by a Sputnik correspondent on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

"That was raised when the [Pakistani] Prime Minister [Shehbaz Sharif] was there for the SCO meeting by [Russian] President [Vladimir] Putin, we still have a working group and we still have to formulate a framework and also the details in that working group," Aurangzeb said on the sidelines of the UNGA High-Level Week on Thursday.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak on September 15 told reporters Putin and Sharif at the SCO summit discussed the construction of the Russia-Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan gas pipeline. He also said Russia will work out the possibility of supplying LNG to Pakistan.

Putin in Samarkand last week said pipeline gas supplies from Russia to Pakistan were possible and part of the infrastructure for this had already been created. The Russian president pointed out that part of the problem was the instability in Afghanistan.

In 2015, Pakistan and Russia signed an agreement on the North-South gas pipeline, estimated to cost \$2 billion and take 42 months to build.

The long-delayed project encompassed construction of LNG terminals and a 683-mile pipeline beginning in southern Pakistan's Karachi to Lahore in the country's northeast, Pakistan's embassy in Moscow said in a notice in March of 2015.

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Pakistan, Russia Still Must Formulate Framework on Gas Pipeline - Information Minister

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Pakistan to Do Everything Possible for Its People, Including Buying Russian LNG - Official

UNITED NATIONS, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Pakistani government will do everything to help its people, be it buying Liquefied Natural gas (LNG) or agriculture products from Russia,

Federal Information Minister Marriyum Aurangzeb told reporters in response to a question by a Sputnik correspondent.

"The focus of the [Pakistani] Prime Minister [Shehbaz Sharif] is whatever it takes to give relief to the people of Pakistan including the LNG supplies from across the world, no matter from where and similarly, the agricultural products," Aurangzeb said on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly High-Level Week on Thursday.

Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on September 15, that Russia will work out the possibility of supplying LNG to Pakistan.

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French, German Foreign Ministers Request Meeting With Russia's Lavrov at UNGA - Zakharova

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna and German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock have been requesting a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York for two days despite the EU's alleged ban on bilateral meetings with the Russian side, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Thursday.

Earlier on Thursday, Cypriot government spokesman Marios Pelekanos told the CyBC radio that the European Union had given instructions to cancel all bilateral contacts with Russia on the sidelines of the UNGA in response to Moscow's actions in Ukraine and the partial mobilization in Russia, announced by Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday. He added that it was the reason for the cancellation of the meeting between Cypriot President Nicos Anastasiades and Lavrov, which was scheduled on Wednesday.

"On the one hand, they dissuade the EU member countries, which have traditionally maintained historical, economic, humanitarian ties with us, from communicating with us, they secretly forbid them [to communicate], and the countries tell us about it. And on the other hand, these Western grandees, including the European Union, are themselves requesting to meet with us. Would you like to hear the names? I have them with me: Colonna from France, Baerbock from Germany, and a representative of northern Europe have asked to meet with Sergey Lavrov. This is the second day they have been requesting [a meeting with Lavrov]," Zakharova told the Solovyov Live show.

The spokeswoman recalled the EU's statements about the isolation of Russia, adding that the example of the UNGA showed the opposite since the room of the Russian side at the UN headquarters has become a negotiating center on the UN platform.

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Situation in World Heading Toward Major Conflict - Serbia's President on Sidelines of UNGA

BELGRADE, September 23 (Sputnik) - Serbian President Alexander Vucic said on Thursday that the situation in the world is heading toward a very big conflict.

"The geopolitical situation is going into the gutter, and we will be in the presence of a big, big, big world conflict," Vucic told journalists on the sidelines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly, adding that the authorities will try to do utmost "to make sure that Serbia survives it." He said that conflicts and wars will not stop in the near future, adding that "when I told you this a hundred times, you called me 'a drama queen,' a madman, and it all turned out to be true in the end."

Vucic is currently in New York to participate in the 77th session of the UN General Assembly and hold bilateral meetings with heads of state and governments.

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ROCOR Archbishop Says Ukraine Church Opening Parishes Abroad 'Alarming'

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The decision of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) to open its own parishes in other countries is "alarming," Russian Church Abroad (ROCOR) Archbishop of Montreal and Canada Gabriel (Chemodakov) told Sputnik.

"I heard this is happening now in some parts of Europe, in Germany and other countries," Gabriel said. "It is something alarming, surprising and I do not know whether it is indeed a sign that Metropolitan Onufrii [UOC primate] and his church has decided to completely go their own way and sever the ties with the church in Russia."

Gabriel emphasized that the opinion he expressed on the UOC opening parishes abroad is his own.

The archbishop noted that one such parish was established in Toronto well before the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine and that he - the head of Canadian diocese - was not informed about the move in advance.

The issue of new UOC parishes abroad was discussed by the ROCOR Council of Bishops earlier this week, Gabriel said.

"We do not know yet, whether indeed this is the path that the UOC is embarking upon," Gabriel added.

On May 27, the Council of the UOC of the Moscow Patriarchate declared independence.

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Macron Says Respectful Dialogue With Russia Can Be 'Useful' as in Case of ZNPP

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - French President Emmanuel Macron said in an interview that he considers having a respectful dialogue with Russia useful as it has been in the

case with sending an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) mission to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) in Ukraine.

"It's always more efficient to be respectful and to try to find a way forward when you have this discussion. I think it is useful, because, for instance, thanks to this dialogue [with Russia], we managed to organize this mission with the international agency [IAEA] to go to the nuclear plant of Zaporizhzhia to have an independent mission," Macron told CNN on Thursday.

Macron added that he is hopeful that an agreement to demilitarize the ZNPP is being finalized now to ensure there are no weapons in the area around the plant.

On Wednesday, IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi said that the agency along with representatives of Russia, Ukraine, and other partners is already working on the very concrete aspects that would be required to establish a demilitarized zone around the ZNPP. He also said that IAEA will enlarge the size of its mission at the ZNPP in the next few days.

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Raytheon Wins \$985Mln Deal to Build US Air Force Hypersonic Cruise Missile - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Raytheon Missiles and Defense has won an almost \$1 billion US Air Force contract to develop and deliver the Hypersonic Attack Cruise Missile (HACM), the US Defense Department said.

"Raytheon Missiles and Defense, Tucson, Arizona, has been awarded a \$985,348,124 ...task order for the Hypersonic Attack Cruise Missile (HACM)," the Defense Department said in a release on Thursday. "Work will be performed in Tucson, Arizona, and is expected to be completed by March 2027."

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New Jersey Resident Sentenced to 4 Years for Involvement in January 6 Riot - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - New Jersey resident Timothy Louis Hale-Cusanelli has been sentenced to four years in prison on felony and misdemeanor charges committed during the events at the US capitol on January 6, 2021, the US Justice Department said.

"Hale-Cusanelli drove to Washington on the morning of Jan. 6, 2021. He joined a mob of rioters that illegally breached a police line attempting to secure the Capitol grounds. He commanded others in the mob to 'advance' on the Capitol, a command he continued once inside," the Justice Department said in a press release after the sentencing on Thursday.

Hale-Cusanelli, a former US Army reservist, stayed in the Capitol for more than half-an-hour and harassed and shouted derogatory statements at Capitol Police officers, the release said.

Law enforcement arrested Hale-Cusanelli on January 15, 2021, and he has been in detention since. Meanwhile, he was discharged from the US Army Reserves and barred from the Navy base after his arrest, the release said.

On May 27, Hale-Cusanelli was found guilty in a jury trial of a felony charge of obstruction of an official proceeding, and four related misdemeanors: entering and remaining in a restricted building or grounds, disorderly and disruptive conduct in a restricted building or grounds; disorderly conduct in a Capitol Building; and parading, demonstrating, or picketing in a Capitol Building, the release said.

After serving the prison term, Hale-Cusanelli will be placed on a three-year supervised release and will have to pay \$2,000 in restitution, according to the release.

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Macron Says France Supports UN Security Council Reform to Include Africa, Other Countries

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - French President Emmanuel Macron said in an interview that his country is in favor of a UN Security Council reform that would include an increase in the number of African and other "emerging" countries.

"[W]e are in favor of a reform of the Security Council to especially have a better representation of the African continent and then some emerging countries. I do believe that our responsibility is to make this international order function. We have to preserve our values and the [UN] charter," Macron said on Thursday.

Macron said the alleged East-West divide that Russia has allegedly been planning to create is "very dangerous."

When delivering his remarks at the UN General Assembly on Wednesday, US President Joe Biden called on the United Nations to become "more inclusive," lending the United States' support to increasing the number of permanent and non-permanent seats on the UN Security Council.

Biden also said that the members of UN Security Council have to consistently uphold the UN Charter and refrain from the use of the veto except in rare, extraordinary situations to ensure it remains a credible and effective body.

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EU Received Over 8.1Mln Ukrainian Refugees in Seven Months - EU Commission President

MOSCOW, September 23 (Sputnik) - The European Union has accepted more than 8.1 million Ukrainian refugees in seven months since Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said on Thursday.

"From day one on, the United States, the European Union, and many other friends have stood at Ukraine's side with weapons..., with funds, with hospitality on the European Union's side for more 8.1 million refugees in seven months," von der Leyen said in her keynote speech at Princeton University.

On February 24, Russia began a military operation in Ukraine, responding to calls for help from the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The West and its allies imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, with the EU pledging to end its dependence on Russian energy supplies. The bloc has already approved seven packages of sanctions against Moscow, including a gradual phase-out of Russian oil. The Ukraine crisis and sanctions have resulted in disruptions of supply chains and a spike in energy prices worldwide, as well as an influx of refugees fleeing to Europe from Ukraine to avoid being dragged into the conflict. On August 8, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, reported that 7.6 million Ukrainian nationals had entered the EU from Ukraine and Moldova since the beginning of Russia's special operation and 4.7 million Ukrainians had been recorded exiting the EU toward Ukraine during the same period.

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Italy's Center-Right Coalition Holds Final Campaign Rally in Central Rome

ROME, September 23 (Sputnik) - A coalition of Italy's center-right parties, which has a preferential chance of winning the snap parliamentary elections scheduled for September 25, has held its final campaign rally in central Rome, a Sputnik correspondent reported. Several thousand supporters of such parties as Brothers of Italy, Lega Nord, Forza Italia and Us Moderates gathered on the large square of Piazza del Popolo on Thursday. The event under the general slogan "Together, for Italy" was attended by leaders of the mentioned political organizations, including Silvio Berlusconi, the head of Forza Italia, who rarely participates in public protests.

"We have a great future ahead of us that we can build together. We want to create an Italy where there are no second-class citizens, where all people can realize themselves, where the government does not take away citizens' savings. We want to build an Italy where everyone has real and complete freedom," Berlusconi said, when opening the event.

The leader of Lega Nord, Matteo Salvini, called the huge crowd of supporters an expression of obligations entrusted to the coalition for the next five years. As part of his performance, Salvini outlined key points of the Lega Nord's campaign program, including the fight against drug legalization, the development of nuclear energy, the pension reform and the abolition of the mandatory tax on the work of state-run broadcasters.

Meanwhile, most of the demonstrators supported Brothers of Italy and its leader, Giorgia Meloni, the correspondent reported. One of the participants told Sputnik that Meloni was "the only remaining consistent, real politician."

"This consistency has allowed her [Meloni] to build up popularity year after year, and I am concerned over this campaign of hatred that leftists have launched against her. I am sure that this government [formed by the center-right coalition] will live for five years. And if a woman [Liz Truss] has become prime minister in the United Kingdom, why can't it happen to us?" demonstrator Giancarlo Aurelio said, standing in front of a huge banner with the inscription "It's time of the motherland."

Meloni, who also gave a speech at the rally, accused the Italian left of a hate campaign, and the international media and political elite of demonizing her position and distorting the Italians' preferences. Her performance was interrupted by applause several times.

"We will have a strong, cohesive government that is widely supported by the people and that will remain in power for five years. Leftists say that Meloni is dangerous, 'so hold your nose and vote for us.' But the Italians have been holding their noses too long, so it is time to breathe in lung-full because it is the air of freedom," Meloni said.

Early parliamentary elections will be held in Italy on September 25 after the cabinet led by Prime Minister Mario Draghi resigned in late July. The administration continues to perform its duties until a new government is formed.

The coalition of the center-right parties has the best chance to win the general elections.

According to various polls, the last of which were released on September 9, it can count on 45-47% of the popular vote, which may provide the group with the opportunity to make up a sustainable majority needed to form a government. Meanwhile, Brothers of Italy is the country's most popular party with a 23-25% support level.

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ROCORA Urges World Leaders to Convince Ukraine to Negotiate With Russia - Archbishop

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCORA) is calling on world leaders to persuade Kiev to negotiate with Russia rather than encourage the conflict to continue, ROCORA Archbishop of Montreal and Canada Gabriel (Chemodakov) told Sputnik.

"In our epistle of the Council of Bishops to the flock, we express hope that the world leaders will seat down at the negotiating table, instead of encouraging more war, and seek to convince Ukraine to join the negotiating table with Russian officials to achieve peace as soon as possible," Gabriel said.

On Wednesday, the ROCORA hierarchs convened their nine-day-long Council of Bishops in New York.

Gabriel said the bishops were able to reach a mutual agreement on the issue of Ukraine and urge prayers for peace despite the differences in opinion.

"We did not discuss the situation regarding armaments nor called on the leaders to stop supplying weapons to Ukraine because I think that we, the Council of Bishops, do not want to speak in terms of weapons and war. Rather, we spoke about the possibility of reaching peace as soon as possible," Gabriel said.

On the first day of the Council of Bishops on September 13, the hierarchs elected Bishop Nicholas (Olhovskiy) as a new Metropolitan and First Hierarch of ROCORA, Gabriel said.

The bishops then sent a request to the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Kirill to confirm the decision and received his approval the following day, he said.

