

12/14/22 Wednesday

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'Hasty, Self-Imposed' Transition: Austrian Ex-FM Blasts Brussels Plan to Quickly Abandon Russian Gas
By - Fantine Gardinier

During an interview at Sputnik offices in Moscow, former Austrian Foreign Minister Karin Kneissl was asked about the prospects for success that Europe has for totally abandoning Russian natural gas imports. According to International Energy Agency data, doing so would create a shortage of 30 billion cubic meters of gas.

"Well, it's the question that has been debated ever since late February or early March, when it was clear, and particularly from the stance of Berlin, [that there was] no way to renounce Russian energy supply. The German government accepted the coal boycott. That was one of the early sanctions. But they wanted to make sure, 'please we cannot renounce Russian gas,'" she said, paraphrasing attitudes in German Chancellor Olaf Scholz's government.

"And you really have to check from country to country. In the case of Germany, Austria, Italy, and some other Central European countries like Hungary, Slovakia, the reliance on Russian pipeline gas is heavy. And it's a different story for a country like Ireland or Portugal. So, it really depends on the energy mix and respective import situation," she said.

Kneissl noted that "there has been already a legal decision made by the EU as a whole, by the Germans in particular, to renounce fossil [fuels] in general. And it's not only a moral obligation, it's a normative obligation that has been pushing investors out of fossil. So what we actually have been watching for the last, I would say at least three or four years, is what is called underinvestment. There is not enough investment into fossil: one of the factors why we have seen price hikes ever since spring 2021, when the economy was picking up again after one-and-a-half years of lockdowns."

However, Kneissl said the clock is ticking not just for Russian gas and oil, but for all fossil fuels, as nations make increasingly ambitious commitments to ending the use of pollutive fuels in a bid to slow the pace of global warming. But that transition can't happen overnight, as the European Union is now attempting to do.

"The question is when," she said of dropping fossil fuels. "Not this year. Not next year, maybe in 10 or 15 years. And gas has always been presented as the energy of transition, of bridging the gap from the fossil age to a renewable age. That is what the narrative was. For many years, I've been following that topic. So what is happening now is a very hasty, self-imposed renouncement."

Kneissl recalled the Oil Shock of 1973 and later the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, two previous cases that served as examples of "a crisis triggered by events in a [energy] producing country or several producing countries" that affected energy markets. However, the present situation is "special" for another reason.

“Today we have the customers, so we have the demand side. It's not the supply side, we have the demand side that is boycotting so to say a certain part of the market. And this is special. This is weird, I would say. And the outcome remains to be seen now that China is somehow coming back to the demand side, because we know that the long lockdowns - and this actually helped the market not to go through the roof, because China is the number one oil importer, a very important gas importer - but with its constant lockdowns, the Chinese market was very phlegmatic. And now they are picking up and this will also have an impact. So the European reliance is there and the price uncertainty will be with us. Where [do we] get the gas from?” she asked.

Check out the rest of Kneissl's sit-down with Sputnik [here](#).

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With Half-Point Hike, Fed Sets Interest Rates at Highest Point Since 2007 Crisis

By - Fantine Gardinier

In a widely anticipated move, the US Federal Reserve on Wednesday increased interest rates by 50 base points, raising them to the highest level seen since December 2007. However, recent comments by its director indicate the Fed is far from done with rate hikes.

With the most recent increase, the [Effective Federal Funds Rate](#), which governs how much of their assets banks are not permitted to lend to each other overnight, is now set at between 4.25% and 4.5%. The last time it was this high was December 2007, when the Fed was rapidly slashing rates in an attempt to stave off financial collapse.

Ironically, this time the Fed is raising rates, despite wide expectations of a stagnating economy in 2023, because it is the textbook maneuver by fiscal policymakers to fight inflation. The anticipated recession is in part due to the rising interest rates, which put a damper on new investments.

