

12/6/22 Tuesday

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US Jury Finds Trump Organization Guilty in Tax Fraud Scheme
By - Fantine Gardinier

A New York jury found the Trump Organization, a holding group for former US President Donald Trump's many business ventures, guilty of tax fraud on Tuesday.

The jury found the conglomerate guilty of a 15-year-long scheme by top executives to dodge paying personal income taxes on various job perks, including rent-free apartments and luxury cars. At the sentencing hearing in January, the company could be fined up to \$1.6 million, and will bear the stain of the conviction on its reputation in future business dealings.

"This was a case about greed and cheating," said Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg. "The Trump Corporation and the Trump Payroll Corporation got away with a scheme that awarded high-level executives with lavish perks and compensation while intentionally concealing the benefits from the taxing authorities to avoid paying taxes. Today's verdict holds these Trump companies accountable for their long-running criminal scheme."

The Trump Organization includes nearly 500 business entities owned by Trump.

The suit is one of several investigations of Trump and his finances that date to the time of his presidency. Unlike when he was chief executive, Trump no longer enjoys the immunity of the nation's top office, opening him up to a slew of lawsuits.

Other suits have alleged he misled lenders about the size of his wealth, or that he violated a clause banning emoluments in the US Constitution by allowing foreign dignitaries to rent rooms at [Trump International Hotel](#) in Washington, DC.

Trump has called the suits, as well as other investigations, such as an FBI probe of White House documents Trump [took to his Mar-a-Lago estate](#) when he left office, a "witch hunt" aimed at preventing him from returning to power in 2024. Trump announced his presidential campaign for the 2024 elections last month.

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US Imports From Russia Doubled From September to October, Trade Data Shows
By - Fantine Gardinier

Despite US attempts to strangle the Russian economy, Moscow has successfully found new markets for its biggest exports, including energy products. However, the United States has also continued to buy Russian goods, even increasing its imports in recent months.

In October 2022, the value of US imports from the Russian Federation were more than twice that imported the month prior, according to the latest trade data from the US Census Bureau.

Data on the [US-Russia trade deficit](#) shows that in September, the US imported \$332.1 million worth of goods from Russia, but in October, it imported \$732 million in goods - a \$400 million increase.

However, the total trade volume is still far below that of January, when the US imported \$1.2 billion in Russian goods. After Moscow launched its special operation in Ukraine in February, the Biden administration severed trade in several goods, [most importantly petroleum](#), gas, and coal products, but also seafood products, alcohol, and non-industrial diamonds.

While specific data from October was not yet available, [September data](#) showed fertilizer was the largest US import, even greater than that seen in February. Iron and steel, as well as nonferrous metals, have also formed a sizable part of US purchases from Russia.

The US has tried to push its own boycott of Russian energy exports onto other nations, so far without much success. The European Union and India [remain major customers](#) for Russian energy, although the EU has attempted to follow in Washington's footsteps, despite the detrimental effect on its own economy and society, which has already sparked massive unrest. On Monday, the Group of Seven, which includes the US, Japan, and several Western European nations, [officially imposed](#) a \$60-per-barrel price cap on Russian oil purchases.

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Saudi Leaders Gave US Three Demands for Joining Abraham Accords, Israeli Media Says
By - Fantine Gardinier

Just six of 21 Arab states recognize the existence of Israel, as in 1967 the Arab League adopted a principle of refusing to normalize or negotiate with Israel after it seized a significant area of Arab lands in the Six-Day War.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia wants to become the next Arab state to normalize relations with Israel, according to reports in Israeli media on Tuesday.

As US officials visited Riyadh on Tuesday, Saudi Foreign Minister Abdel al-Jubeir reportedly told senior American Jewish leaders that normalization would happen eventually, although it would take a while to happen.

According to the report, the visiting representatives were also told by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the power behind the Saudi throne, that the kingdom had three main demands from Washington prior to joining the so-called Abraham Accords peace deal, including a formalized US-Saudi alliance; an equivalent amount of US weapons procurement to being in the NATO alliance; and approval of a small Saudi civil nuclear power program.

Notably, Saudi demands did not seem to include anything regarding Palestinian Arabs, for whom the Abraham Accords were ostensibly signed. At the time, many feared the imminent annexation of large parts of the Jordan Valley in the West Bank by Israel, whose military governs the Palestinian-majority area.

The Saudi demands come at a time when relations with Washington are at a nadir, even as the Biden administration looks to Riyadh for help with gas prices and with opposing Iran, the kingdom's major regional rival.

US President Joe Biden has criticized the Saudi war in Yemen, limiting US weapons sales to defense arms, and published declassified documents alleging bin Salman was involved in the assassination of Jamal Khashoggi, a dissident Turkish-Saudi journalist, in 2019. However, last month, the White House moved to [give bin Salman immunity](#) from prosecution for the murder. Earlier this year, the [Saudis joined other members](#) of the OPEC oil cartel in cutting petroleum production at a time when Washington was demanding it be increased in order to compensate for the Western boycott of Russian energy exports.

Other Arab states with normalized diplomatic relations with Israel include Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Sudan, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, the last four of which did so in 2020 as part of the Abraham Accords. US diplomacy [helped grease the wheels](#) of all of them.

Rumors of secret talks have persisted for years, including claims that bin Salman has held secret meetings with then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Cooperation between them is not unknown, including when Saudi officials looked the other way in 1981 as Israeli strike aircraft crossed Saudi territory to [bomb an incomplete nuclear reactor](#) built by Iraq, which at the time was the mutual enemy of Riyadh, Tel Aviv and Tehran.

In March, [bin Salman said he does not](#) see Israel as an "enemy," telling the US magazine "The Atlantic" that one day the two countries might become friends.

"We have to solve some issues before we get to that," he said. "For us, we hope that the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians is solved."

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Warnock vs. Walker: Georgia Holds Runoff Election for Contested US Senate Seat
By - Fantine Gardinier

Voters in the US state of Georgia are heading to the polls on Tuesday to settle a very close race for one of the state's two US Senate seats, after the November 8 election failed to decide the issue.

Actually, voters have been casting their ballots since last week, after a court ruled it could begin on November 26. The following days [shattered state records](#) as over 1.8 million Georgians voted in that week.

However, the early voting period was much shorter than in past years, thanks to a law signed by Governor Brian Kemp last year. Mirroring Republican efforts across the country, Kemp said the measure was aimed at protecting the "integrity" of the election by cracking down on the most common methods of voter fraud. However, critics, such as Kemp's rival, Democrat Stacey Abrams, have accused the GOP of [suppressing the vote](#) of Black residents with the new restrictions.

The winner will serve a full six-year term in the US Senate, the upper chamber of the US Congress, which includes two delegates from each state, regardless of its population. The

balance of power in the Senate hangs on the outcome of the Georgia runoff election, since Democrats have 48 senators and Republicans have 49, but the 2 Independent senators both side with the Democrats. In the event of a tie, the tie-breaking vote is cast by US Vice President Kamala Harris, a Democrat.