Gabriel pointed out that the bishops also discussed the question of the Western rite with respect to parishes that were Protestant or Catholic but recently became Orthodox Christian.

"We decided to meet with the representatives of the Western rite and try to work out something acceptable to them and us," Gabriel said.

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CIA Launches Podcast to Help 'Demystify' Work of Leading US Intelligence Agency - Director

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The US Central Intelligence Agency launched an official podcast, "The Langley Files," to help shed light on the agency's typically clandestine work, Director Bill Burns said during the podcast's inaugural episode.

"We do usually operate in the shadows, out of sight and out of mind... I'm convinced that in our democracy, where trust in institutions is in such short supply, it's important to try to explain ourselves as best we can and to demystify a little bit of what we do," Burns said on Thursday.

The two hosts, only known as Dee and Walter, used the podcast to ask Burns questions about his role as the CIA's director, a position he revealed he never thought would hold.

Burns provided insight about the CIA's current work, such as the fact that they are hiring more Mandarin speakers and putting more resources toward addressing competition with China.

Burns also attempted to dispel the misconception that intelligence work is as depicted in spy movies, noting that it is often more about teamwork than "lone wolf" efforts.

The podcast is intended to help educate the general public on CIA's core mission and capabilities as an intelligence agency and will feature a variety of special guests, according to the agency's official description.

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Boeing to Pay \$200M In Penalty for Misleading Investors About 737MAX Safety - SEC

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - Boeing has been charged with misleading its investors about the safety of 737MAX aircraft in a bid to improve the company's image following two crashes in 2018 and 2019, and ordered to pay a \$200 million penalty, the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said in a press release.

"The Securities and Exchange Commission today charged The Boeing Company and its former CEO, Dennis A. Muilenburg, with making materially misleading public statements following crashes of Boeing airplanes in 2018 and 2019," the release said on Thursday. "Without admitting or denying the SEC's findings, Boeing and Muilenburg consented to cease-and-desist orders that include penalties of \$200 million and \$1 million, respectively."

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### Klyushin's Lawyers Find Contradictions in Testimony of FBI Agent - Defense Team

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The defense team of Russian national Vladislav Klyushin, who is accused in the United States of committing economic crimes, has found errors in the testimony of an FBI agent and is petitioning to remove the charge of insider trading, a representative of the defense team told Sputnik.

"Vladislav Klyushin's defense insists on holding a hearing on errors and omissions in the affidavit of FBI Special Agent Kang, which was used to obtain search warrants for access to Klyushin's electronic data, and the exclusion of insider trading from the charges," the representative said.

The corresponding petitions were filed by the lawyers of the Russian businessman in a federal court in Massachusetts.

According to the representative, FBI special agent B.J. Kang unreasonably obtained a search warrant for Klyushin, relying only on the possible similarity of the transactions of another defendant in the case.

"The very fact of parallel trading in securities does not in any way allow anybody to assert that Klyushin could be involved in insider trading on the basis of the fact that one position [shares of one company] was allegedly traded simultaneously with another participant in the prosecution.

This accusation is not supported by any other evidence and analytical data reflected in the affidavit filed with the judge by FBI special agent B.J. Kang to obtain a search warrant for electronic devices and personal accounts of Vladislav Klyushin," the representative said.

According to him, the FBI agent did not have enough evidence to request access to all the data in Klyushin's iCloud and Google accounts but simply used numerous conjectures. At the same time, Kang had previously been caught in distorting facts and evidence in another high-profile case against businessman Raj Rajaratnam, the representative added.

A motion to drop the insider trading charge against Klyushin could become a high-profile court precedent. According to the arguments of the defense, Klyushin can only be accused of allegedly "hacking" corporate networks, but not of insider trading in securities. A positive decision on this petition could set a precedent in the state of Massachusetts, which will inevitably lead to changes in the law, writing the name of the judge in the state's judicial history. The next motion review meeting will be held on October 31, with a pre-main hearing scheduled for January 5, 2023. The main hearing in the form of a final meeting with the participation of the jury will take place on January 30.

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### West Hesitant to Provide Ukraine With Tanks Due to Training, Logistical Issues - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - States from the collective West are hesitant to provide US and German made M-1 Abrams and Leopard tanks because of operational differences requiring training and logistics, Politico reported.

As Ukraine continues its Kharkiv offensive against Russian troops and considering Russian President Vladimir Putin's recent call for partial mobilization of the country's armed forces, Kiev urges western states to provide them with US and German made heavy tanks, the report said on Thursday, citing seven sources familiar with the issue.

The hesitation is based on operational and logistical issues, the report added. Ukraine knows how to operate soviet-era tanks, but western battle tanks use different technology and require proper maintenance, according to the report.

Retired Lt. General Ben Hodges quoted in the report said western tanks would upgrade Kiev's armed capabilities as they could strike from longer ranges and retreat before any suppression forces is carried out by the Russian army.

In the past months, countries, many from the former Warsaw Pact who still have Soviet-era military arsenals, have steadily delivered equipment to Ukraine. Poland sent 250 T-72 tanks in exchange for 250 M-1s. Other such as Bulgaria, Romania and the Czech Republic have also contributed.

The Collective West and Ukraine regularly collide on what Kiev considers being "insufficient" military aid in its fight against Russia's special military operation. Many European countries have refused to provide certain types of vehicles, weapons, and ammunition to Ukraine.

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DART Spacecraft Ready for Historic Deflection Collision With Asteroid on Monday - NASA

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - The Double Asteroid Redirection Test (DART) spacecraft is on course to crash into the tiny asteroid Dimorphos on Monday in a historic first test to see if spacecraft can use their kinetic energy to change the orbits of celestial bodies to deflect them from crashing into the earth in the future, NASA scientists told a press conference. "DART is demonstrating the kinetic impact technique for changing the orbit of an asteroid," NASA Planetary Defense Officer Lindsey Johnson, who leads the global effort to detect and follow near-earth objects, told reporters on Thursday.

Dimorphos, which is only about 530 feet or 160 meters in diameter, is currently 7 million miles from the earth and poses no threat to it, but scientists want to see if the impact of the spacecraft can significantly change the asteroid's orbit, the NASA scientists said.

"We are going to precision lock with Dimorphos. We are going to point the cameras and take the pictures and we don't know what the shape [of the asteroid] is," DART Mission Systems Engineer Elena Adams said.

DART will crash into Dimorphos at a speed of 14,900 miles per hour, or 24,000 kilometers per hour. The spacecraft was launched aboard a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

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### Migrants' Death Toll From Shipwreck off Coast of Syria Reaches 34 People - Official

CAIRO, September 22 (Sputnik) - The death toll from the crash of a ship with migrants off the coast of the Syrian city of Tartus reached 34 people, while 14 people have been rescued, the head of the seaports administration, Samir Kubrusli, said on Thursday.

"The death toll from the boat crash off the coast of Tartus has risen to 34 people, 14 have been rescued. The rescue operation continues," Kubrusli said, as quoted by Syrian broadcaster Sham FM.

According to Syrian media, the ship left Lebanon a few days ago, and on board were citizens of Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine, as well as people with unknown citizenship. One survivor said the number of passengers was around 150, Syrian media added.

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### Four Terrorist Suspects Arrested in Iceland - Reports

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Icelandic police arrested four people suspected of preparing terror attacks against government buildings and seized dozens of guns, media reported on Thursday.

A group of men in their twenties, engaged in producing arms using 3D-printers and selling them, planned to use weapons to attack some government buildings, according to the police.

Police also said they seized dozens of weapons and thousands pieces of ammunition. The suspects were arrested on Tuesday, with two men being in custody as of now.

"We have two men in custody. We have just begun to question them," Karl Steinar Valsson, the chief of the national police, was quoted by the Reykjavík Grapevine news portal as saying, adding that some 50 police officers took part in the operation.

Iceland's law enforcement did not give any other details on the case, though the news portal, citing its sources, said that the men are suspected of having ties to Nordic far-right extremist groups.

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### Macron Says Democracies Need to Avoid Lecturing Others, Become More Respectful

WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) - French President Emmanuel Macron said in an interview that democracies should avoid lecturing other nations by saying "we are on the good side of history" and become more respectful to those countries because the world order is currently at stake and requires cooperation on a global scale.

"I think we have to be very respectful - we have to avoid lecturing people by saying 'we are on the good side of history.' I think if we have a lot of respect, if we try to understand where they stand what they believe in and what their feelings are, we can convince them," Macron told CNN on Thursday.

"These guys [non-democracies] are different from us but all together being respectful, we can work because what is at stake is global order. Peace, climate change, food security - all these things could be fixed if we have cooperation between the US, Europe, China, India, Asia and Pacific, Africa and Latin [America]," Macron added.

At the same time, Macron believes that liberal democracies across the world are undergoing a "big crisis" and acknowledged that the West faces increasing pressure on societies in recent years.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY  
WASHINGTON, September 23 (Sputnik) -

#### UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

- \* Ukraine is firing mortars at the border village of Elizavetovka in Russia's Kursk region, Governor Roman Starovoit said on Thursday.
- \* Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) Head Denis Pushilin said that 56 people, including Ukrainian opposition politician Viktor Medvedchuk, were released from Ukrainian captivity as a result of prisoner exchange between Moscow and Kiev.
- \* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that he is not authorized to comment on the exchange of Medvedchuk for Ukrainian prisoners of war.
- \* At least five people died during the shelling of a market in Donetsk, Mayor Alexey Kulemzin said.

#### UN SECURITY COUNCIL MEETING

- \* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday that all those responsible in Ukraine for shelling civilians would be held accountable, regardless of their citizenship.
- \* Western countries are becoming party to the conflict in Ukraine by sending weapons there, wishing to prolong the conflict as much as possible, Lavrov said.
- \* Mexico proposes creating a committee to facilitate peace in Ukraine with the participation of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pope Francis, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said.
- \* China calls for the resumption of a direct dialogue between Russia and Ukraine without any preconditions, Foreign Minister Wang Yi said.

#### REFERENDUMS IN DPR, LPR KHERSON AND ZAPORIZHZHIA REGIONS

- \* Referendums in the Donbas as well as the Kherson and Zaporizhzhia regions are a response to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's call on Russians to leave Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday.

\* The G7 foreign ministers have condemned Russia's support of the decision made by the people's republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR, LPR) as well as by Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions to hold referendums on joining Russia, saying that the bloc would impose additional sanctions against Moscow, German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said.

#### RUSSIA FLIGHTS TO NORTHERN CYPRUS

\* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Thursday that he had discussed with Russian President Vladimir Putin a possible launch of direct flights from Russia to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

\* Russian companies are examining opportunities for direct flights to Northern Cyprus, but no official decision has been made yet, Turkish Cypriot President Ersin Tatar told Sputnik.

#### PUTIN-ERDOGAN TALKS

\* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan plans to hold a phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the coming days, a diplomatic source in Ankara told Sputnik on Thursday.

\* The schedule of Putin does not yet have a phone conversation with Erdogan, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik.

#### SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

\* The volume and type of new sanctions by the EU against Russia are not determined yet, EU foreign affairs spokesperson Peter Stano said on Thursday, adding that the relevant work is ongoing.

\* Leaders of EU countries may approve new measures against Russia, including oil price cap and individual sanctions, during a meeting in Prague on October 6-7, Reuters reported, citing sources.

\* Germany plans to nationalize Gazprom's subsidiary Securing Energy for Europe (Sefer), Spiegel reported, citing government sources.

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Ukraine Groups 'Serious' Forces in DPR's North, May Attempt Counteroffensive - DPR Head

DONETSK, September 22 (Sputnik) - Ukraine has grouped serious forces in the north of the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR), it is possible that they will try to launch a counteroffensive, the DPR's head, Denis Pushilin, said on Thursday.

"The situation in the north of the republic is extremely difficult, there are alarming signals. The enemy has grouped quite serious forces, and it is possible that in the very near future he will try to change the situation and launch a counteroffensive," Pushilin said in a video address on Telegram.

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Macron Says JCPOA Deal Still Feasible, But Current Offer to Iran Final

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - An agreement to resume compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran is still feasible but the United States and other involved parties must make clear to Tehran that the current offer is the final one, French President Emmanuel Macron said on Thursday.

"I think a deal is feasible, but we know that we have to finalize this deal and we have to now be clear that this is the final offer," Macron told CNN when asked about the possibility of reaching a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA.

US President Joe Biden at the UN General Assembly vowed never to let Iran gain nuclear weapons capabilities, a goal of the JCPOA.

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Putin, MBS Satisfied With Transfer of Captive Foreigners to Saudi Side - Kremlin  
MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - During a conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, the leaders expressed satisfaction with the transfer of captive foreigners, who illegally fought in the Donbas, to the Saudi side, the Kremlin said on Thursday.

"Satisfaction was expressed in connection with the transfer to the Saudi side of foreign citizens, prisoners of war who illegally participated in hostilities in the Donbas, which took place with the personal mediation of the Crown Prince," the statement says.

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Putin, Saudi Crown Prince Discuss Coordination to Ensure Stability in Oil Market - Kremlin

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud discussed coordination between the two countries in order to ensure stability in the global oil market, the Kremlin said on Thursday.

"Issues of Russian-Saudi coordination were considered in order to ensure stability in the global oil market. Both sides highly appreciated the efforts within OPEC+, and confirmed their intention to continue to adhere to the agreements reached," the statement says.

In addition, bin Salman informed Putin that at the upcoming international Russian Energy Week forum in Moscow from October 12-14, Saudi Arabia would be represented at a decent level.

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Ukraine, Russia Will Have to Come to Table to Negotiate End of Conflict - Macron

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Ukraine and Russia will have to come to a negotiation table to end the ongoing conflict, French President Emmanuel Macron said on Thursday.