The Fed's move comes a day after the Bureau of Labor Statistics [delivered promising news](#) about inflation, showing the pace at which the US dollar is depreciating has continued to slow. The 7.1% increase in commodity prices in October 2022, as compared to a year earlier, is the smallest increase seen all year, and is seen as reflective of success by the Fed.

However, inflation remains at [historically high rates](#), and little has been done policy-wise to confront what some economists say is the biggest culprit behind inflation: corporate profiteering.

According to [an April study](#) by the Economic Policy Institute, 58% of inflation over the previous two years was due to corporate profits, not other price pressures like shipping or labor costs.

US President Joe Biden has condemned “war profiteering” by oil giants for selling petroleum and petroleum products at elevated prices, but taken no political action against the practice.

Other causes include the boycott on Russian energy products, and manufacturing and shipping troubles created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said earlier this month that while the central bank might slow down its rate increases in the coming period - something already begun with

Wednesday's move - it might have to reach a higher target EFR than previously believed, above 5%.

"Historical experience cautions strongly against prematurely loosening policy. I wouldn't see us considering rate cuts until the committee is confident that inflation is moving down to 2% in a sustained way," Powell reiterated on Wednesday.

"There's an expectation really that the services inflation will not move down so quickly so that we'll have to stay at it," Powell explained at a news conference. "So we may have to raise rates higher to get to where we want to go and that's really why we're writing down those high rates and why we're expecting that they will have to remain high for a time."

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Graphic Video: Delta Employee Hit by Truck While Guiding Plane at Atlanta Airport
By - Fantine Gardinier

A shocking incident at a Georgia airport was captured on film recently, in which an airport worker was struck by a truck on the tarmac.

According to local media reports, the Delta Air Lines worker was working as a "wing walker," helping to guide a Boeing 717 aircraft into the gate at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport on Saturday evening.

Wearing an orange safety vest and carrying bright orange marshalling wands, the worker should have been easily visible to others on the tarmac around her. Despite this, video posted on social media shows that the lavatory servicing vehicle made no effort to brake prior to striking her in the back at high speed.

The video can be viewed [at this link](#). Caution: viewer discretion is advised.

The impact sends the woman flying, and it seems like the driver doesn't realize they've hit something until a moment later. It is hard to tell if the truck's rear wheels run over her or not. However, the driver soon comes to a stop and rushes back to check on the woman.

Just after the truck impacts the woman, an announcement sounds on the PA system that seems to be related to the incident: "attention lav techs, lav techs, please, please watch your speed out on the ramp, and pay attention to your surroundings."

According to local news, which viewed the police report, the worker "was laying on the ground and bleeding from her head" when the responding officer arrived on the scene. She was taken to the hospital with non-life-threatening injuries and is reported to be in stable condition.

The driver reportedly told police he was looking at his tablet at the time he struck the woman. The driver was cited and lost his airport badge.

Delta said it was fully investigating the incident. Local reports included no information about any potential charges.

Airport work can be dangerous. An employee at Louis Armstrong airport in New Orleans, Louisiana, was killed earlier this year after her hair became entangled in a belt loader while unloading cargo from an aircraft.

A 2016 survey by the Bureau of Labor Statistics found that "air transportation workers had 6.7 cases of nonfatal workplace injuries and illnesses per 100 full-time equivalent workers. That was more than twice the rate of 2.9 cases for all private industry workers."

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In Fresh Swing at Trump, McConnell Bemoans 'Candidate Quality' Issue Behind Mediocre Midterm Success

By - Fantine Gardinier

Amid poor election performance by his chosen candidates, a wave of lawsuits and controversies, and venomous infighting with other GOP figures, former US President Donald Trump has become the favorite punching bag for conservatives furious about the Democrats' continued successes.

US Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) renewed his attacks on former US President Donald Trump on Tuesday, blaming him for the party's mediocre electoral success in the November 2022 midterms.

"We ended up having a candidate quality [issue]," McConnell told reporters in the Capitol on Tuesday, recalling a series of close races Republicans lost in the November 8 vote. He noted his affiliated super PAC, the Senate Leadership Fund, "intervened" in the GOP Senate primary races in Alabama and Missouri to ensure the defeat of Trump allies Rep. Mo Brooks and former Missouri Governor Eric Greitens, respectively.