Georgia's other senator is Sen. John Ossoff, a Democrat who took office in 2021.

Democrat US Senator Rev. Raphael Warnock

Warnock took office in 2020 in a special election set in motion by the early retirement of Sen. Johnny Isakson a year prior. Kemp appointed Republican Kelly Loeffler to replace Isakson for the remainder of his term. Like in 2022, the 2020 vote between Warnock and Loeffler was too close to call, so a December runoff vote was held, which Warnock lost.

Warnock is the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, where in July 2020 he presided over the funeral of Civil Rights Movement icon Rep. John Lewis, also from Georgia. His victory was historic for a number of reasons, including being the first Black man to represent Georgia - or indeed, any former Confederate state - in the US Senate, and the first Democratic senator from Georgia in 20 years.

Warnock's politics are fairly in line with the Democrats' platform, supporting expanding access to healthcare, abortion, LGBTQ rights, more funding for anti-COVID-19 measures, and the passage of the John Lewis Voting Rights Act. He is against the death penalty and "concealed carry" permits for firearms. However, he has worked across the aisle on important infrastructure legislation with Republican colleagues.

Republican Herschel Walker

In an unusual twist, Warnock's challenger, Herschel Walker, is also a Black man. Walker is a career athlete, playing college-level, then professional football as a running back, during which he was a mainstay of the Dallas Cowboys' 1990s dominance of American football, and even joined the US' national bobsledding team at the 1992 Winter Olympic Games in France. He later started Renaissance Man Food Services, which distributes chicken products.

Aside from some political endorsements as an area businessman - including Kemp in 2018 and Loeffler in 2020 - Walker's big foray into the political world came in 2018, when then-US President Donald Trump appointed Walker to the President's Council on Sports, Fitness, and Nutrition. Trump later encouraged Walker to run against Warnock, and gave his campaign an official endorsement. Walker has also been endorsed by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), a rival of Trump's among the GOP leadership, signaling the party was united behind his campaign.

Walker has continued to support Trump's claims of election fraud in the 2020 US presidential election, even after the US Capitol breach on January 6, 2021. Georgia was a major battleground in that election, with Trump pressuring the state's Republican government to alter the election results in his favor. His political positions largely align with other Republicans, including opposing abortion and transgender rights, being critical of efforts to combat climate change, and supporting Trump's wall at the US-Mexico border and personal gun ownership. In the weeks leading up to the November 8 election, Walker struggled to fend off accusations of hypocrisy after an ex-girlfriend of his [told US media](#) about how he supported her aborting a pregnancy while they were together and even financed the procedure. Walker has denied the claims.

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'It Could Be a Hurricane': JPMorgan CEO Warns Inflation Could Drag US Into Recession in 2023

By - Fantine Gardinier

Even though economic reports continue to show strength in the US economy, investors are nonetheless behaving as if more volatile times are coming, dodging riskier bets and keeping market gains low.

Speaking to [CNBC on Tuesday](#), Jamie Dimon, CEO of JPMorgan Chase, the largest US bank, predicted that the steady grind of inflation would virtually ensure a recession in the coming year. Noting that millions of Americans stashed roughly \$1.5 trillion from COVID-19 pandemic relief programs into their savings, Dimon said that inflation, which depreciates the value of the US dollar, was "eroding" it away.

"[T]hat \$1.5 trillion will run out sometime mid-year next year," Dimon said. "When you are looking that forward, those things very well may derail the economy and cause this mild to severe recession that people are worried about."

The Federal Reserve has struggled to get inflation under control after it hit a 40-year high at the start of the year, although recent months have seen a slowing of its increase. As the central bank ratchets up interest rates, economists and investors alike are [increasingly predicting](#) a rise in unemployment and eventually a recession - the common side-effects of such a move. Indeed, many business leaders, beset by financial problems, higher employee wages, and a strengthening labor movement, have [expressed their hope](#) for such a downturn.

US inflation, at its worst in 40 years, is being driven by a number of factors, including various production and distribution troubles connected to the COVID-19 pandemic, the US-led Western boycott of Russian energy exports as retribution for its special operation in Ukraine, and price speculation by businesses, many of which have recorded record profits this year.

Writing in [Bloomberg on Tuesday](#), economist Scott Johnson further revised his 2023 predictions downward, warning the coming year could be one of the worst in decades.

According to his analysis, the global economy will grow just 2.4% in 2023, down from an expected 3.2% growth in 2022, and the smallest increase since 1993, not including the crisis years of 2009 and 2020. However, different parts of the planet are expected to have wildly different experiences, with China expected to grow more, while the US, UK, and European Union will see smaller gains amid inflationary troubles and central bank efforts to rein it in.

"In the US, with wage gains set to keep inflation above target, we think the Fed is headed toward a terminal rate of 5%, and will stay there till [the first quarter of 2024]. In the euro area, meanwhile, a more rapid decline in inflation will mean a lower terminal rate and the possibility of cuts at the end of 2023," he wrote.

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White House 'Not Surprised' by Xi Visiting Saudi Arabia, Says Mindful of China Influence

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – The United States is mindful of China's plans to expand its influence around the world, and President Xi Jinping's trip to Saudi Arabia comes as no surprise, US National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"It's probably not a surprise that President Xi is traveling around, and certainly no surprise that he chose to go to the Middle East," Kirby said at a press briefing.

He noted that the White House was "mindful of influence that China is trying to grow around the world," including in the Middle East.

While he said the White House was "not asking nations to choose between the United States and China," the US was "certainly well poised ... to succeed in that competition."

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White House Says US Has Not Encouraged Ukraine to Strike Russia, Up to Kiev to Decide

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – The United States has not encouraged Ukraine to conduct strikes on Russian soil, but doing so is Kiev's decision, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"It is their decision to make. We have not encouraged them to do that. We have been very clear about our concerns over escalation here," Kirby told reporters.

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US Blacklists 24 Foreign Organizations, Including 10 in Russia - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed export sanctions on 24 organizations, including 10 in Russia for allegedly undermining US national security, the Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security said in a notice in the Federal Register on Wednesday.

"These entities have been determined by the US Government to be acting contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States and will be listed on the Entity List under the destinations of Latvia, Pakistan, Russia, Singapore, Switzerland, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)," the notice said.

The Russian entities include AO Kraftway Corporation PSC, AO PKK Milandr, AO Scientific Research Center for Electronic Computing, LLC Fibersense, Milandr EK, Milandr ICC JSC, Milur IS, Microelectronic Production Complex (MPK) Milandr, Ruselectronics JSC, and Scientific Production Company Optolink.

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UNICEF Calls for Removing Children's Personal Info From Ukraine's Myrotvorets Website

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has called for the names and other information of children to be removed from the Kiev-based Myrotvorets website that maintains a running list of people it considers enemies of the state, according to a statement provided to Sputnik.

"We are calling for all parties to take steps to protect the best interests of children in line with international child rights law. This includes calling for the removal of names and information of children from the website 'Peacemaker,'" UNICEF said in a statement. "The publishing of children's information in ways that put them at risk is completely unacceptable."