"The Ukrainians and the Russians will have to go to the table to negotiate, so it will be the end of this [conflict]," Macron told CNN.

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Putin, Saudi Crown Prince Note High Pace of Development of Trade, Economic Ties - Kremlin

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud noted the high pace of development of trade and economic ties, agreeing to continue cooperation, the Kremlin said on Thursday.

"During the exchange of views on the bilateral agenda, it was stated that trade and economic ties are developing rapidly, trade is growing, mutually beneficial cooperation is being strengthened in various fields. It was agreed to continue interaction and personal contacts," the statement says.

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Putin, Saudi Crown Prince Discuss SCO Interaction - Kremlin

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud discussed cooperation in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Kremlin said on Thursday.

"The subjects of interaction in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization were discussed in the light of the decision taken at the recent summit in Samarkand to grant Saudi Arabia the status of a dialogue partner. Mohammed bin Salman noted the growing role of the SCO in international affairs, expressed the Kingdom's readiness to actively participate in its activities," the statement says.

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## CSTO Secretary General Visits Armenian-Azerbaijani Border

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - The mission of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) led by its Secretary General Stanislav Zas visited the area of the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and met with Armenian soldiers, the CSTO Secretariat said.

"Secretary General Stanislav Zas as part of the mission of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in Armenia visited a border area of the province of Vayots Dzor at the border with Azerbaijan. Stanislav Zas met with troop commanders of the Armenian forces deployed at the line of contact as well as with local officials. He also observed places that had been fired at and talked to soldiers who took part in fighting," the message read.

On Tuesday, the CSTO mission headed by the secretary general arrived in Armenia to examine the situation on the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The mission has also been tasked with preparing a detailed report for the heads of CSTO member states and developing proposals for de-escalating the renewed tension.

Hostilities broke out on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in the early hours of September 13, in an area unrelated to the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Azerbaijan said it started an offensive responding to an Armenian "provocation." Armenia said Azerbaijani forces shelled Armenian civilian towns with no military infrastructure, including the resort town of Jermuk. Both countries agreed to a ceasefire later on September 13, which failed overnight. Another ceasefire went into effect late on September 14.

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## Putin Congratulates Saudi Crown Prince on Kingdom's 90th Anniversary - Kremlin

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, congratulating the country's leadership and people on the 90th anniversary of the proclamation of the Kingdom, the Kremlin said on Thursday.

"At the initiative of the Saudi side, Russian President Vladimir Putin had a phone conversation with the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud. In connection with the 90th anniversary of the proclamation of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is celebrated on September 23, Vladimir Putin asked to convey heartfelt congratulations and good wishes to King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and congratulated all the leadership and people of the country on this significant date," the statement says.

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## Share of International Payments in Euro Hits Record Low Since June 2020 - SWIFT Data

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - The share of international payments in euros fell 1 percentage point over the month to 34.49% in August, which is the record low since June 2020, according to data of the SWIFT payment system.

Meanwhile, the dollar remained the most popular currency used in international payments — its share increased by 1.44 percentage points over the month to 42.63% in August.

The most popular currencies also included the British pound with an unchanged share of 6.45%, the Japanese yen with a share of 2.73% — a decrease by 0.09 percentage points over the month, and the Chinese yuan, whose share increased by 0.11 percentage points from July to 2.31% in August.

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Kazakhstan to Host CSTO Military Drills From September 26 to October 8 - Defense Ministry MOSCOW/ASTANA, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) will hold Interaction-2022, Search-2022 and Echelon-2022 military exercises in the Kazakh regions of Zhambyl and Almaty from September 26 to October 8, the Kazakh Defense Ministry said on Thursday.

"Exercises with the CSTO Collective Rapid Deployment Forces 'Interaction-2022,' 'Search-2022' and 'Echelon-2022' will be held in Zhambyl and Almaty regions from September 26 to October 8, 2022," the ministry said in a statement.

Military contingents of the CSTO countries will arrive in Kazakhstan from September 22 to 30 to participate in the drills, the defense department added. Servicemen will move by rail and air, as well as on wheeled military vehicles.

"Issues of commandant service, air defense and comprehensive support will be worked out during the movement of military contingents," the statement read.

The CSTO is an intergovernmental military alliance consisting of six countries — Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. The CSTO member states conduct annual military command exercises with a focus on improving the efficiency of the organization's collective security and developing strategic defense partnership.

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NATO Countries Condemn Referenda in DPR, LPR, Zaporizhzhia, Kherson Regions

BRUSSELS, September 22 (Sputnik) - NATO countries jointly condemned upcoming referenda in the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics as well as in the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions, according to a statement, released on Thursday.

"We condemn in the strongest possible terms the plan to hold so-called 'referenda' on joining the Russian Federation in the Ukrainian regions partly controlled by the Russian military. Sham

referenda in the Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson regions of Ukraine have no legitimacy and will be a blatant violation of the UN Charter," the statement read.

The message also said that NATO allies would not recognize "illegal and illegitimate annexation" of the regions.

On Tuesday, the DPR and LPR, as well as the Russian-controlled parts of the Ukrainian regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, said that they would hold referendums on accession to Russia from September 23-27.

The DPR and LPR proclaimed their independence from Ukraine in 2014 after holding self-determination referendums. In February 2022, Russia recognized the DPR and LPR and launched a military operation in Ukraine in response to calls for help from the two breakaway republics.

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Three People Dead in Explosion at Refinery in Argentina - Reports

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Three workers died in an explosion followed by fire at a refinery in the western Argentine province of Neuquen, Argentine media reported on Thursday. The explosion occurred on Thursday morning at the refinery of the New American Oil (NAO) company, news agency Telam reported, adding that around 90 firefighters and Civil Defense personnel managed to control the flames after several hours of fighting.

According to the news agency, one of the main crude oil tanks exploded.

"The prosecutor's office is working, examinations are being carried out and an investigation is underway into the causes of the fire," Deputy Secretary of Civil Defense and Citizen Protection of Neuquen Martin Giusti told a briefing, as quoted by the news agency.

After the explosion, oil and gas unions of the Argentine provinces of Rio Negro, Neuquen, and La Pampa launched a strike "because of the disregard for life and safety" of the workers, the news agency added.

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Madagascar Supports UNSC Reform to Include African Countries - Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Madagascar supports reforming the UN Security Council to include African nations, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Madagascar Richard Randriamandrato told Sputnik.

"We are definitely supporting that reform. The United Nations has done a lot since the end of World War II, so now it is time to turn the page, to start a new chapter for openness for the African countries," Randriamandrato said. "So we join our voice with Senegal to make that proposal along with the African Union."

Randriamandrato pointed out that Madagascar remains neutral when it comes to the conflict in Ukraine.

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Prices for Firewood, Wood Pellets in Germany Up 85.7% in August Year-on-Year

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - The prices for firewood and wood pellets in Germany increased by 85.7% in August year-on-year due to the ongoing energy crisis and severe supply difficulties, the German Statistical Office said on Thursday.

"The prices of firewood and wood pellets rose 85.7% in August 2022 compared with the same month a year earlier and thus considerably more than overall consumer prices, which were up 7.9% in the same period," a statement read.

The rise firewood and wood pellets prices is primarily caused by the increased demand, as many Germans have turned to these goods as alternative ways to heat their houses amid even more growing gas, oil and electricity prices, the statistical office explained. Prices for firewood and wood pellets have also went up due to rising procurement and transportation costs in the woodworking industry, according to the statement.

On February 24, Russia began a military operation in Ukraine responding to calls for help from the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. The West and its allies imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, with the European Union pledging to end its dependence on Russian energy supplies. The bloc has already approved seven packages of sanctions against Moscow, including gradual phase-out of Russian oil. The Ukraine crisis and sanctions have resulted in disruptions of supply chains and a spike in energy prices worldwide.

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US Labor Watchdog Says \$46.5Bln Stolen From Pandemic-Related Relief Program Since 2020

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Labor's Inspector General revealed on Thursday that it discovered \$46.5 billion was stolen from a pandemic-related relief program since March 2020.

"The DOL-OIG [Labor Department's Office of Inspector General] also issued an Alert Memorandum identifying \$45.6 billion in potentially fraudulent UI [unemployment insurance] benefits paid to individuals," the Inspector General's office said in a press release.

More than 1,000 individuals in the United States have been charged with crimes connected to unemployment insurance fraud since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, the release said.

These charged individuals allegedly used a number of fraudulent tactics to receive unemployment insurance benefits, including using social security numbers of dead people and prisoners, the release said.

The US government will continue to seek individuals that abused pandemic relief programs, the release said.

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Pentagon Says Has No Information on Reports of US-Provided Sea Drone Shoring in Crimea

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department has no information to provide on reports of a possible US-provided sea drone found by Russian forces washed ashore in Crimea, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"In terms of the reports out there about a – I think you called it a sea vehicle – I don't have anything on that," Ryder said during a press briefing when asked about the reports.

The unmanned vessel, which resembles a kayak equipped with sensor equipment, was found on Wednesday over 150 miles from Ukrainian territory near a Russian naval base in Sevastopol, according to US media reports.

Russian forces towed the unmanned vessel out to sea and performed a controlled destruction, the reports said. It is unclear whether the drone is intended for surveillance or combat purposes. Although the vessel has not been formally identified or claimed by the United States or Ukraine, the Pentagon in April pledged unmanned coastal defense vessels to Ukraine as part of an \$800 million security assistance package.

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Raisi Says Iran Will Continue to Support, Expand Agreements With Russia

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Iran will continue to support and expand agreements with Russia, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said on Thursday.

"The agreements are not only focused on the past few months or weeks, there have been ongoing relations with the Russian Federation for many many years, which has resulted in fruitful agreements in the economic, trade, aerospace technology as well as defense arena between the two countries, and these agreements are still in force, and we will continue to support them and expand them vigorously," he told a press briefing on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

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## Russian Gen. Staff Says Over 10,000 Reservists Voluntarily Arrived at Recruiting Offices

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Over 10,000 reservists voluntarily showed up at the enlistment offices during the first day of partial mobilization, a spokesman for the Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, Vladimir Tsimlyansky, said on Thursday.

"It should also be noted that during the first day of the partial mobilization, more than 10,000 citizens voluntarily arrived at the military registration and enlistment offices, without waiting for a summons," Tsimlyansky said.

On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered partial mobilization in the country, the day after the Donetsk and Luhansk breakaway republics, as well as the Russian-controlled parts of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions decided to stage referendums on joining Russia from September 23-27.

According to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, the partial mobilization in the country is prompted by the need to control the 1,000-kilometer (621-mile) contact line with Ukrainian forces and the Russian-controlled territories. The measure requires only 1% of Russia's total mobilization resource or about 300,000 reservists.

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## US Treasury Chief Says Taiwan Only Source of Advanced Semiconductors, Poses National Risk

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Taiwan is the sole source of advanced semiconductor microchips, which poses a risk to US national security, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Thursday.

"The only country in the world that is a source of the most advanced semiconductors is Taiwan," Yellen said during an event hosted by The Atlantic. "I would regard that as a resilience risk and also a national security risk."

Moreover, the United States is highly dependent on China for certain supplies like lithium and processing of some of the minerals that go into electric batteries, Yellen added.

Yellen said that it is possible to both mine these minerals and process the minerals in the United States and other countries that the United States is comfortable with.

Last month, US President Joe Biden signed an executive order to implement the \$280 billion CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, which includes more than \$52 billion in subsidies for US semiconductor manufacturers in an effort to counter China's growing technological clout.

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## US Might Not Meet 2% Inflation Target by 2023 Despite Fed Rate Hikes - Yellen

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve might not meet its 2% target for inflation by next year even with its sharpest rate hikes in a generation, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said Thursday.

"It may not happen by 2023 but I have full confidence in the Fed's ability to bring it down," Yellen said during a live appearance on the The Atlantic media platform.

The Fed has vowed to bring inflation, currently near four-decade highs of above 8%, back to its long-term target of 2% through a series of rate hikes that began in March.

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Biden Sends Lynne Tracy's Russia Ambassador Nomination to Senate - White House

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden has sent to the Senate the nomination of Lynne M. Tracy to serve as Ambassador to Russia, the White House said on Thursday.

"Nominations sent to the Senate: Lynne M. Tracy, of Ohio, a Career Member of the Senior Foreign Service, Class of Career Minister, to be Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the Russian Federation," the White House said in a statement.

On September 20, Biden nominated Tracy to be the new Ambassador to Russia, replacing John Sullivan, who was appointed by former President Donald Trump in 2019.

Tracy currently serves as US Ambassador to Armenia. Prior to her current position, she worked as a Senior Adviser for Russia at the State Department Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs.

Tracy earned a bachelor's degree in Soviet Studies from the University of Georgia and a Juris Doctor degree from the University of Akron in Ohio.

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## Treasury Chief Yellen Says Inflation Causing Great Sense of Economic Insecurity in US

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Thursday that inflation is causing a great sense of economic insecurity in the United States and she hopes it does not become an endemic.

"I think inflation has been running at unacceptably high rates, it is a huge issue for every American household, it's leading to a great sense of economic insecurity for Americans, and we don't want to see it become endemic," Yellen said during an event hosted by The Atlantic. Yellen further said she thinks inflation will come down next year, but it may be vulnerable to risks of supply shock that may be caused by the situation in Ukraine.

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Russia's Announcements Do Not Impact US Commitment to Help Ukraine – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – Recent announcements coming from Russia do not impact the US commitment to work with allies to help Ukraine amid the ongoing conflict, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"In terms of the statements or the announcements coming out of Russia, it does not affect the [US Defense] Department's commitment to continue working closely with our international partners and our allies on providing Ukraine with this [military] support that it needs in their fight to defend their country," Ryder said during a press briefing.

On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an order calling up 300,000 reservists to support Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. In response to Putin's address, European countries have pledged to continue to support Ukraine, with some of them vowing to increase their military assistance for Kiev.