Brooks, who helped found the right-wing Freedom Caucus, was once a fierce Trump backer and one of the speakers at Trump's "Stop the Steal" rally on January 6, 2021, which immediately preceded the US Capitol breach. Ironically, after winning Trump's endorsement, Brooks claimed the former president had asked him to "[immediately remove](#)" US President Joe Biden from the White House, return Trump to power, and hold a new special election. Trump then pulled his endorsement, and Brooks became a vocal opponent.

McConnell said on Tuesday that the GOP had to "relearn one more time - you have to have quality candidates to win competitive Senate races," recalling several past elections in which that lesson had been hard-learned.

"Our ability to control the primary outcome was quite limited in '22 because the support of the former president proved to be very decisive in these primaries. So my view was do the best you can with the cards you're dealt. Hopefully in the next cycle we'll have quality candidates everywhere and a better outcome," the Senate GOP chief said.

McConnell has long been a Trump adversary, drawing the then-president's ire by opposing his attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election, which he lost to Biden.

McConnell later condemned the January 6 insurrection, laid the responsibility for the violence at Trump's feet, and supported his impeachment, although he ultimately [voted for Trump's acquittal](#), because he said the trial had become political by being held after Trump had left office.

However, in the two years since, Trump had lost many other once-staunch allies as well, [including in Congress](#) and even his own [vice president, Mike Pence](#). Several polls held since the November 2022 midterm election have also shown that among the GOP rank-and-file, Trump's popularity has waned, with more supporting Florida Governor Ron DeSantis in a hypothetical 2024 presidential race.

The newest poll, published by Suffolk University and USA Today on Wednesday, showed 56% of polled Republican voters said they'd prefer DeSantis to Trump in 2024. Of all registered voters surveyed, 60% said they didn't want to see Trump or Biden run in 2024.

"There's a new Republican sheriff in town," David Paleologos, director of the Suffolk University Political Research Center, said in [a news release](#). "DeSantis outpolls Trump not only among the general electorate, but also among these Republican-leaning voters who have been the former president's base. Republicans and conservative independents increasingly want Trumpism without Trump."

Of the three, only Trump has publicly announced a bid for the presidency in 2024. DeSantis has remained mum on the idea, and while Biden has spoken of a 2024 run and [recently joined a toast](#) to such an effort, he has yet to formally open a campaign.

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Video: Fireball That Exploded Over Canada in 2021 Originated in the Oort Cloud

By - Mary Manley

On February 22 of last year a fireball streaked across the sky of Alberta, Canada. The fireball, which is a meteor nearly bright as the planet Venus, was also visible from British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Montana. The American Meteor Society (AMS) had received more than 400 reports and more than 100 videos of the bright object at the time.

[Scientists](#) have managed to track down the origin of a fireball which exploded over Canada in February of last year. While Earth is no stranger to all kinds of space debris that falls into its atmosphere on a daily basis, fireballs are usually masked by daylight or occur over oceans and uninhabited regions.

The fireball from February, according to scientists, is not a typical kind of meteor. The object is believed to have originated in the Oort Cloud, which is far beyond the reach of Pluto's orbit. According to NASA, the inner edge of the [Oort Cloud](#) is thought to be between 2,000 and 5,000 astronomical units (AU) from the sun. An AU is the distance between Earth and the sun (about 93 million miles).

While it's not unusual for material from the Oort Cloud to be ejected and head toward the direction of our solar system, the fireball from February exploded in such a way that [scientists](#) believe the object was made of rock, and not a chunk of frozen ammonia, methane and water as is typically discovered to come from the Oort Cloud, otherwise known as a long-period comet.

"This discovery supports an entirely different model of the formation of the Solar System, one which backs the idea that significant amounts of rocky material co-exist with icy objects within the Oort Cloud," says [Denis Vida](#), a physicist of the University of Western Ontario in Canada. "This result is not explained by the currently favored Solar System formation models. It's a complete game changer."