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Democrat Incumbent Warnock Projected to Win US Senate Runoff Race in Georgia - CNN

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Incumbent Democratic Senator Raphael Warnock is projected to win the US senate race in Georgia, CNN reported.

Warnock had secured 50.8% of the vote to Republican challenger Herschel Walker's 49.2% with 98% of total ballots counted, according to official results posted by CNN on Tuesday.

The Democrats will now have a 51-49 majority in the Senate as a result of the Georgia runoff, triggered because no candidate secured a majority in the November 8 midterm election.

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US Approves \$330M In Sale of Aircraft Parts, Equipment to Taiwan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US approved a \$330 million sale of aircraft parts and equipment to Taiwan, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency said in a press release.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States of the expansion of the Cooperative Logistics Supply Support Arrangement for stock replenishment supply of aircraft standard spare parts and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$330 million," the release said on Tuesday.

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UPDATE - Republican Challenger Walker Takes Lead in US Senate Race in Georgia

(Updates headline, lede with new vote results)

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Incumbent Democratic Senator Raphael Warnock is now trailing Republican challenger Herschel Walker in the US Senate race in Georgia with over 60 percent of votes counted.

Walker leads 50.5% to 49.5% with 62 percent of ballots counted, according to results posted by CNN on Tuesday.

Earlier, Warnock had a 16-point lead with 20% of votes counted before Walker swiftly closed the margin.

The runoff was triggered because no candidate secured a majority in the November 8 midterm elections. The victory would boost the Democrats' majority in the Senate to 51-49.

Democrats have already secured control of the Senate with 50 seats because Vice President Kamala Harris holds the tie-breaking vote.

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US Senate Runoff Race in Georgia in Virtual Tie With Almost 60% of Votes Counted

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Incumbent Democratic Senator Raphael Warnock has a slim lead over Republican challenger Herschel Walker in the US Senate race in Georgia with almost 60 percent of votes counted.

Warnock leads 50.2% to 49.8% with 58 percent of ballots counted, according to results posted by CNN.

Earlier, Warnock had a 16-point lead with 20% of votes counted.

The runoff was triggered because no candidate secured a majority in the November 8 midterm elections. The victory would boost the Democrats' majority in the Senate to 51-49.

They have already secured control of the Senate with 50 seats because Vice President Kamala Harris holds the tie-breaking vote.

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Canada Auditor General Says Ottawa Overpaid Billions in Wage Subsidies During Covid Crisis

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Canada's Auditor General Karen Hogan said that Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government overpaid C\$4.6 billion (\$3.4 billion) in wage subsidies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

During the COVID-19 crisis, the Canadian government rolled out two programs, the Canada Recovery Benefit (CRB) and the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy (CEWS) to help families and businesses suffering from the pandemic collateral effects, notably the forced lockdowns, handing over \$154 billion between 2020-2022.

"We found that overpayments of \$4.6 billion were made to ineligible individuals, and we estimated that at least \$27.4 billion of payments to individuals and employers should be investigated further," the Auditor General statement reads.

The audit said the overpayment occurred because in 2020, the Federal government decided to rely on the applicants and the information provided by them.

Ottawa also limited pre-payment controls, as it wanted to expedite procedures to help affected people and employers, the statement added.

According to the audit, the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA) then acknowledged the risks related to limiting pre-payment controls, assured it would increase verifications but delayed the measure causing the inability of the ministry to assess all non-eligible recipients.

Hogan called the CRA to "act now" as she feels concerned about the ministry's inability to track down non-eligible payments.

"The Canada Revenue Agency and Employment and Social Development Canada need to act now to expand their post-payment verification plans to include all recipients identified as being at risk of being ineligible for benefits," she said.

The CRA has only been able to recover around \$1.7 billion worth of overpayments, mostly from voluntary returns.

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Democrat Incumbent Warnock Takes Early Lead in US Senate Runoff Race in Georgia

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Democratic Senator Raphael Warnock has taken an early lead in the US senate runoff race in Georgia, official results revealed.

Warnock has a 58% to 42% lead over Republican challenger Herschel Walker with less than 20 percent of total ballots counted, according to official results posted by Politico on Tuesday.

Warnock garnered the most votes in the November 8 midterm election, but not enough to gain a majority to avoid a runoff that is required by state law.

Republicans were able to steal the House from the Democrats by a slim margin during the 2022 midterm elections, the most expensive in US history, which were held on November 8. Many pundits expected the Republicans to win the House by as many as 20 seats while some thought the party of Lincoln could even take the Senate.

Warnock, a minister, is a member of the Congressional Black Caucus and chair of the Subcommittee on Financial Institutions and Consumer Protection, as well as the Subcommittee on Commodities, Risk Management and Trade.

Walker, a political newcomer, played in the National Football League and started a chicken product distribution business. Walker received endorsements from figures including former US President Donald Trump and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell.

The Senate race in Georgia has been the most expensive one of the election cycle, with over \$300 million expected to be spent on advertisements for the whole year, Politico reported late last month. Warnock led Senate candidates for most money raised this cycle, more than doubling Walker, the report said.

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Taiwan Chipmaker TSMC Triples Investment in Arizona Plants to \$40Bln

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Taiwanese semiconductor manufacturing firm TSMC said in a press release it tripled its investment in chip production in the state of Arizona to \$40 billion.

TSMC initially announced in November that it would invest \$12 billion to build a plant in Phoenix, Arizona, that will manufacture advanced semiconductor chips, creating 1,600 new high-end jobs.

"TSMC today announced that in addition to TSMC Arizona's first fab, which is scheduled to begin production of N4 process technology in 2024, TSMC has also started the construction of a second fab which is scheduled to begin production of 3nm process technology in 2026," the company said on Tuesday. "The overall investment for these two fabs will be approximately US\$40 billion."

Arizona's two manufacturing facilities, according to the release, are expected to create an additional 10,000 high-end jobs, including 4,500 direct TSMC jobs.

The two semiconductor fabs will manufacture over 600,000 wafers per year, with estimated end-product value of more than \$40 billion.

Earlier this year, US President Joe Biden signed legislation which included \$52 billion in subsidies for domestic semiconductor manufacturers that the White House said would create at least 40,000 jobs in the United States.

Biden earlier on Tuesday toured the TSMC facility in Arizona and held a presser alongside several local lawmakers and the city's mayor.

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Musk Says Fired Twitter Counsel Over Concerns About His Role in Information Suppression

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Elon Musk said in a tweet that he had fired Twitter's deputy general counsel over concerns about his role in information suppression under the previous management.

"In light of concerns about Baker's possible role in suppression of information important to the public dialogue, he was exited from Twitter today," Musk said on Tuesday.

Last week, journalist Matt Taibbi in collaboration with Musk published so-called "Twitter Files" - Twitter's internal communications to disclose links with political actors and with a focus on how the social network blocked stories related to Hunter Biden's laptop in the lead-up to the 2020 US Presidential election.