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Finnish Prime Minister Says Transit of Russians Via Country Must Be Stopped

HELSINKI, September 22 (Sputnik) - The transit of Russians with Schengen visas through Finland must be stopped, Finnish Prime Minister Sanna Marin said on Thursday, adding that the Finnish government was already working on a legal justification for such restrictions.

"The government's goal is very clear. We believe that Russian tourism and the transit [of Russian] through Finland must be stopped," Marin told a press briefing, as broadcast by Finnish media.

According to the prime minister, Thursday's meeting of the Finnish government once again heard a statement by Finland's Justice Chancellor Tuomas Poysti about the legal side of such measures.

On February 24, Russia began a military operation in Ukraine, responding to calls for help from the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. In response, the West and its allies have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow. A number of EU countries have reduced the issuance of tourist visas to Russians, while also calling for a total ban on granting Schengen visas to the country's citizens. Moscow has said that it considers the idea a manifestation of chauvinism and that such a decision will invite retaliatory measures.

On September 6, the European Union adopted a proposal to fully suspend a visa facilitation agreement with Russia. The measure entered into effect on September 12. The decision complicated visa application process for Russian citizens and imposed more restrictions for multiple entry visas.

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EU Set to Approve New Package of Anti-Russia Sanctions - Borrell

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - The EU is set to unveil a new list of targets for anti-Russian sanctions, foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said on Thursday.

"We will approve a new package of sanctions, although we have already done almost everything possible," Borrell told reporters.

He did not provide a timeframe nor the list of potential targets.

"I cannot tell their names now," he said.

Borrell expressed confidence that European sanctions are very effective. He noted that two thirds of Russian commercial planes cannot fly and almost all car-producing factories stopped because of the lack of the equipment coming from Europe.

EU foreign affairs spokesman Peter Stano said earlier on Thursday that the volume and type of new sanctions by the EU against Russia are not determined yet.

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US CENTCOM Says Thwarted Suicide Bomber Attack in Syria on September 20 - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US Central Command (CENTCOM) on Thursday announced that the Syrian Democratic Forces thwarted a suicide bomber attack near the Um Fakik village in Syria, resulting in the death of at least four fighters from the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia).

On September 20, seven Islamic State fighters were heading in two vehicles stuffed with explosives in the direction of the Internally Displaced Persons camp at al-Hol when they were interdicted by US-partnered Syrian Democratic Forces, CENTCOM Communications Director Col. Joe Buccino said in a statement.

One of the vehicles prematurely exploded near the Um Fakik village alerting the Syrian Democratic Forces in the area nearby, the statement said.

One of the two men from the second vehicle, which was rigged with at least 50 kilograms of explosives, detonated his suicide vest while the Syrian Democratic Forces shot and killed the second man, the statement said.

No Syrian Democratic Forces personnel were killed or wounded but one Islamic State fighter is custody, the statement added.

Earlier on Thursday, Maj. Gen. Oleg Yegorov, deputy head of the Russian Defense Ministry's Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria, said the Jabhat al-Nusra terror group (banned in Russia) shelled Syria's Idlib de-escalation zone four times over the past 24 hours.

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Belarus Says Events in Ukraine 'Not Sudden,' Result of West Ignoring Security Concerns

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) – Belarus believes that the Ukraine crisis did not happen all of a sudden, but resulted from the west continuously ignoring Russia's security concerns, Foreign Minister Vladimir Makei said on Thursday.

"The events in Ukraine did not come about suddenly. They are the result of systemically ignoring the risks [to] security in the region by Western countries, and not taking into account the concerns of the countries involved," Makei told a UN Security Council.

Diplomacy and mutual understanding are the only possible way out of the conflict, Makei said, noting that Belarus knows too well what war entails.

Multiple sanctions by the West have further contributed to the devastating situation in the region, he continued.

"You cannot guarantee the security of one state by suppressing the security of another," the minister stressed.

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UN Rights Experts Urge Iran to Hold Independent Investigation Into Amini's Death

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - UN human rights experts condemned on Thursday the death of Mahsa Amini, whose death led to civil unrest across Iran, and urged the Iranian government to hold an independent and prompt investigation.

"We strongly condemn the use of physical violence against women and the denial of fundamental human dignity when enforcing compulsory hijab policies ordained by State authorities. We call on the Iranian authorities to hold an independent, impartial, and prompt investigation into Ms Amini's death, make the findings of the investigation public and hold all perpetrators accountable," the experts said in a statement published on UN Human Rights Office's website.

The experts also denounced police violence against protesters, the statement added.

The experts noted that after the protests began, there was a mass shutdown of the internet in the country, which is the third such act in the last year in Iran.

"Iran must repeal all legislation and policies that discriminate on the grounds of sex and gender, in line with international human rights standards," the experts said.

On September 13, Mahsa Amini was detained by Iran's so-called morality police in Tehran for wearing an "improper" hijab, an offense punishable by prison. The woman was sent to one of the centers belonging to the police department and military intelligence for an explanatory conversation. In the center, Amini had a heart attack, after which she was immediately taken to a nearby hospital. Three days later, the young woman passed away.

Many Iranian citizens accused the morality police of Amini's death, suggesting that law enforcement officers had beaten her on the head. People in different cities of the country launched a series of mass protests. Moreover, some Iranian women published videos on social media that showed them cutting their hair, as well as burning hijabs and rusari kerchiefs, which they are obliged to wear on their heads.

On September 17, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi ordered a special investigation into the case and expressed condolences to Amini's family.

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Bipartisan Group of US Lawmakers Asks Pentagon to Give Ukraine Advanced Drones - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Wednesday received a letter from a bipartisan group of 17 lawmakers who are urging the Defense Department to send advanced drones to Ukraine for use against Russian forces, the Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday.

The lawmakers asked Austin to conduct a security review of advanced drones requested by Ukraine in the hope of providing them an upper hand on the battlefield, the report said, citing a reviewed copy of the letter.

The letter specifically mentioned the provision of MQ-1C Gray Eagle and MQ-9A Reaper combat drones, made by General Atomics, capable of carrying Hellfire air-to-surface missiles, the report said.

The drones could provide Ukraine with continuous surveillance and long range precision tracking and targeting needed to counter Russian rockets and missiles, the report cited the lawmakers as saying.

The Defense Department has so far been reluctant to give Ukraine advanced drones over concerns that Russia could consider the move escalatory, the report said.

The US government also fears that sensitive technology included in the drones could fall into Russian hands if intercepted, the report added.

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UK, Poland, Ukraine Agree to Strengthen Defense Cooperation - Foreign Office

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United Kingdom, Poland and Ukraine agreed to develop trilateral cooperation in the area of defense during a meeting between their foreign ministers on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York on Thursday, the UK Foreign Office said.

"Foreign Ministers of Poland, Ukraine and the United Kingdom met in New York on 21 September 2022 and agreed to develop their trilateral co-operation including by strengthening

the defence capabilities of the 3 countries and the NATO Eastern flank," the statement read, adding that the UK and Poland had pledged to continue "unwavering support" for Ukraine amid Russia's military operation.

The countries also agreed that they will elaborate plans for further long-term assistance to Ukraine to help it "defend against future attacks."

On Wednesday, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed an order calling up 300,000 reservists to support Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. In response to Putin's address some European countries pledged to continue to support Ukraine, with some of them vowing to increase their military assistance to Kiev.

On February 24, Russia launched the special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The Russian Ministry of Defense said the operation is solely targeting Ukrainian military infrastructure.

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US Announces \$170Mln in Additional Humanitarian Aid for Rohingya Refugees - Blinken

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has authorized an additional \$170 million in humanitarian aid for Rohingya refugees both, inside and outside Myanmar, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"The United States today announced more than \$170 million in additional humanitarian assistance for Rohingya inside and outside Burma, as well as for host communities in Bangladesh," Blinken said in a statement.

The new aid package brings the total US assistance to nearly \$1.9 billion since August 2017, when more than 740,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh, Blinken said.

"This additional humanitarian assistance includes more than \$93 million through the State Department and more than \$77 million through USAID," Blinken said. "With nearly \$138 million for programs specifically in Bangladesh, it provides life-sustaining support to the over 940,000 Rohingya refugees."

The new aid package will enable the provision of food, safe drinking water, health care, protection, education, shelter and psycho-social support to the Rohingya refugees, Blinken added.

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Bangladesh Has Been Affected by Anti-Russia Sanctions, Import Problems - Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Bangladesh has been very affected by the sanctions imposed against Russia and is calling on a peaceful dialogue to bring the Ukraine conflict to an end, Foreign Minister AK Abdul Momen told Sputnik on Thursday.

In August, Bangladeshi Ambassador to Russia Kamrul Ahsan told Sputnik that Bangladesh is trying to negotiate supply of oil with Russia despite Western sanctions as Dhaka is rocked by protests over fuel price hikes.

When asked how the talks on Russian oil imports are going, Momen said, "I don't want to say anything about it."

"The Ukrainian war is causing difficulties to many countries, including the country like Bangladesh which is far away from the war territory," Momen stated. "It's only because sanctions, it's because you know we used to import some products from both Russia and Ukraine and those stopped now."

The good news is, he added, they have resumed imports of products like corn.

"But it's disrupted the supply chain," he added. "The war has also disrupted the financial transaction chains which are very important."

Momen stressed that Bangladesh does not want the Ukraine conflict to continue.

"We want no war. We want the war should end as quickly as possible for the well-being of the people because when there is a war, people are suffering," he said. "Sanctions are imposed to punish Russia but unfortunately Russia is not being punished that way, it is punishing even those who imposed the sanctions - common people, the poor people these are the ones who are being affected. And therefore we would urge that there should be some dialogue for resolution of this problem amicably through peaceful means."

Though the United States and its allies have said that sanctions do not apply to food products and fertilizers, Russia points out that restrictions on bank settlements, insurance, and shipment of goods hinder its exports.

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Ukraine's Kuleba Says Will Discuss Mexico Peace Proposal With Foreign Minister Ebrard

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Thursday that he will meet with his Mexican counterpart Marcelo Ebrard to discuss Mexico's proposal to establish a committee to facilitate peace in Ukraine.

"I am going to see the Mexican Foreign Minister in the afternoon and we will discuss the proposal," Kuleba said.

Earlier on Thursday, Ebrard informed the UN Security Council about Mexico's proposal to establish a committee to facilitate peace in Ukraine with the participation of others heads of state and government and possibly including Pope Francis.

Ebrard said Mexico wants to facilitate dialogue and create new instruments of mediation to build trust and expressed hope the UN General Assembly will approve the initiative.

The international community must act and commit to the preservation of peace because accepting war is effectively choosing to end up in the abyss, Ebrard added.

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Upcoming Conscription Unrelated to Russia's Operation in Ukraine - General Staff

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - The activities of the upcoming conscription in Russia are in no way related with the conduct of the special military operation and will be carried out within the time frame set by the Russian legislation as planned, Rear Adm. Vladimir Tsimlyansky, the spokesman of the Main Organizational and Mobilization Directorate of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces, said.

"The activities of the upcoming conscription are in no way connected with the conduct of a special military operation. As before, it will be carried out within the time limits and in a planned manner, established by the legislation of the Russian Federation," Tsimlyansky said.

All military conscripts, regardless of their specialty, will be sent to units and will undergo military service on the territory of Russia, he said.

As part of the autumn conscription campaign in Russia, 120,000 people will be recruited for military service, Tsimlyansky said.

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UPDATE - US Treasury Dept. Creating Sanctions Review Office to Study Unintended Impacts - Job Post

(Updates with new attribution, more information in paras 2-5)

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Treasury Department is launching a new office tasked with reviewing the US sanctions policy for possible unintended impacts, according to a federal job listing released on Thursday.

The Treasury Department is seeking to hire a supervisory international economist to serve as Chief Sanctions Economist, who will lead a new Sanctions Economic Analysis Unit at the Terrorism and Financial Intelligence unit of the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), the listing said.

The new position requires a top secret security clearance and education in economics or a related field. The position comes with a starting annual pay of \$148,484 - \$176,300, the listing added.

The new office is created as part of the Biden administration's efforts to mitigate unintended impacts of economic sanctions, including the litany of measures imposed on Russia in response to its special military operation in Ukraine, according to US media reports.

Last year, a government review found a 933% increase in sanctions since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the United States - a number that continues to rise given current tensions on the world stage.

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Taiwan, Czech Republic to Boost Cooperation on Semiconductors - Taiwan Administration Head

BEIJING, September 22 (Sputnik) - Taiwan will strengthen its cooperation with the Czech Republic in different areas, including semiconductor technologies, head of the Taiwanese administration Tsai Ing-wen said on Thursday.

On Sunday, the Czech delegation led by senator and former president of the Czech Academy of Sciences Jiri Drahos came to Taiwan on a six-day trip. On Thursday, Drahos met with Tsai to discuss the bilateral cooperation.

"Our visit symbolizes another big step toward the Taiwanese-Czech cooperation. We will deepen exchanges and sign memorandums in such areas as semiconductor technologies, education, medicine and museums," Tsai said, adding that cooperation between Taipei and Prague had enhanced for last two years, with Taiwanese experts going to the Czech Republic in March to explore production capacity for semiconductors.

Drahos, on his part, noted that Taiwan was a "key democratic partner" in the Indo-Pacific region, as the island and his country shared the same experience of having a "non-democratic and hostile neighbor," which made them both appreciate democratic values.