Last year's meteor was found to be around 10 centimeters (4 inches) across and weighed around 2 kilograms (4.4 pounds), and had the same burn and disintegration that is consistent with a rocky fireball. However, its trajectory matched the orbit of a long-period comet, leading researchers to question its origin and wonder how a rocky meteoroid could end up so far from its original home.

"We want to explain how this rocky meteoroid ended up so far away because we want to understand our own origins. The better we understand the conditions in which the Solar System was formed, the better we understand what was necessary to spark life," [says Vida](#).

"We want to paint a picture, as accurately as possible, of these early moments of the Solar System that were so critical for everything that happened after."

According to the AMS, observers can expect to see just one fireball of a magnitude -6 or better for every 200 hours of meteor observation while a fireball magnitude -4 can be witnessed once every 20 hours. For reference: Venus at its brightest is gaged at a magnitude of -4.5, the full moon is a -12.6 magnitude, and the sun is a -26.7 magnitude.

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Prince William and Kate Middleton Actively 'Avoiding' New Netflix Series 'Harry & Meghan'
By - Mary Manley

"They were happy to lie to protect my brother," alleged Harry in the docuseries about William, Prince of Wales. The new Netflix series in which the Duke and Duchess of Sussex were paid a reported £112 million for has received mixed reviews, despite being the streaming service's highest-viewed documentary ever.

A source from Buckingham Palace revealed to US [media](#) on Wednesday that the Prince and Princess of Wales, William and Kate, are actively "avoiding the series," and are instead having aides watch the show.

"It will take a long time before there is harmony between the brothers," the source said. "There is a lot of anger there."

The source added that King Charles III is open to reconciling with his youngest son and would "certainly rescue the situation if he could. He would love this to stop."

The series, "Harry & Meghan," is a £112 million deal between the Duke and Duchess of Sussex and Netflix that documents the couples' departure from their position as working senior royal members in 2020 and some of the fallout thereafter.

But, as TV critic [Daniel D'Addario](#) writes, the show is only a surprise for viewers in the fact that it illustrates "how narrow their vision of their fame is, how pinched and unimaginative their presence on the world stage has become."

If viewers are able to look past the cringe-worthiness of Meghan referring to her husband as “H” and Harry referring to her as “M,” they may start to sympathize with the couple's disdain of the British media.

The docuseries—which uses historians to touch upon the colonizing and racist history of the British monarchy including its Commonwealth—spends most of its time in the first three aired episodes criticizing British tabloids, which the couple views as immoral, money-seeking, and relentless with the goal of wanting to “destroy” Meghan, the Duchess claimed.

At one point in the series a video shows a distressed Meghan inside a car running through the locations of where she and Harry have clashed with paparazzi and strategized about how to avoid them.

Harry also claimed the British media, which was attacking Meghan with critical, racist undertones, were “happy to lie to protect [William],” and that they were “never willing to tell the truth to protect us.”

“When Will and Kate came over and I had met her for the first time, they came over for dinner,” Meghan said in the [documentary](#). “I remember I was in ripped jeans and barefoot.”

“Like I was a hugger, always been a hugger,” she added. “I didn’t realize that that is really jarring for a lot of Brits.”

“I guess I’d start to understand very quickly that the formality on the outside, carried through on the inside,” she continued. “There is a forward-facing way of being and then you close the door and you relax now. But that formality carries over on both sides. And that was surprising to me.” After leaving the British royal family, Harry and Meghan are now living in the coastal city of Montecito in California with their two young children. The couple are, apparently, focusing on their work as campaigners, charity benefactors and media personalities. Meghan currently has a feminist-aimed podcast called “Archetypes”.

Bob Seely, a Conservative Party lawmaker, said he would try to introduce a bill to Parliament that will strip Harry and Meghan of their royal titles because he views the documentary as an attack on an “important British institution.” Employment Minister Guy Opperman has called the couple “utterly irrelevant.”