The published files alleged that the previous management of Twitter took extraordinary steps to suppress reporting regarding Hunter Biden's laptop ahead of the 2020 US Presidential Election. According to the Twitter Files published by Taibbi, Baker played a role in the discussion about whether the laptop story fell under Twitter's "hacked materials" policy.

"I support the conclusion that we need more facts to assess whether the materials were hacked," the documents published by Taibbi cited Baker as saying in one of the emails. "At this stage, however, it's reasonable for us to assume that they may have been and that caution is warranted."

Hunter Biden reportedly abandoned his laptop at Isaac's repair shop in 2019, while his father, Joe Biden, was running to become US president. The contents of the laptop were later made public. Emails obtained by Western media from the laptop proved Russia's claims that the US president's son helped fund bioweapon research in Ukraine.

The Bidens have faced scrutiny and criticism from Republicans and others for their alleged misconduct in Hunter Biden's foreign business dealings, which came into the public spotlight following the release of the emails.

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US Court Dismisses Case Against Saudi Crown Prince for Khashoggi Murder - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - A US federal court dismissed a lawsuit against Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman over his alleged role in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi due to an immunity recommendation from the Biden administration, according to a memorandum opinion.

Judge John Bates of the US District Court for the District of Columbia on Tuesday dismissed claims against bin Salman and two other defendants after the Biden administration recommended immunity for the crown prince.

Khashoggi was killed in October 2018 by a team of Saudi agents inside their consulate in Istanbul. US intelligence found that bin Salman, who became the prime minister in September, had approved an operation to murder the journalist.

The facts of the case provide a strong argument that the claims against bin Salman are meritorious, although the case cannot be resolved by the court at this time, the filing said.

"Despite the Court's uneasiness, then, with both the circumstances of bin Salman's appointment and the credible allegations of his involvement in Khashoggi's murder, the United States has informed the Court that he is immune, and bin Salman is therefore 'entitled to head of state immunity... while he remains in office,'" the filing said. "Accordingly, the claims against bin Salman will be dismissed based on head-of-state immunity."

Historically, courts surrender their jurisdiction when the State Department files a suggestion of immunity, according to the filing.

In July, US President Joe Biden met with bin Salman in Jeddah, during which time he raised Khashoggi's murder. Bin Salman said at the time that he does not feel personally responsible for the murder and took action against those who were.

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Harris, Sandu Meet at White House to Discuss Impact of Ukrainian Conflict on Moldova

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris has met with Moldovan counterpart Maia Sandu at the White House to discuss the impact of the Ukrainian conflict on Moldova, the White House announced in a release.

"The Vice President welcomed Moldova's progress on its reform agenda and reaffirmed U.S. support for Moldovan energy security and self-defense," the readout said. "The two also discussed the impact on Moldova of Russia's brutal war against Ukraine, including Moldova's efforts to welcome Ukrainian refugees."

In late November, Moldovan Prime Minister Natalia Gavrilita said that the Moldovan government will ask the parliament to extend the state of emergency for another 60 days due to the continuing energy crisis in the country.

The state of emergency was introduced in Moldova following the launch of Russia's military operation in neighboring Ukraine on February 24 and was extended several times.

The extension is necessitated by the energy crisis and its impact on the transport, energy and border security of Moldova. The Emergency Situations Commission will have the right to make urgent solutions to provide all consumers with energy sources and maintain energy security in Moldova should the state of emergency be extended.

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Canada to Provide \$256Mln for Developing Countries Biodiversity Conservation - PM Office

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Canada will make a new contribution of C\$350 million (\$256 million) to help developing countries in their biodiversity conservation efforts, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's office said in a press release.

On Tuesday, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was delivering remarks at the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP15), hosted by Canada from December 7-19, in the city of Montreal.

"Prime Minister Trudeau today announced that Canada will provide a new contribution of \$350 million to support developing countries – home to the vast majority of the world's biodiversity – to advance conservation efforts," a statement from the Prime Minister's Office reads.

The new investment is made in support of the Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) implementation to which Canada had already pledged the amount of \$732 million, the statement added.

This new financial support to developing countries will potentially place Canada as a nature protection leader, the statement continues.

"By stepping up and bringing the world together in Montreal, we can stop biodiversity loss and build a healthy planet for future generations," the release said.

The announcement comes as Canada pursues its goals on the protection of landmasses and oceans. By 2030, Ottawa aims to preserve an area as large as the European Union, about 30% of the country's territory.

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No Western Power Should Seek to Achieve 'Regime Change' in China - Former Australian PM

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - No Western state should make any attempt to carry out or influence "regime change" in China, former Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison told an audience at the Hudson Institute.

"There is no realistic agenda for regime change: That is an internal matter for China to decide," Morrison, who served as Australia's prime minister from 2018 until this year, said on Tuesday. "We should not assume [that we know] what the Chinese population wants. We should not be so arrogant."

Morrison said current Chinese President Xi Jinping, who has led the country since 2012 and been its president since 2015, had broken with the policies of every Chinese leader over the previous 33 years.

"Xi was the leader that brought an end to Deng [Xiaoping]'s policies. A renewed commitment to the ideology of socialism there has been a revival of the instrument of state control," Morrison said.

China's growth according to some Western assessments is now down to 3.5% a year, Morrison added.

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Blinken on Waning Public Support for Ukraine Conflict: US Does Not Conduct Policy by Polls
WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US government does not inform its foreign policy by conducting polls but rather it is guided by the national interest, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a press briefing.

"We don't do policy by polls. We do policy based on the interests of the United States and the interest of the United States is clearly in supporting and helping Ukraine defend itself against

this aggression from Russia," Blinken said when asked about recent polls showing waning public support for the conflict in Ukraine.

Blinken said he believes that Americans "across the board" care about the situation in Ukraine and the world can become much more challenging for the United States if Washington decides not to support Kiev in its conflict with Russia.

On Monday, a new poll by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs found that only 40% of Americans believe the United States should maintain its current level of support for Ukraine indefinitely.

In addition, the poll found that Americans remain divided on whether the United States should support Ukraine "as long as it takes" - 48%, supporting that view from the 58% reported in July. The United States to date has provided Ukraine with at least \$20 billion in military assistance since the beginning of the Biden administration and has earmarked significantly more for military, economic and other aid.

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China Can Destroy US Satellites in Low Earth Orbit - Pentagon Space Policy Chief

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - China has developed the capability to target and destroy US communications and surveillance satellites operating in low earth orbit - around 200 miles above the earth - and is believed also to be developing the capability to destroy satellites operating in geosynchronous orbit 22,000 miles above the planet, Defense Department Space and Defense Policy Principal Director Gen. Travis Lancaster said.

"China has [the] capability to target high orbit satellites and the intelligence community assesses they are probably developing the capability to target high orbit satellites," Lancaster told an Atlantic Council podcast on Monday.

China has become a major space power with an in-space presence that significantly improves the capability of its air, land and sea forces, Lancaster said.

"China launched over 150 satellites in 2022 alone making a total of 650 currently in orbit. The country's space force presence has greatly improved the precision and accuracy of Chinese missile systems targeting the Western Pacific," he said.