Last week, the Chinese embassy in the Czech Republic said that the visit of a Czech delegation to Taiwan would seriously violated China's state sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The situation around Taiwan escalated after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited the island in early August. China condemned Pelosi's trip, which it regarded as a gesture of support for separatism, and launched large-scale military exercises in the vicinity of the island. Despite this fact, several countries, including France, Lithuania, the United States, and Japan, have sent their delegations to the island since then, further increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

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Russian Companies Exploring Direct Flights to Northern Cyprus - Turkish Cypriot Leader  
(Adds more quotes from President Tatar, details, background in paras 6-15)

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Russian companies are examining opportunities for direct flights to Northern Cyprus, but no official decision has been made yet, Turkish Cypriot President Ersin Tatar told Sputnik.

On Thursday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he has discussed with Russian President Vladimir Putin a possibility of launching direct flights from Russia to the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. CNN Turk reported, citing sources, that such flights may begin in November.

"From my Ministry of Transport, they tell me that one private company applied to ... Turkish Cypriot civil aviation, that they might fly from Russia," Tatar said.

Tatar added he has not received any direct requests from the Turkish and Russian governments to authorize such flights.

"I think it might be those private companies who are trying to explore, explore the opportunities how to carry tourists, to Northern Cyprus, it might be, which I think is only fair," Tatar said. "If private companies want to fly their airplanes to North Cyprus to carry tourists to North Cyprus, this can only be welcome, because we in Cyprus, we are trying to obviously improve our economic situation and tourism is the main industry."

Tatar said the lack of direct flights to that part of the island has impeded the tourism industry. He also underscored that Turkish Cypriots really care about the Russian people because they chose to live in his country and have integrated into their society. North Cyprus universities have many Russian academics and students while thousands of children attend its elementary schools, he added.

Tatar said the conflict in Ukraine has led to complications with Russians coming to the country. "The Greek Cypriot government in the south, because they're in line with the European regulations and the Western world, they're imposing embargoes and other isolations to the Russian people and to Russian economic developments," he added.

Tatar said if need be he will consult with Erdogan and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu to see how they would interpret any developments as far as these issues are concerned.

Tatar went on to say that North Cyprus is fighting for its equality, as through international agreements, it is a separate community.

"In theory, everybody knows, the United Nations knows, the Europeans know, they all know that there are two peoples in Cyprus. One is Turkish Cypriot, and the other is Greek Cypriot. There is no Cypriot nation as such," he said. "So, we are very much kind of disappointed by the international community that they still insist that the Republic of Cyprus, now that they're in Europe, represents the whole of Cyprus. This is not the case."

Tatar said although he would welcome Russian recognition of his country, he knows there are difficulties.

"I'm not trying to politicize the issue, because [it's] very easy to say, oh, Russia is going to recognize us tomorrow, [but] that can complicate things," Tatar stated.

Tatar said they deserve more respect and a more humanitarian approach as they fight for independence.

"We... have been able to demonstrate our strength of character to exist, to survive, to have our own state, to have our own self-determination," Tatar said.

The Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus was declared in 1983 with Turkey's backing, although the island had been de facto divided since 1974. In late June, Cypriot President Nikos Anastasiades expressed his readiness to resume negotiations under UN auspices.

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Israel Calls for Stronger Iran Nuclear Deal by Including Credible Military Threat - Lapid

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Israel wants the international partners to negotiate a "stronger and longer" nuclear agreement with Iran by putting a credible military threat on the table, Prime Minister Yair Lapid said in a speech at the UN General Assembly on Thursday. "The only way to prevent Iran from getting a new nuclear weapon is to put a credible military threat on the table, and then, and only then, to negotiate a longer and stronger deal with them," Lapid said.

The prime minister emphasized what needs to be made clear to Iran is that the world will respond with military force, not words, if Iran advances its nuclear program.

On Wednesday, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said during his speech at the UN General Assembly that Tehran is not seeking to obtain or build nuclear weapons.

Raisi blasted the United States for trampling on the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). He also noted that the International Atomic Energy Agency had repeatedly found that the United States had withdrawn from its commitments under the accord while Iran had paid a price for having lived up to its commitments.

Raisi said Iran had been extremely flexible during the negotiations to revive JCPOA and talks would not have advanced beyond the first several days had it not been for Tehran's flexibility. Iran remains "very serious" about the negotiations and is willing to resolve all issues as long as the rights of the Iranian people are respected, he added.

The JCPOA deal was agreed on in 2015 by Iran, China, France, Germany, Iran, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as the European Union. Former US President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew the United States from JCPOA in 2018 and re-imposed comprehensive sanctions on Iran.

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UK to Probe US Cloud Computing Giants Google, Amazon and Microsoft - Regulator

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - The UK's media regulator, the Office of Communications (Ofcom), has stated it is investigating Google, Amazon and Microsoft, the three US companies that dominate cloud computing in the United Kingdom.

In a statement released on September 22, the regulator announced it is launching a "market study examining position of Amazon, Microsoft and Google in UK's £15bn [about \$17 billion] cloud services market," specifying that if "competition concerns are identified it could lead to further action."

Ofcom estimates the three US "hyperscalers" earn around 81% of revenues in the rapidly changing UK public cloud infrastructure services market. The regulator wants to make sure this is not limiting innovation and growth by hindering other companies from competing with them. If the 12-month-long investigation indicates the cloud computing market is not working well, Ofcom says it may make a market investigation reference to the Competition and Markets Authority.

In the same press release, the media regulator said it would then move onto other digital markets, probing services such as WhatsApp, FaceTime and Zoom, within the next year.

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Russian Oil Output Forecast for 2022 Revised Downwards to 515Mln Tonnes - Finance Ministry

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - The production of crude oil in Russia is expected to stand at 515 million tonnes in 2022, and it will amount to 490 million tonnes in 2023, increasing to 500 million tonnes per year from 2024-2025, according to a document from the Russian finance ministry available to Sputnik.

"The refusal of a number of countries to cooperate with Russia in the oil sector, as well as the presence of a discount on sales of basic Russian export goods, led to a revision of the forecast trajectory of oil production in Russia: the estimate in 2022 was reduced to 515 million tonnes, in 2023 to 490 million tonnes. In 2024-2025, the level of oil production will average about 500 million tonnes," according to the document.

In response to Russia's military operation in Ukraine, the European Union announced a ban on the provision of services and insurance of Russian oil supplies around the world, as well as partial embargo on Russian oil. The restrictions are due to come into force in December this year for seaborne imports of Russian crude and in 2023 for petroleum products.

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Putin's Address to Russians Consolidates NATO – Deputy Secretary General

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Wednesday's address by Russian President Vladimir Putin only helped to unify NATO in the face of Moscow's nuclear rhetoric, the alliance's deputy secretary general, Mircea Geoana, said on Thursday.

On Wednesday, Putin announced the partial mobilization amid the Russian military operation in Ukraine. He also voiced support for referenda on joining Russia announced on Tuesday in the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk (DPR, LPR) as well as in the Russian-controlled parts of Ukraine. The Russian leader accused the west of using the threat of nuclear weapons to blackmail Russia, and warned that Moscow will use all means at its disposal if its territorial integrity is threatened.

"What Mr. Putin has been saying yesterday is having NATO more united than ever. We are calm, we are determined. We knew that this escalation would come. We are also condemning forcefully the nuclear rhetoric and this is something that a major power, a nuclear power would experience in the global affairs, in strategic affairs. Soviet Union and now Russia. They also carry an obligation not to misuse the rhetoric," Geoana said during his speech at Budapest Forum 2022.

Geoana also characterized Putin's words about nuclear weapons as strategic communication trick, adding that NATO's intelligence shows no signs of heightened readiness of Russia's nuclear forces.

"In real terms we are not seeing and our intelligence is not indicating any change on the nuclear readiness of Russia, level of alertness or any significant moves. But this is strategic communication trying to influence the morale of Ukrainians and the resolve of the West. This trick would not work," the NATO representative added.

On Tuesday, DPR and LPR as well as the Russian-controlled parts of the Ukrainian regions of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson said that they would hold referendums on accession to Russia from September 23-27.

The DPR and LPR proclaimed their independence from Ukraine in 2014 after holding self-determination referendums. In February 2022, Russia recognized the DPR and LPR and launched a military operation in Ukraine in response to calls for help from the two breakaway republics.

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US Treasury Dept. Creating Sanctions Review Office to Study Unintended Impacts - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Treasury Department is launching a new office tasked with reviewing the US sanctions policy for possible unintended impacts, Bloomberg reported on Thursday.

The Treasury Department is seeking to hire a "chief sanctions economist" to advise on policy matters and lead a new Sanctions Economic Analysis Unit, the report said.

This new, permanent home for sanctions analysis will allow us to be more effective in current and future programs, the report cited Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo as saying.

The new position requires a top secret security clearance and comes with a starting pay of \$150,000, the report said.

The new office is part of the Biden administration's effort to mitigate unintended impacts of economic sanctions, including the litany of measures imposed on Russia in response to its special military operation in Ukraine, the report added.

Last year, a government review of US sanctions policy found a 933% increase in sanctions since the September 11, 2001 attacks - a number that continues to rise given current tensions on the world stage, according to the report.

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Erdogan Says Exchange of Prisoners of War Between Moscow, Kiev Important Step Toward Peace

ANKARA, September 22 (Sputnik) - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Thursday that he considers the exchange of prisoners of war between Russia and Ukraine an important step toward ending the crisis in Ukraine.

"This exchange of prisoners brokered by Turkey is an important step toward ending the war. Our efforts to bring peace between Russia and Ukraine continue. I would like to thank [Russian President Vladimir] Putin and [Ukrainian President Volodymyr] Zelenskyy for the opportunity to exchange prisoners," Erdogan was quoted as saying by Turkish broadcaster A Haber.

Earlier in the day, the head of the Donetsk People's Republic, Denis Pushilin, said that 56 people, including pro-Russian politician Viktor Medvedchuk, were released from Ukrainian captivity as a result of a prisoner exchange between Moscow and Kiev. The Ukrainian side received 215 servicemen.

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Estonian Government Calls Up Over 2,800 Reservists for Additional Military Exercise

MOSCOW/TALLINN, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Estonian government on Thursday ordered the call-up of 2,861 reservists for the additional OKAS/QUILL 2022 defense readiness exercise to allegedly practice the functioning of the reserve army, the Estonian Defense Ministry said.

"On the proposal of the Commander of the Defense Forces, 2861 reservists ... were invited to the readiness exercise. Persons in reserve whose units are called to the defence readiness exercise are required to report immediately to the designated assembly point," a statement read.

During the military training, which is taking place from September 22-28, Estonian servicemen will work out the national chain of command, from the government decision-making process to the combat readiness of specific units in the rapid response structure, the defense ministry added.

At the same time, according to Estonian military, the OKAS/QUILL 2022 defense readiness exercise has nothing to do with partial mobilization in Russia.

"There is no direct security threat to Estonia. The exercise is conducted yearly with the Government decision and with no previous notice to the participants. The Estonian reserve-based defence model requires for reservists to be ready to react and participate in exercises at all times," the statement added.

Tallinn has decided to hold the military training long before Russia announced partial mobilization, Estonian Defense Minister Hanno Pevkur told a press conference on Thursday. His words were echoed by Maj. Gen. Veiko-Vello Palm, the deputy chief of the Estonian defense forces, who said that carrying out additional training was a standard procedure.

"We want to show that we have a standing army, that we are constantly training in peacetime and are ready to quickly raise the army at the right time," Palm added.

Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a partial mobilization in the country on Wednesday — the day after the Donetsk and Luhansk breakaway republics, as well as the Russian-controlled

parts of the Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions decided to stage referendums on joining Russia from September 23-27.

According to Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, the partial mobilization in the country is prompted by the need to control the 1,000-kilometer (621-mile) contact line with Ukrainian forces and the Russian-controlled territories. The measure requires only 1% of Russia's total mobilization resource, or about 300,000 reservists.

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Israel Will Do 'Whatever It Takes' to Prevent Iran From Getting Nuclear Arms - Lapid

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Israel will do whatever it takes to ensure Iran does not develop a nuclear weapon, Israeli Prime Minister Yair Lapid said during his United Nations General Assembly speech on Thursday.

"We have capabilities and we are not afraid to use them," Lapid said. "We will do whatever it takes, Iran will not get a nuclear weapon."

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US Pledges \$376Mln in New Humanitarian Aid for Venezuelans – Blinken

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – The United States will provide almost \$376 million in new humanitarian assistance to vulnerable people in Venezuela as well as to Venezuelan refugees and migrants, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"The United States announced today nearly \$376 million in new humanitarian assistance to respond to the needs of vulnerable Venezuelans in Venezuela, Venezuelan refugees and migrants, and their generous host communities across the region," Blinken said in a statement, adding that the US took this commitment under the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection.

The new humanitarian assistance includes more than \$181 million through the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration and over \$194 million through the US Agency for International Development, he added.

Blinken noted that the US is sending this aid to 7 million Venezuelans with critical needs inside Venezuela and to nearly 6.8 million refugees in 17 countries across the region, as well as those who host them.

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## NATO Secretary General, China's Foreign Minister Meet at UNGA

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg has met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on the sidelines of the 77th United Nations General Assembly, to discuss Russia's military operation in Ukraine and the issue of Taiwan. "Met Foreign Minister Wang Yi @MFA\_China. I called on #China to use its influence on #Russia to end its war in #Ukraine. I also raised #NATO's concerns on human rights & Taiwan. We stand ready to continue our dialogue on global security," Stoltenberg wrote on Twitter. Earlier in the month, Stoltenberg said that China was a challenge to NATO's security with its big military investments and due to its increasing presence in the Arctic and Africa. In June, NATO adopted a new strategic concept at the summit in Madrid. In terms of China, the document said that its "stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge NATO's interests, security and values." The concept also accuses Beijing of "subverting the rules-based international order," including in the space, cyber and maritime domains.

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## Biden Says Expects to Discuss Situation in South China Sea With Philippine President

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden at the beginning of his bilateral meeting with his Philippine counterpart Bongbong Marcos expressed hope they would discuss the situation in the South China Sea along with a number of other pressing issues, the White House press pool reported on Thursday.