According to Ingrid Seward, the editor-in-chief of Majesty, palace officials were “braced for the worst” following the bombshell interview Meghan and Harry did with Oprah Winfrey in 2021. The couple had made allegations of racism in the royal family, which William publicly denied. Buckingham Palace has made no comment on the docuseries.

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'I Thought It Was An Earthquake': Rain-Wrapped Tornado Blasts New Orleans

By - Mary Manley

A second tornado has descended on New Orleans this year. The first tornado was a powerful EF3 tornado that swept through the Lower Ninth Ward and Arabi on March 22 and is the strongest on record to strike the area which resulted in the death of a 25-year-old man.

A destructive tornado swept through New Orleans [late Wednesday](#) as part of a series of dangerous winter storms that continue to push eastward from their origins in the West this past [weekend](#).

The National Weather Service (NWS) first issued a warning for the twister at 3:45 p.m. local time. The rain-wrapped tornado then made its way through southeast Louisiana, destroying homes and structures in Killona, West Bank, and Arabi.

At least three possible tornadoes were spawned out of a storm that has been moving through the US South, while at least one was confirmed to be on the ground near Arabi starting at 4:04 p.m. and headed northeastward at a speed of 35 miles per hour.

A 56-year-old woman in Killona died after a possible tornado tore through the area of Schoolhouse Road, officials say. Seven others were injured. Mobile homes were flipped onto their sides by the tornado in that same area while power lines were also knocked down.

“When it first started, I thought it was an earthquake,” said [Joan Hill](#), who was in her shotgun home on the 1000 block of 9th Street when the storm ripped through. “And then I started being battered between the walls.”

Hill said the storm was over in seconds, but was so strong it moved her house about eight feet to the right and had ripped the roof off the back of her home. Another eyewitness who lives on the 900 block of Dolholde, said her entire house shifted several feet off of its foundation.

Tens of thousands of people in New Orleans were without power following the storm; however by 9:34 p.m. the number of [power outages](#) shrunk to 4,573 customers.

In north Louisiana, a [mother](#) and her 8-year-old son were found dead under a pile of debris in Caddo Parish after a tornado blew through the area late Tuesday. Nearly two dozen people across the state have been injured as a result of a series of tornadoes that moved across Louisiana and some parts of Mississippi. New Orleans was also hit just nine months ago by a more powerful tornado which destroyed dozens of homes and left one person dead.

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Dramatic Footage Shows Florida Officer Accidentally Overdose on Fentanyl During Traffic Stop
By - Mary Manley

A video of a Florida police officer struggling in and out of consciousness was released as an urgent message to the public about the dangers of fentanyl. The drug is a synthetic opioid that is 100 times stronger than morphine and 50 times stronger than heroin. It is added to other drugs to increase potency, and make illicit sales cheaper.

A terrifying video of a [Florida](#) officer was recently released showing her in a state of unconsciousness after being just barely exposed to the drug fentanyl.

Tavares Officer Courtney Bannick was performing a traffic stop on Tuesday alongside other officers when she found the deadly narcotic inside a rolled-up dollar bill, police believe.

Shortly after the vehicle search, Bannock began to struggle to breathe. Luckily another officer heard her choking and realized she needed immediate medical attention.

Video of the incident shows officers laying her on the ground and administering Narcan or “naloxone,” a medicine that rapidly reverses an opioid overdose. The medicine can be administered through a nasal spray or injected directly into a person’s muscle, under the skin, or in their vein, according to the National Institutes of Health ([NIH](#)).

The officers had to give Bannick three doses of Narcan as they waited for ambulances to arrive; she is, however, expected to make a full recovery.

“She was completely lifeless. She looks deceased in these videos,” Tavares police Detective Courtney Sullivan told an [Orlando](#) news outlet. “So she’s very thankful today.”

“If the other officers weren’t there, there’s a very high chance and probability that today would be different and that we would be wearing our thin blue line — the straps that go over our badges,” Sullivan said, referring to protocol when an officer dies in the line of duty.