China also continues to deploy sophisticated counter space weapons, Lancaster added.

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US Not Preventing Ukraine From Developing Long-Range Capabilities - Defense Secretary

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is not preventing Ukraine from developing its own long-range weapons systems to strike Russian territory, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said.

"Your question was: is the US working to prevent Ukraine from developing its own long range strike capability? The short answer is no. We're absolutely not doing that," Austin said during a press conference on Tuesday.

The question came following reports that the Defense Department has modified High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) sent to Ukraine to limit their range due to concerns Kiev might use them to strike Russian territory and thereby escalate the conflict.

The United States has provided Ukraine 20 HIMARS launchers with guided munitions that can strike a target nearly 50 miles away. However, Washington has declined to provide Kiev with the Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS), which have a range of almost 200 miles.

While the Defense Department has often touted the effectiveness of the existing HIMARS capabilities on the battlefield in Ukraine, President Joe Biden said last month that he is not looking for Ukraine to start striking Russian territory by providing longer-range weapon systems and munitions.

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US Accuses Iran of 'Unsafe Interaction' in Hormuz Gulf - Central Command

WASHINGTON, December 76 (Sputnik) - A naval vessel operated by the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps interacted in an unsafe manner with a US patrol vessel in international waters in the Gulf of Hormuz, the Central Command (CENTCOM) said.

"An Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy patrol boat interacted in an unsafe and unprofessional manner as US Navy ships transited the Strait of Hormuz, the evening of December 5," CENTCOM said in a press release on Tuesday.

The incident occurred when expeditionary sea base platform ship USS Lewis B. Puller and the guided-missile destroyer USS The Sullivans were conducting a routine transit in international waters and the patrol boat approached them, the release said.

"The Iranian vessel attempted to blind the bridge by shining a spotlight and crossed within 150 yards of the US ships - dangerously close, particularly at night. The US ships safely deescalated the situation through the employment of audible warnings and non-lethal lasers. US Navy ships continued their transit without further incident," the release added.

CENTCOM emphasized that the actions by Iran's vessel violated international standards of professional and safe maritime behavior, increasing the risk of miscalculation and collision, according to the release.

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US Special Counsel Steps Up Trump Investigation - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - Special Counsel Jack Smith has sent subpoenas to elections officials in three US states where officials were allegedly engaged by former President Donald Trump in an effort to overturn the 2020 presidential election, the Washington Post reported on Tuesday.

Smith has subpoenaed local officials in Arizona, Michigan and Wisconsin for any and all communications with him, his campaign and a long list of aides and allies, the report said. The requests for records arrived in Dane County, Wisconsin; Maricopa County, Arizona and Wayne County, Michigan late last week, and in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on Monday, the report said.

These are among the first known subpoenas issued by Smith, who was named last month by US Attorney General Merrick Garland to oversee the January 6, 2021 events at the US Capitol and the investigation into Trump's possible mishandling of classified documents at his Florida home, the report said.

Trump has said the activities are a continuation of the political witch hunt against him that sought to reverse the results of the 2016 presidential election, his agenda while in office and now aim to prevent him from running for president again in 2024.

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US, Australia Agree to Invite Japan to Integrate Into Force Posture Initiatives - Austin

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - US and Australian senior officials have agreed to invite Japan to integrate into force posture initiatives in Australia, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said.

"We agreed to enhance trilateral defense cooperation and to invite Japan to integrate into our force posture initiatives in Australia," Austin said on Tuesday after meeting with Australia's foreign and defense ministers.

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US Will Increase Rotational Presence of US Forces in Australia - Pentagon Chief

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States will enhance the rotational presence of American forces capabilities in Australia, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin said during a press conference.

"Based upon today's talks, we will increase rotational presence of US forces in Australia," Austin said on Tuesday in a joint press conference with Australia's foreign and defense ministers. "That includes rotations of bomber task forces, fighters, and future rotations of US Navy and US Army capabilities."

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US Jury Finds Trump Organization Guilty on All Counts, Including Tax Fraud – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – A US jury has found two Trump Organization entities guilty on all counts, including conspiracy, multiple counts of tax fraud and falsifying business records, CNN reported.

The Trump and Trump Payroll corporations have been found guilty in a tax fraud trial related to a 15-year scheme to defraud tax authorities by not paying taxes for top executives, the report said on Tuesday.

Former US President Donald Trump and his family members have not been charged in the case.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) -

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

* Global oil prices fall by more than 3% on Tuesday evening and the price of Brent oil dipped below \$80 per barrel for the first time since January 6.

* Russia may reduce oil production, but not by much, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.

* It is not possible for Europe to replace the entirety of its Russian gas supply with alternative sources, European Commissioner for Energy Kadri Simson said.

* Azerbaijan has expressed support for a Turkish gas hub project proposed by Russia, Turkish Energy Minister Fatih Donmez said.

UKRAINE DEVELOPMENTS

* Russia has requested a UN Security Council meeting on December 9 to address the matter of weapons supplies to Ukraine by the collective West, Russian mission to the United Nations said on Tuesday.

* The United States has not provided Ukraine with weapons that have given it the capability to strike beyond its borders and the Biden administration is not encouraging Kiev to conduct strikes beyond its borders, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

* The Russian military did not launch missile strikes on Kiev on December 5 during a massive attack on Ukrainian military and energy facilities, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* As a result of negotiations, a total of 60 Russian troops returned from Ukraine and were taken to Moscow by Russian Aerospace Forces aircraft for treatment and rehabilitation, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Ukraine's losses in November amounted to more than 8,300 military, five airplanes, 10 helicopters, 149 tanks, and more than 300 armored vehicles, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

WESTERN SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA

* The draft of a new EU sanctions package against Russia includes a ban on the broadcasting of four channels, as well as control over the export of dual-used goods worth more than 2.3 billion euros (\$2.4 billion), the Financial Times newspaper reported on Tuesday.

* The European Commission will propose a ban on new investments in the mining sector of Russia as part of a new package of sanctions, the Financial Times newspaper reported.

PRICE CAP ON RUSSIAN OIL

* After the introduction of a price cap on oil from Russia, the fragmentation of the world market will become a reality, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov said on Tuesday.

* The United States and the West in general are "biting the hand that feeds them," by introducing the Russian oil price cap, Ryabkov said.

* Russian oil has been and will be in demand, while logistics chains will change, there is no tragedy in this, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.

* The United States is closely monitoring the backlog of oil tanker vessels in Turkey that has been caused by new restrictions that went into effect as part of the collective West's price cap on Russian oil, White House National Economic Council Director Brian Deese said.

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US Senator Warren Working on Bill to Bring Cryptos Under Regulators' Thumb - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - Elizabeth Warren, a senator in President Joe Biden's Democratic Party committed to reducing Wall Street's excesses, is working on a bill that would hand utmost regulatory authority of the cryptocurrency market to the Securities and Exchange Commission, news site Semafor reported Tuesday.

The senator's office is looking at a number of crypto-related issues, such as regulations, taxation, climate, and national security, the report said.