Biden said he expected to "discuss the South China Sea" and thanked Marcos his "position on the war against Ukraine," the report said.

The two leaders are meeting amid the ongoing UN General Assembly High-Level Week in New York.

"The role of the United States in maintaining the peace in our region is something that is much appreciated by all the countries in the region and the Philippines especially," the report cited Marcos as saying during his remarks before the meeting started.

Marcos added that the Philippines will continue to look to the United States for leadership in the region and noted that the two countries are partners, allies and friends, the report said.

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## Top US Banks Assure Congress Their Credit Cards Won't Block Gun Purchases

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The chief executives of seven major US banking groups assured Congress on Thursday that credit cards issued by their firms will not block gun

purchases within the United States, despite efforts to share information on such transactions with law enforcers.

"We do not intend to use the code to limit or restrict the purchase of firearms by our customer base," Jane Fraser, chief executive at Citigroup, said in reply to a question from a lawmaker of the Republican party, which is a strong ally of the National Rifle Association (NRA).

Fraser's words were echoed by the CEOs Jamie Dimon of JPMorgan Chase & Co, Brian Moynihan of Bank of America, Charles Scharf of Wells Fargo, Andy Cecere of US Bancorp, William Demchak of PNC and William Rogers Jr. of Truist.

Their comments came amid media reports that US credit card purchases of firearms can potentially be tracked under a merchant code for firearms stores to be created by the International Organization for Standardization.

Merchant codes are four-digit codes that define retailer types across industry.

Up until now, gun purchases had been classified under "miscellaneous retail stores" or "sporting goods stores", enabling them to escape law enforcement scrutiny at the point of a card swipe, especially if other procedures related to the transactions had not alerted the authorities.

The measure had been lauded by Democrat party members, who are staunch critics of the NRA, which they blame for the mass proliferation of firearms that have turned the United States into the world's worst country for gun-related massacres. The right to bear firearms for self-defense is protected under the US Constitution. Critics say the law has been bent at will by gun makers and advocates to allow sales of high-powered weapons that can fire hundreds of bullets within minutes.

Statistics show that in 2020 alone, more than 45,000 Americans died at the end of a barrel of a gun, whether by homicide or suicide, more than any other year on record. The figure represents a 25% increase from five years prior, and a 43% increase from 2010.

As of 2018, the US had a ratio of 120.5 firearms per 100 residents, up from 88 per 100 in 2011, far surpassing the rest of the world.

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President of Partially-Recognized Kosovar Republic Calls NATO Membership a Priority

BELGRADE, September 22 (Sputnik) - The president of the partially-recognized Republic of Kosovo, Vjosa Osmani-Sadriu, told NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg how important membership of the Euro-Atlantic community, including of NATO, was for her territory, at their meeting on Wednesday, the presidential office said in a social media post on Thursday.

Osmani-Sadriu stated that "membership in the European Union and NATO will contribute to increased security and stability in the region." She described "membership in this organization as a state priority of Kosovo and a prerequisite for ensuring peace in the region, as well as for the promotion and protection of common values."

The meeting took place following a summer of tensions between Republic of Kosovo authorities and the Serb minority living there over a decision to end the use by locals of Serbia-issued number plates. The subsequent unrest caused the deadline for implementing the decision to be

pushed back. Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti announced in a social media video on September 1 that the rule would be enforced from October 31.

On September 20, a regional commander of Kosovo Force (KFOR), NATO's peace-keeping mission to the breakaway province of Serbia, said a battalion-sized unit had arrived in Kosovo as part of contingency planning.

In February 2008, Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia and nearly 100 UN member states have since recognized its independence. Several countries, including Serbia, Russia, China and Greece, have not, while some have withdrawn their recognition of Kosovo.

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US Senate Blocks Bill Requiring Disclosure of Major Campaign Donors, Political Ad Sponsors

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday blocked consideration of legislation requiring the disclosure of major campaign donors' and advertisement sponsors' identities in an effort to address the role of anonymous funding in elections in the United States. Senate lawmakers voted down a motion to invoke cloture and proceed on the Democracy is Strengthened by Casting Light on Spending in Elections (DISCLOSE) Act in a vote of 49-49. A total of 60 votes were required for the measure to pass. Senators Tammy Baldwin and Mike Crapo did not vote on the measure.

The bill would require organizations spending money in elections, including political action committees and other so-called "dark money" groups, to disclose donors who contribute \$10,000 or more during an election cycle.

The legislation also requires organizations to identify those behind political ads by disclosing their top five funders at the end of television ads. The bill mandates disclosure of donors by groups that spend money on ads supporting or opposing judicial nominees as well.

In addition, the bill contains a number of provisions intended to safeguard US elections from special interest and foreign influence, including by cracking down on the use of shell corporations to hide donor identities.

The bill is sponsored by Senator Sheldon Whitehouse and co-sponsored by all 50 senators who caucus with Democrats. President Joe Biden has also called for the bill's passage.

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Erdogan Says May Hold Phone Call With Biden to Discuss F-16 Deal

ANKARA, September 22 (Sputnik) - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Thursday that he will probably have a telephone conversation with his US counterpart, Joe Biden, to discuss the purchase of F-16 fighter jets by Ankara.

"Currently, we are interested in purchasing F-16 aircraft. We previously held positive talks with Biden on this issue. I also held several meetings here with Republican senators. Our [Defense] Minister Hulusi Akar is also negotiating with his [US] counterpart. The atmosphere is developing in a positive direction. We hope that this positive atmosphere will continue. Of course, we did not have the opportunity to have a wide meeting with Biden. Later, perhaps, we will have the opportunity to discuss these issues within the framework of telephone diplomacy," Erdogan said, as quoted by Turkish broadcaster A Haber.

In 2019, the United States suspended Turkey's participation in its F-35 program over Ankara's purchase of the Russian S-400 air defense system and later completely removed it from the project. Last year, Erdogan announced that the US suggested that Turkey procure the fourth generation of the F-16 fighter jets instead of the fifth generation F-35s.

The US Congress has yet to approve the deal while the US State Department is lobbying for it, saying that it will "serve Washington's interests." On the other hand, US' ally Greece has been insisting that Washington drops the deal with Turkey.

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Those Responsible for Shelling of Civilians in Ukraine Will Be Held Accountable - Lavrov

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, speaking at the UN, that all those responsible in Ukraine for shelling civilians would be held accountable, regardless of their citizenship.

"Criminal cases are being investigated against citizens of the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, the Netherlands on the fact of mercenarism and criminal acts in Ukraine. I assure you that all those responsible, regardless of their citizenship, will be held accountable," the minister said.

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Price on Russian Export Oil to Remain at \$80 Per Barrel Level in 2023 - Finance Ministry

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Prices for Russian export oil Urals will remain elevated until the end of 2022, with an average price of \$80 per barrel at the end of the year, the Russian Finance Ministry said on Thursday.

"Oil prices are expected to remain elevated until the end of the year (even though Russian export commodities are trading at a discount to world prices) and at the end of 2022 will be \$80.0 per barrel," the ministry said in the draft of the main directions of the budget, tax, customs and tariff policy of Russia for 2023 and the planning period of 2024 and 2025, obtained by Sputnik.

A significant increase in oil quotations in the first half of 2022 is rooted in and increased demand for non-Russian oil from a number of countries amid the oil embargo and the decision by OPEC+ alliance of oil producing countries, on a restrained increase in oil production, the ministry added.

According to the ministry, a gradual decline in oil prices to about \$65 a barrel is expected by 2025 due to the global energy market transformation and the gradual slowdown of the global economy.

Global energy prices have been surging since 2021. After the beginning of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022 and the adoption of several packages of sanctions against Moscow by the West, energy prices, including oil prices, have accelerated the growth, pushing many western governments to resort to contingency measures and search for alternative suppliers.

In September, G7 finance ministers also confirmed their intention to impose price caps on Russian oil and called on all nations to support the initiative. The price cap is scheduled to take effect on December 5, 2022, for crude oil and on February 5, 2023, for refined products coming from Russia.

Moscow, in turn, has pledged to altogether stop exporting Russian oil to the countries that impose the price cap.

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US Firm Axiom to Send First Saudi Female Astronaut to Space in Coming Years - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - US space firm Axiom is partnering with Saudi Arabia to enhance its space program and send the first Saudi female astronaut to space, the company said on Thursday.

"Axiom Space and SSC announced today their epoch-making partnership to fly two Saudi astronauts to space, including the first female Saudi astronaut," the company said in a press release.

Axiom, which is currently building the world's first commercial space station, and the Saudi Space Commission (SSC) hope to send Saudi astronauts to space no earlier than 2023, the release said.

Axiom and SSC will partner to train Saudi astronauts for a human spaceflight and prepare them to conduct scientific research in space.

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Russia Has No Doubts That West Becoming Party to Conflict in Ukraine - Lavrov

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Western countries are becoming party to the conflict in Ukraine by sending weapons there, wishing to prolong the conflict as much as possible, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday.

"The position of the countries, which are pumping up Ukraine with weapons and military equipment and training military forces of this country, is especially cynical. The goal is obvious and they do not hide it, declaring to prolong the fighting as much as possible, despite casualties and damage, so as to pull apart and weaken Russia," Lavrov told the United Nations Security Council meeting, adding that such policy means direct involvement of the West in the conflict, making them party to it.

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Lavrov Calls for Publishing Names of People Shown as Killed in Bucha

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, during the UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine, called on Western countries and UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres to publish the names of the people who were shown as killed in Bucha.

"I appeal once again in the presence of the Secretary General and respected ministers: please get the Ukrainian authorities to take an elementary step — publish the names of those people whose corpses were shown in the city of Bucha. I have been asking for this for more than one month, no one hears, no one wants to react. Dear Mr. Secretary General, at least you use your authority, please. I think it will be useful for everyone to deal with this episode," Lavrov.

In April, the Russian Defense Ministry stated that all photographs and video materials published by the Kiev regime, allegedly testifying to the "crimes" of the Russian military in the city of Bucha, Kiev region, were yet another provocation. During the time this settlement was under the control of the Russian armed forces, not a single local resident suffered from any violent actions, the ministry stressed.

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Scottish Minister Says UK's Decision to Allow Fracking Not Applicable to Scotland

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Scottish government is not planning to issue any licenses for the extraction of gas by fracking despite the decision of the UK government, Scottish Cabinet Secretary for Net Zero, Energy and Transport Michael Matheson said on Thursday.

"To be clear - this policy change does not apply in Scotland. Fracking can only happen here if licences are issued by the Scottish Government and we do not intend to issue any licences," Matheson wrote on Twitter.

On Thursday, the UK government lifted the moratorium on the extraction of shale gas by fracking and reaffirmed its intention to issue over 100 licenses for oil and gas extraction in the North Sea.

The United Kingdom halted the use of fracking in the country in November 2019 over the risk of seismic activities.

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, is a technique for extracting shale gas and oil by injecting pressurized toxic liquid into the ground. Opponents of hydraulic fracturing argue that the process poses numerous health, safety and environmental risks, including the potential for fracking fluids and waste to leak into municipal water, as well as the large volume of water used.

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Iran Restricts Access to Social Media Amid Ongoing Protests - Reports

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Iranian authorities have restricted access to social networks, including Instagram and WhatsApp (the services of Meta, which is banned in Russia as an extremist organization) due to ongoing protests across the country after the death of Mahsa Amini, Iranian media reported on Thursday.

Access to the social networks was limited on Wednesday evening, Iranian news agency Fars reported, adding that it is unknown how long the ban will last.

According to the news agency, protest are fueled by special revolutionary groups seeking to turn the citizens against the Iranian authorities and cause damage to the national security.

On September 13, Mahsa Amini was detained by Iran's so-called morality police in Tehran for wearing an "improper" hijab, an offense punishable by prison. The woman was sent to one of the centers belonging to the police department and military intelligence for an explanatory conversation. In the center, Amini had a heart attack, after which she was immediately taken to a nearby hospital. Three days later, the young woman passed away.

Many Iranian citizens accused the morality police of Amini's death, suggesting that law enforcement officers had beaten her on the head. People in different cities of the country launched a series of mass protests. Moreover, some Iranian women published videos on social media that showed them cutting their hair, as well as burning hijabs and rusari kerchiefs, which they are obliged to wear on their heads.

On September 17, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi ordered a special investigation into the case and expressed condolences to Amini's family.

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Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Calls Pelosi's Speech in Yerevan Irresponsible

BAKU, September 22 (Sputnik) - Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov on Thursday slammed the recent statements of US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi during her visit to Yerevan as unfounded and politically irresponsible.

Pelosi paid a visit to Armenia from September 17-19, during which she met with high-ranking officials, including Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. On behalf of the US Congress, she condemned Azerbaijan's attacks on Armenia. During the meeting, Pelosi called the United States a friend of Armenia in the confrontation with Turkey in the context of the Nagorno-Karabakh issue.

"At such a sensitive moment, when there is a chance to achieve a fragile peace, it is politically irresponsible to support revanchists by making unfounded statements. It's hard to call it anything else...," the minister said in an interview with Azerbaijan's Real TV channel.

As a rule, double standards are manifested by various politicians on the eve of elections in these countries, Bayramov said, calling on the nation to be patient in the current political realities.

Hostilities broke out on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in the early hours of September 13, in an area unrelated to the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region. Azerbaijan said it started an offensive responding to an Armenian "provocation." Armenia said Azerbaijani forces shelled Armenian civilian towns with no military infrastructure, including the resort town of Jermuk. Both sides reported losses among their military. By the morning, the parties agreed on a cease-fire.

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Armenian Foreign Minister, ICRC Head Discuss Situation on Border With Azerbaijan

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan and Peter Maurer, the head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), have met on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York and discussed the recent escalation of the situation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, the Armenian Foreign Ministry said on Thursday.