It noted that the senator has stepped up her criticism of cryptocurrency and big finance after the collapse of crypto-exchange FTX sent Bitcoin and other digital coins crashing, causing investors billions of dollars in losses.

Warren could propose ideas that include ensuring broker-dealers and crypto exchanges comply with certain regulatory obligations like providing audited financial statements, and imposing bank-like capital requirements so they are able to withstand financial shocks, the report added.

She could also suggest an expansion in tax reporting requirements for cryptocurrency, beyond rules US lawmakers already enacted last year after changes brought forth by Democrats, according to the report.

Crypto exchange-operator FTX announced on November 11 that it was filing for bankruptcy protection, sending Bitcoin and other notable digital currencies plunging.

FTX was ruined after rival digital currency exchange operator Binance walked away from a proposed acquisition and left it scrambling to raise about \$9.4 billion from investors and rivals, a task it was not up to.

Since FTX's announcement, BlockFi, a lender with exposure to the failed exchange operator, also filed for bankruptcy protection.

In Tuesday's trade, Bitcoin hovered at just under \$17,000, down some 63% on the year.

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US Navy to Accept More Recruits With Lower Aptitudes Amid Personnel Crisis - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) – The US Navy will now be accepting more recruits with lower aptitudes as the recruitment crisis deepens, Military.com reported.

"As we continue to navigate a challenging recruiting environment, changing the AFQT [Armed Forces Qualification Test] requirement removes a potential barrier to enlistment, allowing us to widen the pool of potential recruits and creating opportunities for personnel who wish to serve," Cmdr. David Benham, spokesperson for Commander, Navy Recruiting Command, was quoted by the news outlet on Monday as saying.

As per the new established recruitment guidelines, the US Navy will be able to enlist 7,500 new recruits amongst applicants with high school diplomas scoring between 10-30% on the AFQT, the report said.

This year, about 20% of the entire recruitment pool for the Navy may be made of elements from the lowest aptitudes category, according to the report.

As there may be some concerns regarding the pool "quality," Benham said that all potential candidates will still have to meet the recruitment requirements.

Furthermore, even though the new guidelines open the door to a bigger recruitment pool, this is not meant to be a permanent solution, nor the "cure" to issues regarding Navy enlistment, the report continued.

The US military faces serious challenges in its recruitment goals, falling short 15,000 of its enlistment goals for 2022. Pandemic restrictions, including the COVID-19 vaccination mandates, have contributed to the problem.

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Mayorkas to Visit Ecuador, Colombia for Talks on Migration, Countering Crime - DHS

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas will visit Ecuador and Colombia from December 7-10 for talks with government officials and civil society on migration, crime and other issues, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) said on Tuesday.

"In Ecuador, Secretary Mayorkas will explore opportunities for increased bilateral cooperation with respect to cybersecurity, countering transnational organized crime, strengthening law enforcement information sharing, and regional migration management," DHS said in a statement.

In Colombia, Mayorkas will engage senior officials on priorities including irregular migration flows and information sharing, DHS said.

Mayorkas' visit follows the US-hosted Summit of the Americas in June and the multinational endorsement of the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection, to which Colombia and Ecuador are signatories, DHS said.

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US Approves Potential \$3.75Bn Sale of Abrams Battle Tanks to Poland - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) – The United States approved a possible \$3.75 billion sale of 116 Abrams battle tanks and related equipment to Poland, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Tuesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Poland of M1A1 Abrams Main Battle Tanks and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$3.75 billion," DSCA said in a press release. "The Government of Poland has requested to buy one hundred sixteen (116) M1A1 Abrams Main Battle Tanks."

In addition, Poland has requested 12 Hercules combat recovery vehicles, eight Joint Assault Bridges, six command vehicles, 26 high mobility multi-purpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWV), 26 Joint Light Tactical Vehicles, and other equipment, according to the release.

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US Approves \$1.5Bn Sale of CH-47 Chinook Helicopters to South Korea - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - The United States approved a possible \$1.5 billion sale of CH-47 Chinook helicopters and related equipment to South Korea, the Pentagon said on Tuesday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Republic of Korea of CH-47F helicopters and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$1.5 billion," the Pentagon said in a press release.

South Korea requested to purchase 18 CH-47 Chinook helicopters from the United States and other related equipment, the release said.

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Morgan Stanley Cuts 2% of Staff, Resumes Pre-Pandemic Firing of Bad Performers - CNBC

NEW YORK, December 6 (Sputnik) - Morgan Stanley cut about 2% of its staff on Tuesday, letting go of underperformers at one of Wall Street's biggest banks, CNBC reported, citing people with knowledge of the layoffs.

The moves impacted about 1,600 of the company's 81,567 employees and touched nearly every corner of the global investment bank, according to the people, who spoke on conditions of anonymity.

Least affected were the bank's financial advisors, who bring in its highest revenue by managing client assets. Morgan Stanley is known for its massive wealth management division and top-tier trading and advisory operations.

CNBC said Morgan Stanley appeared to be following top Wall Street bank Goldman Sachs and other rivals, including Citigroup and Barclays, in reinstating an industry ritual put on hold during the coronavirus pandemic: the annual firing of underperformers. Banks typically trim 1% to 5% of their headcount each year, targeting those deemed to be their weakest workers, often before bonuses are paid, in order to leave more money for quality employees.

The banking industry put a halt to staff culling in 2020 after the breakout of the COVID-19 sparked a two-year boom in deals activity, CNBC said, adding that deals dramatically slowed this year amid aggressive interest rate hikes by the Federal Reserve.

Morgan Stanley, like others on Wall Street, has seen its headcount swell in recent years. The bank's employee ranks surged by 34% from the first quarter of 2020 to the third quarter of this year, although that included people brought in from two massive acquisitions. Its last firm-wide reduction in force, known in short as RIF, was in 2019.

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US Senate to Hold Classified Briefing on Ukraine Tomorrow - Majority Leader

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - The US Senate will hold a classified briefing to update lawmakers on the conflict in Ukraine as Congress attempts to pass a government funding bill and the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) before the end of the year, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday.

"Tomorrow, we'll have an all-Senators classified briefing on the latest developments in Ukraine. I'm confident Senators will leave that briefing with a stronger understanding about how critical an omnibus is, not just to fund the government and keep our country moving and innovating, but

to ensure we're providing our troops, our veterans and our allies with what they need," Schumer said during a press conference.

Republicans and Democrats will continue negotiations to fund the government through an omnibus bill or continuing resolution, as well as to pass the NDAA, before the new Congress takes office in January, Schumer said.

Schumer and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell agreed to work together on government funding legislation, for which both sides will "have to give" to send a bill to President Joe Biden's desk, Schumer said.

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US Has Not Provided Ukraine With Arms to Use Inside Russia - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - The United States has not provided Ukraine with weapons that have given it the capability to strike beyond its borders and the Biden administration is not encouraging Kiev to conduct strikes beyond its borders, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"We are not enabling Ukraine to strike beyond its borders. We are not encouraging Ukraine to strike beyond its borders," Price said during a press briefing in response to attacks on two Russian air bases earlier this week.

Price pointed out that the United States has made clear US weapons sent to Ukraine are "defensive supplies."

The Russian Defense Ministry said the attacks against the two Russian air bases were conducted by Ukrainian drones.

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January 6 House Committee to Issue Criminal Referrals – Chair

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) – The House select committee investigating the January 6 riot will send criminal referrals to the Justice Department, but is yet to decide who it will recommend charging and what offenses it will put forward, Chair Rep. Bennie Thompson said Tuesday.

"What we've decided is that we will probably make referrals," Thompson told reporters as quoted by The New York Times. "There's a general agreement we will do some referrals, but we've got to get there. We're not there yet."

The committee is to meet later Tuesday, where the criminal referrals will be part of its discussion, Thompson added.

The statement was made as a debate is ongoing within the panel about whether to issue charges against former President Donald Trump and some of his top allies.

A criminal referral would be a symbolic act by the panel since the Congress has no power to charge or prosecute, the newspaper noted.

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US Imports From Russia More Than Double to \$732.4Mln in Oct - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - US imports from Russia more than doubled in October, even with the United States having banned imports of Russian oil, data from the Commerce Department showed on Tuesday.

US imports from Russia stood at \$732.4 million last month, up from \$332.1 million in October, the international trade balances data showed.

Exports, meanwhile, contracted to \$80.1 million from \$90.4 million in the same period.

The US trade deficit against Russia as a whole was at 11.685 million for the first 10 months of the year versus \$19.660 million for the same period of 2021.

The United States' trade deficit against the rest of the world increased 5% in October to reach slightly more than \$78 billion as global demand appeared to slow for US-made goods and services, which were also disadvantaged by a stronger dollar.

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US Closely Monitoring Oil Tanker Backlog in Turkey Caused By Price Cap - White House

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is closely monitoring the backlog of oil tanker vessels in Turkey that has been caused by new restrictions that went into effect as part of the collective West's price cap on Russian oil, White House National Economic Council Director Brian Deese said on Tuesday.

"We're closely monitoring the situation but I think it's too early to make any judgments," Deese said during a press gaggle when asked if there is any concern about the backlog having an impact on global oil supply.

The price cap is not expected to have any material impact on the global oil market, Deese added.

On Monday, media reported that some 19 oil tankers were stuck in Turkey's Bosphorus and Dardanelles straits, which link Russia's Black Sea ports to the global oil markets.

The oil shipping disruption occurred after the European Union's price cap plan limiting Russian oil to \$60 per barrel went into effect on Monday as part of an effort to limit Moscow's oil revenues and ability to fund its special military operation in Ukraine.

The European Union has prohibited tankers transporting Russian oil from accessing Western maritime insurance unless the oil is sold under the Group of Seven (G7) price cap of \$60 per barrel.

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Biden May Announce Reelection Bid Shortly After New Year Holidays - White House

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is likely to announce his intention to seek reelection shortly after the New Year holidays, White House Chief of Staff Ronald Klain said.

"I hear from a lot of Democrats across the country that they want him to run. But the president will make that decision. I expect it shortly after the holidays, but I expect the decision will be to do it," he said at The Wall Street Journal's CEO Council Summit on Monday.

Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, announced in November he will run for the country's top office in 2024.

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US Lawmaker Proposes Bill to Hold Saudi Arabia Responsible for Attack on US Naval Facility

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Matt Gaetz issued a statement on Tuesday that he has introduced a bill to hold Saudi Arabia accountable for the terrorist attack at US Naval Air Station Pensacola in 2019.

"This morning, US Congressman Matt Gaetz (FL-01) introduced the 'Saudi Arabia December 6, 2019, Anti-Terror and Accountability Act,'" the statement said.

On December 6, 2019, a Saudi pilot who trained at the Naval Air Station Pensacola in Florida opened fire on the personnel there, killing three US servicemen and wounding more than a dozen others before the authorities shot him dead.

"This bill will hold the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia accountable for aiding and abetting terrorist attacks within the United States while financially supporting the victims of the NAS Pensacola Terrorist Attack," the statement said.

The bill requires the US government to end support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, halt any US military officer exchange programs with Saudi Arabia and authorizes the victims of the attack in Pensacola to seek damages from the Saudi Arabian government.

"The legislation also withdraws \$1 billion from US military aid to Ukraine and deposits the same amount to the Justice for United States Victims of State-Sponsored Terrorism Fund," the statement added.

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Fracking Activity Impacting Frequency, Intensity of Earthquakes in Texas - Oil Regulator

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - Fracking-related activity in West Texas is having an impact on the frequency and intensity of earthquakes in the region, the Texas Railroad Commission, the industry regulator in the top oil-producing state, told Sputnik.

On November 16, a 5.4 magnitude earthquake struck West Texas, making it the state's largest recorded earthquake in three decades, according to the US Geological Survey.

"The RRC has been monitoring seismicity over the course of several years and identified produced water injection disposal as having an impact on the frequency and intensity of earthquakes. Produced water is produced during oil and gas production," Texas Railroad Commission (RRC) spokesperson Andrew Keese said in response to whether fracking contributed to the 5.4 magnitude earthquake.

To protect residents and the environment, the Texas Railroad Commission created three seismic response plans in the Permian Basin, the most productive oil and gas area in the state, Keese said.

The response plans to reduce injection-induced seismicity include reduction of daily injection volumes in disposal wells and suspension of disposal well permits, Keese said.

Texas' state seismic monitoring network and seismicity research center, TexNet, found that from 2017 to 2020, about 68% of earthquakes above magnitude 1.5 were highly associated with hydraulic fracturing or the disposal of produced formation water into either shallow or deep geologic formations, which is a common practice by oil companies at the end of the fracking process that can shift fault lines.

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Congressman Biggs Says Challenging McCarthy for US House Speaker to Dislodge Establishment

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - Representative Andy Biggs said on Tuesday that he is challenging Republican colleague Kevin McCarthy to become the next Speaker of the House in order to dislodge establishment control of the lower chamber.

"We will elect an establishment Republican as the speaker – think [former House Speaker] Paul Ryan, or in this case, Ryan's right-hand man, Kevin McCarthy," Biggs said in a Daily Caller op-ed detailing his bid. "We actually have an opportunity to dislodge the establishment and reinvigorate the America First movement that was founded by former President Donald Trump."

Biggs claimed McCarthy lacks leadership for not using the spending package currently under consideration by Congress as leverage over President Joe Biden and the Democratic Party.

Biggs also criticized McCarthy for circulating a censure resolution of Trump and protecting Congresswoman Liz Cheney from removal from the Republican Party.

It is "inadequate" to plead or work with the political establishment, according to Biggs.

Republicans will never change the status quo by choosing status quo candidates for positions of power, Biggs said.

Republicans are expected to hold a slim 222-seat majority in the House when the new Congress starts in January, meaning McCarthy can only afford to lose a handful of votes before he is unable to reach the 218 votes needed to become speaker.