"On September 21, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Armenia Ararat Mirzoyan, on the margins of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly, met with Peter Maurer, the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Presenting the consequences of Azerbaijan's recent aggression against sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Armenia, Minister Mirzoyan noted that Azerbaijan's criminal actions were accompanied by cases of deliberate targeting of civilian population and infrastructure, as well as gross violations of international and humanitarian law," a statement read.

During the meeting, Mirzoyan drew Maurer's attention to cases of ill-treatment and tortures of Armenian prisoners of war by Azerbaijani servicemen and noted the international community's failure to provide decisive and targeted condemnation of "Azerbaijan's war crimes and belligerent behavior."

At the same time, the Armenian foreign minister said he highly appreciated assistance provided by the ICRC in matters related to the return of Armenian prisoners of war and hostages from Azerbaijan, search for missing servicemen and other humanitarian issues.

In the night from September 12-13, new clashes broke out on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border, in an area unrelated to the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region. Baku and Yerevan accused each other of ongoing shelling and reported losses in their ranks.

By morning of September 13, the parties agreed on a ceasefire. Grigory Karasin, the head of the Russian upper house's foreign affairs committee, told Sputnik that a truce was achieved thanks to Russia's efforts, including a conversation between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan. According to the Russian official, despite the ceasefire, there is still a lot of work to be done, since Yerevan applied to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

On September 13, the CSTO Permanent Council held an extraordinary meeting, during which its members expressed extreme concern about the situation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border and considered proposals to activate the CSTO mechanisms for the resolution of the conflict. The CSTO Collective Security Council reached an agreement to send a mission led by CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas to Armenia.

To date, the situation on the Armenian-Azerbaijani border remains tense, with the parties accusing each other of violating the ceasefire.

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Donbas Referendums Response to Zelenskyy's Call on Russians to Leave Ukraine - Lavrov

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Referendums in Donbas, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia Regions are response to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's call on Russians to leave Ukraine, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Thursday.

"The apotheosis was an interview with Mr. Zelensky on August 5 last year, who advised everyone who feels Russian for the sake of their children, their grandchildren to get out to Russia," Lavrov told the United Nations Security Council meeting, adding that the current decisions on referendums "are response on his [Zelenskyy's] desire."

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Russian Cabinet of Ministers Approves Draft of New Three-Year Budget

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - The Russian cabinet of ministers approved on Thursday the draft budget for 2023 and the planning period for 2024 and 2025.

"The draft law on the federal budget for 2023 and for the planning period of 2024 and 2025 was approved at a government meeting. When drafting the main financial document, the cabinet of ministers proceeded from the need to fulfill social obligations to citizens and from the president's instructions," the government said on Telegram.

Earlier in the day, Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin said that the draft budget for the next 3 years provides for a balanced budget policy with maintaining demand and strong economic growth at a level above 2%. The cabinet of ministers expects the total revenue in 2023 in the amount of over 26.13 trillion rubles (\$435 billion). In nominal terms, this is less than in 2022 but significantly more than in 2021, Mishustin said. Expenses, compared to this year, will increase slightly, up to 29.56 trillion rubles. Throughout this period, the budget will be in deficit. Government borrowings will be the main source of its coverage.

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Sri Lanka to Present Debt Restructuring Plan on Friday - Head of Central Bank

NEW DELHI, September 22 (Sputnik) - Sri Lanka will announce its plans on debt restructuring during a meeting with international creditors on September 23, head of the country's Central Bank Nandala Weerasinghe said on Thursday.

"All the creditors collectively must assure that they are willing to support Sri Lanka in the debt restructuring process going forward," Weerasinghe was quoted by as saying by Newswire.lk.

The country's traditional lenders are China, India, and Japan.

Earlier in September, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reached an agreement with the government of Sri Lanka for a loan of about \$2.9 billion to support the country's economic reforms.

For the IMF to present a loan for Sri Lanka to its board and start the tranche, Sri Lanka has to get financial guarantees from its international creditors by introducing plans on debt restructuring, according to Weerasinghe.

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the country's tourist flow, which led to a shortage of foreign currency and the worst economic crisis since independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. The crisis triggered a sharp rise in energy prices and the subsequent shortage in food and basic necessities, as well as constant power outages.

In April, the country defaulted on its external debt obligations, with its debt reaching \$51 billion. The IMF estimates Sri Lanka's economy is expected to contract by 8.7% in 2022 and inflation recently exceeded 60%.

When the crisis broke out, then-President Gotabai Rajapaksa fled the country after a popular uprising against the economic hardship. Former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe replaced Rajapaksa and has already held several rounds of talks with the IMF team on restructuring its debt in accordance with the IMF-supported economic restructuring program.

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All EU Decisions, Including Sanctions, Veto Abolition, Made Unanimously - Spokesperson

BRUSSELS, September 22 (Sputnik) - All decisions of the European Union on foreign policy issues, which include the imposition of sanctions, are taken unanimously until the relevant procedure is changed by a unanimous decision of all EU member states, European External Action Service spokesperson Peter Stano told RIA Novosti.

On Tuesday, a meeting of the EU General Affairs Council was held, which discussed the issue of changing the decision-making mechanism in the EU from unanimous to majority voting, which should deprive member states of the opportunity to use the right of veto, including in matters of imposing and lifting sanctions. Czech EU Affairs Minister Mikulas Bek, who chaired the meeting, said at the final press conference that he was not optimistic about rapid progress in moving away from unanimous decision-making in the EU in favor of majority voting.

"Foreign policy decisions are subject to unanimity, unless the member states decide otherwise by unanimity. So far such a decision was not made and all foreign policy decisions continue to be made by unanimity," Stano said.

Earlier, the head of EU diplomacy, Josep Borrell, spoke in favor of decision-making by a simple majority on foreign policy issues. He explained, in particular, that the accession of new countries to the EU would require abandoning the principle of unanimous decision-making. According to Borrell, the conflict in Ukraine showed that the EU must make "strategic decisions" fast. The European Parliament also supported the idea of moving to majority voting on issues related to foreign policy.

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Meta Hints at Possible Trump Return to Facebook Before 2024 Election – Reports

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump could be allowed to return to Facebook (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) before the 2024 election after his two-year suspension expires in 2023, The Washington Examiner reported on Thursday, citing the president for global affairs at Meta Platforms Nick Clegg.

Clegg alluded to a possible return of Trump to Facebook as soon as January during an event hosted by the news publication Semafor earlier on Thursday, the report said.

"When you make a decision that affects the public realm, you need to act with great caution," the report cited Clegg as telling Semafor. "You shouldn't throw your weight about."

Trump was banned from Twitter and Facebook following the Capitol riot on January 6, 2021.

The platforms deemed that his activities in relation to the event violated their policies.

In July 2021, Trump announced class-action lawsuits against the CEOs of Facebook and Twitter, Mark Zuckerberg and Jack Dorsey.

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Ex-Mississippi Human Services Dept. Director Pleads Guilty to Theft Charge - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - A former official with the Mississippi Department of Human Services (MDHS) has pleaded guilty on a theft charge and for conspiring to defraud the state of millions of dollars in federal funds meant for the poorest and most needy residents, the US Justice Department said on Monday.

"John Davis, 54, of Jackson, Mississippi, and his co-conspirators fraudulently obtained and misused federal funds - including funds from two programs, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP) - for their personal use and benefit," the Justice Department said in a press release.

At Davis's direction, the MDHS provided federal funds to two nonprofit organizations and then directed them to fraudulently award contracts to various entities and individuals for social services that were never provided, the release said.

In addition, Davis enabled certain nonprofit organizations to receive full or almost-complete payments for fake contracts at or near the beginning of the contract periods, whether or not these nonprofits provided the work and services they were contracted to provide, the release said.

Investigators discovered that MDHS misappropriated more than \$77 million in welfare funds under Davis' tenure, directing the money to wealthy celebrities and pet projects of them and state officials, the release said.

That includes \$1.1 million in TANF funds that a non-profit, the Mississippi Community Education Center, gave to former professional football quarterback Brett Favre for speeches he never gave, the release also said.

Davis pleaded guilty to one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud and theft concerning programs receiving federal funds and one count of theft concerning programs receiving federal funds, the release added.

Sentencing in the case is scheduled for February 2, 2023, and Davis faces up to five years in prison for the conspiracy charge and ten years for the theft of federal funds charge, according to the release.

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White House on Strategic Stability Talks: 'Not Time for Business as Usual With Russia'

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Strategic stability talks between the United States and Russia may be unlikely anytime soon given the current state of relations between Washington and Moscow, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby told Sputnik on Thursday.

"This is not the time for business as usual with Russia," Kirby said when asked about whether it may be possible to resume strategic stability dialogue in the near future.

In August, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov likewise cast doubts on a resumption of strategic stability talks with the US, citing "recklessly aggressive" policy by Washington.

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Mexico Proposes Peace Committee on Ukraine With Participation of Modi, Pope Francis

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) – Mexico proposes creating a committee to facilitate peace in Ukraine with the participation of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Pope Francis, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard said on Thursday.

"In this sense, I allow myself to share this proposal from Mexico's President, Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, to strengthen the efforts of mediation of the Secretary General Antonio Guterres, through the creation of a committee on dialogue and peace for Ukraine, with the participation of other Heads of State and of Government, including, if possible, his excellency Narendra Modi from India, and His Holiness Pope Francis," Ebrard told a UN Security Council. Mexico wants to facilitate dialogue and create new instruments of mediation to build trust, Ebrard noted, adding that he hopes the UN General Assembly will approve the initiative. "We must act and commit to the preservation of peace. Accepting war is choosing to end up in the abyss," Ebrard added.

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US Sanctions Iran Morality Police, 7 Security Officials for Amini Death - Treasury

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has sanctioned Iran's Morality Police and seven senior security officials for the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini while in detention and the subsequent violence toward Iranians participating in protests against her death, the Treasury Department said in a release on Thursday.

"Mahsa Amini was a courageous woman whose death in Morality Police custody was yet another act of brutality by the Iranian regime's security forces against its own people," Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in the release. "We condemn this unconscionable act in the strongest terms and call on the Iranian government to end its violence against women and its ongoing violent crackdown on free expression and assembly."

On September 14, the Law Enforcement Forces' (LEF) Morality Police arrested Amini for allegedly improperly wearing a hijab and sent her to a re-education class at police headquarters. Amini was transferred to a hospital the same day in a coma and died two days later from internal injuries.

Eyewitnesses have said that Amini died due to injuries sustained while in Morality Police custody while the authorities attributed her death to a heart ailment that her family said she did not suffer from, according to reports.

The sanctioned security officials include Morality Police Chief Mohammad Rostami Cheshmeh Gachi; Morality Police Tehran Division Chief Haj Ahmad Mirzaei; Ministry of Intelligence and

Security head Esmail Khatib; LEF Deputy Commander Qasem Rezaei; Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari province LEF Commander Manouchehr Amanollahi; Iranian Army ground forces Commander Kiyumars Heidari; and Basij Resistance Forces Deputy Commander Salar Abnoush.

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Confirmed Ebola Cases Rise to 7 in Uganda - Authorities

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Uganda has confirmed seven Ebola cases, including one death, since the outbreak of the infection in the country's central municipality of Mubende, with seven more cases being investigated as suspected Ebola-related fatalities, Dr. Kyobe Henry Bbosa, the Ebola incident commander at the Ugandan Health Ministry, said on Thursday. On Tuesday, the Ugandan authorities declared an Ebola outbreak in Mubende after the death of a 24-year-old local resident infected with the Ebola-Sudan strain.

"As of today, we have seven confirmed cases, of whom we have one confirmed death, but also we have seven probable cases that died before the confirmation of the outbreak," Bbosa told the Africa Online Briefing of the World Health Organization (WHO).

In addition, the Ugandan authorities have listed up to 11 Ebola-related contacts so far and are currently trying to trace down up to 43 contacts, the Ebola incident commander said.

"The epidemic appears to have started around the beginning of September, when people started dying in the small village in the Sub County called Madudu," Bbosa added.

The Ebola incident commander said that Uganda's government was taking all necessary measures to protect the population and health workers, though Ebola cases were still expected to increase in the country in the near future.

Ebola is an acute viral infection that affects humans and some other species of animals. The Ebola epidemic broke out in West Africa in 2015, with Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia becoming the epicenter of the outbreak. According to the World Health Organization, during the last major epidemic 28,600 people were infected with Ebola, and more than 11,300 of them died.

China calls for resumption of direct dialogue between Russia and Ukraine without preconditions - foreign minister

Sputnik

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Lavrov's Meeting With Cypriot President at UNGA Canceled at EU's Behest - Reports

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Cyprus President Nicos Anastasiades pulled out of his meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, which was scheduled on Wednesday at

the United Nations, as part of the European Union response to Russian President Vladimir Putin's address to the nation earlier that day announcing partial mobilization and support for referendums on Ukrainian regions joining Russia, Cyprus media reported on Thursday. The talks, among others, were to focus on the possible establishment of direct flights between Russia and breakaway Northern Cyprus.

Government spokesman Marios Pelekanos told CyBC radio that this was because of developments in Ukraine and the latest decrees issued by President Putin. Pelekanos said the EU had given instructions to cancel all bilateral contacts with Russia.

The EU foreign ministers, who were at the UN General Assembly in New York, held a meeting following the Russian president's speech to discuss a common position, and promised further restrictive measures.

The Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republic as well as the parts of Zaporizhzhia and Kherson regions under Russian military control announced on Tuesday they would hold referendums on accession to Russia from September 23-27.

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No Phone Conversation With Erdogan on Putin's Schedule Yet - Peskov

MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - The schedule of Russian President Vladimir Putin does not yet have a phone conversation with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told Sputnik.

Earlier, a diplomatic source in Ankara told Sputnik that Erdogan would talk to Putin by phone in the coming days.

"Not on schedule yet," Peskov said.

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German Fighter Jets to Conduct Training Flights Over Estonia - Estonian General Staff

HELSINKI, September 22 (Sputnik) - The German air force's Eurofighter Typhoon jets will conduct training flights at low altitudes over Estonia this week as part of the NATO Air Policing mission in the Baltic states, the General Staff of the Estonian Defense Forces said on Thursday. German fighter jets have been carrying out the NATO mission since August 2, they are stationed at the Amari air base near Estonia's capital of Tallinn.

"On Thursday and Friday, German air force Eurofighter Typhoon fighters will conduct training flights at low altitudes in Estonian airspace. Flights will be made at an altitude of at least 152 meters [almost 500 feet] in southwestern, southeastern, and central Estonia. Where possible, the flights will be carried out at a distance from settlements and farms," a statement read.

The Baltic countries do not have aircraft suitable for air patrol, therefore, since April 2004, after their entry into NATO, aircraft of the NATO member states have been engaged in airspace protection. These aircraft are based in Lithuania at the Zokniai airfield, as well as at the Amari airbase, which since 2014 became an additional platform for the deployment of NATO aircraft. Flights are carried in specially designated areas and approved by all governments of the Baltic states.

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UPDATE - Two People Killed, 25 Others Injured During Protests in Iran Over Amini's Death - Reports

(Adds new data on casualties, damage in para 5, report about upcoming demonstration in para 6) MOSCOW, September 22 (Sputnik) - Two people died and 25 others were injured during mass protests in the western Iranian cities of Kermanshah and Qazvin triggered by the death of 22-year-old Iranian woman Mahsa Amini in police custody after being detained for wearing an "improper" hijab, media reported on Thursday.

Two members of the Iranian resistance force Basij were believed killed by protesters during riots on the streets of Kermanshah and Qazvin on Wednesday night, Iranian news agency Tasnim reported, adding that one of the members was shot dead, while the other was stabbed to death. In addition, 25 people were injured, including police officers. Protesters caused damage to public and state property, according to Tasnim.

The Iranian health ministry spokesperson said 61 ambulances of the country's emergency services were damaged during riots, the report said.

Later in the day, Iranian news agency Akharin Khabar reported that 76 people were injured in the northern Iranian province of Mazandaran during the protests. The demonstrators also destroyed 41 government buildings and 11 private buildings in Mazandaran, the province's deputy governor for security said, as cited by the news agency.

At the same time, the Islamic Development Coordination Council said that the Iranian authorities would hold a mass demonstration after Friday prayers in response to the civil unrest, Iranian news agency IRNA reported.

On September 13, Amini was detained by Iran's so-called morality police in Tehran for wearing an "improper" hijab, an offense punishable by prison. The woman was sent to one of the centers belonging to the police department and military intelligence for an explanatory conversation. In the center, Amini had a heart attack, after which she was immediately taken to a nearby hospital. Three days later, the young woman passed away.

Many Iranian citizens accused the morality police of Amini's death, suggesting that law enforcement officers had beaten her on the head. People in different cities of the country launched a series of mass protests. Moreover, some Iranian women published videos on social media that showed them cutting their hair, as well as burning hijabs and rusari kerchiefs, which they are obliged to wear on their heads.

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Erdogan Plans to Hold Phone Conversation With Putin Soon - Source

ANKARA, September 22 (Sputnik) - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan plans to hold a phone conversation with Russian President Vladimir Putin in the coming days, a diplomatic source in Ankara told Sputnik on Thursday.

"In the coming days," the source said when asked when the conversation is planned.

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Uzbekistan, US Boost Strategic Partnership in All Spheres - Uzbek Foreign Ministry

TASHKENT, September 22 (Sputnik) - Uzbekistan and the United States have intensified strategic partnership in recent years in all areas of the bilateral and regional agenda, the Uzbek Foreign Ministry said on Thursday.

Uzbekistan's acting Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov and US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland discussed issues of bilateral cooperation on the sidelines of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly in New York.

"As it was noted during the meeting, over recent years, due to the joint efforts, the Uzbek-American strategic partnership has significantly intensified in all areas of the bilateral and regional agenda," the ministry said, adding that both sides actively cooperate on political issues on the principles of mutual trust and respect.

Nuland noted the US support for Uzbekistan's course of reforms and openness, as well as Washington's commitment to enhancing ties at the bilateral level and in the C5+1 format, which consists of five Central Asian nations and the United States.

"The efforts of our country to achieve sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan, provide feasible humanitarian aid to the neighboring state, implement infrastructure and energy projects were highly appreciated," the ministry added.

During the meeting, the sides exchanged views on the schedule of upcoming events at various levels.

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Macron Warns of 'Crisis of Liberal Democracies'

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) – Liberal democracies across the world are undergoing a "big crisis," French President Emmanuel Macron told CNN on Thursday.

"I think we have [a] big crisis of democracies, of what I would call liberal democracies. Let's be clear about that. Why? First, because being open societies and being open and very cooperative democracies put pressure on your people. It could destabilize them," Macron said in an interview.

Such countries "have to articulate the respect of people's willingness, middle class references, and all the progress made by our democracies welcoming different cultures, being open and cooperative," the French president explained.

"This is a matter of balance," he stressed.

Macron acknowledged that the West faces an increasing pressure on societies in recent years.

"We are at the point where, in our different countries, there is what I would call a crisis of middle classes," he said.

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US Sanctions Iran's Morality Police, Security Officials for Amini Death, Protest Crackdown

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury sanctioned on Thursday Iran's Morality Police and seven senior leaders of Iran's security organizations for the death of a 22-year-old woman in detention and the subsequent violence toward Iranians participating in mass protests over her death, according to a release.

"Mahsa Amini was a courageous woman whose death in Morality Police custody was yet another act of brutality by the Iranian regime's security forces against its own people," Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen said in the release. "We condemn this unconscionable act in the strongest terms and call on the Iranian government to end its violence against women and its ongoing violent crackdown on free expression and assembly.

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China Hopes for Prompt Conflict Resolution in Ukraine - Foreign Minister

BEIJING, September 22 (Sputnik) - Delaying the Ukrainian crisis is not in interests of the involved parties and China hopes for prompt conflict resolution, continuing to facilitate talks, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said on Thursday.

"Expanding and delaying the Ukrainian crisis does not meet the interests of any of the parties, and [we] hope that the war will end as soon as possible and peace talks will resume," Wang said during a meeting with his Polish counterpart, Zbigniew Rau, on the sidelines of the 77th UN General Assembly.

The Chinese minister also noted that Beijing had always supported a well-balanced and sustainable architecture of the European security, which would be a long-term guarantee of peace, and would continue make efforts to facilitate peace talks between the parties involved.

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CNN Host Cancels Interview With Iranian President, Claims He Demanded She Wear Headscarf

WASHINGTON, September 22 (Sputnik) - Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi purportedly demanded CNN show host Christiane Amanpour wear a headscarf during an interview scheduled for Wednesday evening, leading the chief international anchor to cancel the discussion after refusing to comply with the condition, Amanpour said on Thursday.

"This was going to be President Raisi's first ever interview on US soil... 40 minutes after the interview had been due to start, an aide came over. The president, he said, was suggesting I wear a headscarf, because it's the holy months of Muharram and Safar," Amanpour said via social media. "I politely declined. We are in New York, where there is no law or tradition regarding headscarves ... And so we walked away. The interview didn't happen."

Raisi's aide alluded to protests in Iran – sparked by the death of 22-year old woman Mahsa Amini in police custody – and claimed wearing a headscarf was "a matter of respect," Amanpour also said.

Amanpour claims she planned to ask Raisi about Amini's death during the interview, which was set to take place while the leader was in New York for the UN General Assembly.

Amini died in the custody of Iran's so-called "morality police," the Guidance Patrol, earlier this month, leading to anti-government protests throughout the country. Several deaths and dozens of injuries have been reported among protestors, according to Iranian media.

However, an official forensic examination of Amini's body shows no signs of injuries consistent with claims she was beaten to death, Iranian lawmaker Mohammad Saleh said on Wednesday. Raisi last week ordered a special investigation into Amini's death and expressed condolences to her family.

Officials assert Amini had a heart attack after being detained by the Guidance Patrol for improperly wearing a hijab. Amini was purportedly transferred from the military intelligence center where she was detained to a hospital where she later died, they assert.

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Erdogan Says He Might Meet With Pashinyan in Prague in October

ANKARA, September 22 (Sputnik) - Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said on Thursday that he might hold a meeting with Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan during the European Political Community summit in Prague in early October.

"A summit of the European Political Community is planned in Prague. We are currently considering the issue of whether we should participate in the summit in Prague. If we participate

in the summit in Prague, Pashinyan will most likely be there. I think he has a thought: 'Maybe we can meet there?. Maybe we can have a separate discussion with him there. But of course we will also make some moves in the Caucasus ... While we are only in the planning process. We will discuss them with Mr. Ilham Aliyev [President of Azerbaijan] and take appropriate steps," Erdogan said, as quoted by A Haber.

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Le Pen Opposes Sale of French Gas to Germany Over Risk of Energy Shortages

PARIS, September 22 (Sputnik) - France should not supply gas to Germany if French enterprises have to cut production amid energy shortages and the upward curve in energy prices, French far-right leader Marine Le Pen said on Thursday.

"I have indicated to the prime minister that I will be as tough as possible against the sale of gas to Germany in a situation where we will probably ask French enterprises to reduce gas consumption, which, in my opinion, is a real risk," Le Pen said after a meeting with Prime Minister Elisabeth Borne, as quoted by the BFMTV.

Le Pen noted that the government should first of all take care of its own citizens, rather than ensure European solidarity.

On September 5, French President Emmanuel Macron said that France intends to supply Germany with more gas, and in return it plans to receive electricity. Macron also noted that European solidarity will play a big role in ensuring energy security in Europe this winter, promising that France will complete the construction of the necessary communications for gas supplies to Germany in the coming weeks.

Media reported that gas supplies from France to Germany could begin as early as October 10. At the same time, on Wednesday, French Economy and Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said that he had asked the EU Commission to double the amount of financial assistance to enterprises amid surging energy prices.

This summer, the French government launched an energy sobriety program with a view to reducing electricity consumption in the country by 10% by 2024 to avoid shortages in the coming winter.

Some French companies, including two major glass manufacturers Durelex and Arc, said they had already partially reduced production volumes and placed a number of their employees in part-time jobs. The largest aluminum plant in France Aluminium Dunkerque announced in early September that it would reduce production by about 20% due to rising energy prices.

Since 2021, energy prices in Europe have been surging as part of a global trend. After the beginning of Russia's military operation in Ukraine in February 2022 and the adoption of several packages of sanctions against Moscow by the West, fuel prices have accelerated the growth, pushing many EU governments to resort to contingency measures.

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UN Chief Says Obstacles to Russian Fertilizer Exports Should Be Immediately Removed

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - All obstacles to the export of Russian fertilizers should be immediately removed to avoid a food supply crisis, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Thursday.

"It is essential that all States remove every remaining obstacle to the export of Russian fertilizers immediately. We need to get them to farmers at a reasonable cost, and on to fields as soon as possible," he told a UN Security Council on Ukraine.

He stressed that it is vital the shipments continue and increase, so commodity markets further stabilize.

"If the fertilizer market is not stabilized, next year could bring a food supply crisis. Simply put, the world may run out of food," the UN chief warned.

Though the United States and its allies have said that sanctions do not apply to food products and fertilizers, Russia points out that restrictions on bank settlements, insurance, and shipment of goods hinder its exports.

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Russian Companies Exploring Direct Flights to Northern Cyprus - Turkish Cypriot Leader

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - Russian companies are examining opportunities for direct flights to Northern Cyprus, but no official decision has been made yet, Turkish Cypriot President Ersin Tatar told Sputnik.

On Thursday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said he has discussed with Russian President Vladimir Putin a possibility of launching direct flights from Russia to the self-proclaimed Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. CNN Turk reported, citing sources, that such flights may begin in November.

"From my Ministry of Transport, they tell me that one private company applied to ... Turkish Cypriot civil aviation, that they might fly from Russia," Tatar said.

Tatar added he has not received any direct requests from the Turkish and Russian governments to authorize such flights.

"I think it might be those private companies who are trying to explore, explore the opportunities how to carry tourists, to Northern Cyprus, it might be, which I think is only fair," Tatar said. "If private companies want to fly their airplanes to North Cyprus to carry tourists to North Cyprus, this can only be welcome, because we in Cyprus, we are trying to obviously improve our economic situation and tourism is the main industry."

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UN Chief Calls for Probe of Burial Site in Izyum

UNITED NATIONS, September 22 (Sputnik) - The burial site in the town of Izyum, Kharkiv region, should be subjected to a thorough investigation, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Thursday.

"The reports are a catalogue of cruelty: summary executions, sexual violence, torture and other inhumane and degrading treatment against civilians and prisoners of war. The latest accounts of burial sites in Izyum are extremely disturbing. All these allegations must be thoroughly investigated, to ensure accountability," Guterres told a UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine. Last week, Ukrainian authorities alleged that mass burial sites were found in Izyum following Russian troops' withdrawal from the Kharkiv region in early September with more than 400 bodies reportedly found so far.

In March-April, the area was a hotbed of hostilities between Russian and Ukrainian forces, seeing control of villages outside Izyum swing back and forth. Ultimately, Russian forces established control over the fiercely contested territory.

Bodies of dead Ukrainian soldiers were transported to local morgues, where some of them were identified.

An eyewitness told Sputnik that Ukraine's command refused to take away the bodies and the soldiers were buried at a cemetery outside Izyum.

In September, Ukraine recaptured Izyum and nearby areas and accused Russia of crimes against humanity.