Republicans including Biggs, Matt Gaetz, Ralph Norman, Bob Good and Matt Rosendale have expressed opposition to McCarthy's leadership, with the latter two pressing for changes to House rules in exchange for support.

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Parties to Ukraine Conflict Must Uphold Int'l Law on War Prisoners - Chinese Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 6 (Sputnik) - China stands for upholding the Geneva Conventions regarding the treatment of prisoners of war in the Ukraine conflict and captured combatants must be treated humanely, Chinese Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Geng Shuang said on Tuesday.

"According to the third Geneva Convention, prisoners of war are entitled to human treatment and protection from torture and ill treatment and other harm," Geng Shuang said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The parties to the conflict should strictly uphold relevant international law, he added.

Tuesday's meeting was requested by France and Mexico to discuss the humanitarian situation in Ukraine. UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths briefed the UN Security Council members with updated information on the situation in Ukraine.

The members of the UN Security Council who belong to the so-called collective West called on Russia to stop all military actions in Ukraine and accused Moscow of continuing to disregard international law. They also warned of the coming danger of cold temperatures during the winter in Ukraine, which suffers from electricity and fuel shortages.

Russian diplomats said during the meeting that the Western countries exhibit a double standard and that Moscow will use whatever means at its disposal to reach its goals in Ukraine.

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Colorado Nightclub Shooting Suspect Charged With 305 Crimes, Including Murder - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - The 22-year old suspect accused of carrying out a mass shooting at a lesbian-gay-bisexual-transsexual (LGBT) nightclub in the US state of Colorado has been charged with 305 criminal counts, including murder and crimes of bias, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday.

Anderson Lee Aldrich is being charged with murder, attempted murder, assault and crimes of bias after allegedly killing five people and wounding 19 others in a shooting at Club Q in Colorado Springs last month, the report said, citing the prosecutors in a court hearing on the case.

Aldrich, who identifies as "non-binary" and uses the pronouns "they" and "them," was apprehended by the authorities after reportedly being subdued by people present during the shooting, the report said.

Aldrich has yet to enter a plea in the case, the report added.

A preliminary hearing in the case was scheduled for late February, according to the report.

Charges could be amended during later court appearances as more victims are identified, according to the report.

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US Senator Urges Biden Admin. to Prioritize Arming Taiwan Over Ukraine - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - US Senator Josh Hawley on Tuesday sent a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin calling on the two officials to prioritize arming Taiwan to deter a potential invasion by China over sending weapons to Ukraine.

"I write with concern about reports that US arms transfers to Ukraine are impeding our ability to prevent a war in Asia by supplying Taiwan with the weapons it needs to deter a Chinese invasion," Hawley said in the letter.

The senator said Taiwan is more important for US national interests than Ukraine since Washington does not have the luxury of waiting for China to attack the island and it will be extremely difficult to deliver weapons to Taiwan after an invasion begins.

The senator added that Javelin and Stinger missiles, HIMARS rocket launchers and related weapons should be sent to Taiwan as quickly as possible and not be diverted to or delayed because of Ukraine.

At the same time, Hawley suggested tying any US arms transfers to Taiwanese defense spending increases and reforms, according to the letter.

Hawley cited a report by the US-China Economic and Security Review Commission that found that the diversion of existing stocks of weapons and munitions to Ukraine and pandemic-related supply chain issues has exacerbated a sizeable backlog in the delivery of weapons already approved for sale to Taiwan, undermining the island's readiness.

According to media reports in November, the backlog of deliveries for Taiwan was more than \$14 billion a year ago and has since grown to nearly \$19 billion.

US-China relations worsened after US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi visited Taiwan in early August. Beijing condemned Pelosi's trip, which it regarded as a gesture of support for separatism, and launched large-scale military exercises in the vicinity of Taiwan. Nevertheless, several countries, including France, the United States, Japan and others, have sent their delegations to the island since then, further increasing tensions in the Taiwan Strait.

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Nebenzia Leaves UNSC Meeting During Ukraine Ambassador's Address

UNITED NATIONS, December 6 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia walked out of the UN Security Council's room on Tuesday right before his Ukrainian counterpart, Sergiy Kyslytsya, began his speech, a Sputnik correspondent reports. "I am not going to listen to what is going to be said by the representative of the Ukraine team," Nebenzia told a UN Security Council meeting. Nebenzia referred to the "undiplomatic tweets" of the Ukrainian envoy.

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Europe Unable to Replace All of Russian Gas Supply With Other Sources - EU Energy Chief

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - It is not possible for Europe to replace the entirety of its Russian gas supply with alternative sources, European Commissioner for Energy Kadri Simson said on Tuesday.

"We also know that it is impossible to replace 100% of Russian gas with alternative suppliers. That means that we also need other alternative, parallel actions," Simson said during an interview with the Atlantic Council.

The statement comes as a coalition of countries led by the United States and Europe seek to diminish Russia's revenue from energy exports, including by imposing a \$60, adjustable price cap on Russian oil.

Europe began moving away from Russia as a supplier of energy following the beginning of its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24.

Projects to connect the continent to new sources of energy include a turn to the United States as a supplier of fuel and plans by Slovenia to build a pipeline to Hungary for Algerian gas. However, Hungary still receives some 85% of its gas from Russia.

Earlier this month, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban said he would seek an exemption from EU sanctions on Russian gas and atomic energy.

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Russia's Martyshev to Be Released From US Custody on December 20 - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) – Russian national Yury Martyshev, jailed in the United States on charges of computer hacking, will be released from custody on December 20 and extradited, his lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik on Tuesday.

"We anticipate that Yuri Martyshev will be released from federal custody on December 20. At that time, he will be transferred to US Immigration for further processing and ultimately

deportation back to Russia. We are in contact with the immigration authorities to hopefully expedite his removal to the Russian Federation, and this all will be set in motion once his is transferred out of federal custody," Tarasov said.

Martyshev wants to come back to Russia, the lawyer added.

In April 2019, a US federal court sentenced Martyshev to 78 months in jail on charges of computer hacking.

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US Trade Deficit Increases 5% in October as Global Demand Slows, Dollar Strengthens

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - The United States' trade deficit against the rest of the world increased 5% in October to just over \$78 billion as global demand appeared to slow for US-made goods and services, which were also disadvantaged by a stronger dollar.

"The goods and services deficit was \$78.2 billion in October, up \$4 billion from \$74.1 billion in September, revised," the Census Bureau and Bureau of Economic Analysis, both units of the US Commerce Department, said in a statement.

The statement showed that US exports fell 0.7% to \$256.6 billion while imports rose 0.6% to \$334.8 billion.

Global growth is forecast to slow from 6% in 2021 to 3.2% in 2022 and 2.7% in 2023, the International Monetary Fund said in an outlook released in October. The IMF said this is the weakest growth profile since 2001 except for the global financial crisis and the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The dollar has also appreciated sharply this year, at one point climbing more than 11% since the end of December 2021 against the currencies of the main US trading partners. The value of the dollar increased as the Federal Reserve kept piling on interest rates to curb inflation, expanding at the fastest rate in four decades.