Bannick, who was wearing gloves at the time of the search, said she had performed this kind of search “100 times before the same way” adding that it only takes “one time and a minimal amount” to cause someone to have an overdose.

“I’m thankful I wasn’t alone and had immediate help,” she said.

Officers believe wind may have picked up the fentanyl and blown it into Bannick’s face, causing her to overdose. The individuals they had performed a search on are now facing criminal charges.

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Chilean Parties Restart Process to Replace Dictatorship-Era Constitution

By - Wyatt Reed

After a first proposed constitutional rewrite was widely rejected by voters, Chile’s leading politicians have agreed to a do-over – on significantly more moderate terms.

Political parties in Chile have reached an agreement to attempt another rewrite of the country’s constitution, after 62% of voters rejected the first version suggested by a constitutional commission in September.

According to the rules agreed upon by most of the country’s main political actors, the Senate and the National Assembly will appoint half of the members of a constitutional council consisting of 50 elected officials and a commission made up of 24 experts.

The shift to appointing experts to rewrite the document marks a significant departure from the previous process, under which members of the assembly drafting the new constitution were elected directly by the people of Chile.

Chilean President Gabriel Boric has described replacing the constitution as one of the main goals during his time in office.

Under the current neoliberal constitution — which was imposed by the military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet in 1980 – business interests are prioritized over the welfare of working Chileans.

On Tuesday, Boric described the agreed-upon accord as a compromise and expressed optimism about the direction of the process.

“I value this agreement,” the president explained, noting that all parties involved “had to move from our original positions.”

According to Alvaro Elizalde, the president of the Senate, in January the commission will get to work on a proposal for a new constitution, which the council will use as a blueprint. With council members set to be elected in April, the final vote to approve their proposed document won't be held until the final months of 2023.

The current push to replace Chile's constitution is largely a product of a massive protest movement which sprung up in late 2019 over a planned hike in subway fares.

The initial demands quickly grew to include replacing the country's foundational document with one more amenable to the interests of working Chileans, indigenous groups, and the environment. In November of that year, Chile's Congress agreed to hold a referendum on rewriting a new constitution, which was ultimately supported by 78% of the population.

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Peru's President Castillo Says He'll Be Released Wednesday – Even After Judge Denies Appeal

By - Wyatt Reed

An optimistic statement by Peru's imprisoned president is likely to give hope to the tens of thousands of largely indigenous demonstrators who've taken to the streets since the leader was detained by security forces after attempting to dissolve the country's extraordinarily unpopular legislature.

The embattled President of Peru, Pedro Castillo, issued a statement insisting he'll be released Wednesday, even after a judge denied his appeal and demanded the head of state remain in detention amid what's being widely characterized as a parliamentary coup.

“Compatriots: tomorrow, Wednesday, December 14, seven days have passed since an unjust and abusive detention,” Castillo wrote in a statement published on his Twitter page. “Seven days in which the people have shown me their solidarity and commitment in defense of our government and its future. Tomorrow at 1:42 p.m. I will go free.”

Peru has been rocked by massive demonstrations this week calling for Castillo to be released from jail and for the dissolution of Congress, which currently holds an [approval rating](#) of just 10%.

Tensions in the Andean nation continue to grow, with thousands of largely-indigenous protesters having seized major highways – as well as the airport in Arequipa, the second-most populous city in the country.

Prosecutors are seeking to sentence Castillo to three years in prison for “the alleged crime of rebellion.” He's been kept under lock and key since security forces detained him on Dec. 7 after he attempted to head off a third congressional impeachment attempt by dissolving the historically-unpopular legislative body.

The armed forces and police of Peru initially issued an ambiguous statement but subsequently moved to detain Castillo, who was reportedly handed over by his driver to a SWAT team as he sought political asylum at the Mexican embassy.

The US State Department immediately leapt to the defense of the new regime, with Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs Brian A. Nichols [writing](#) just a day later that “we applaud Peruvians as they unite in support of their democracy,” and that “the US welcomes President Boluarte and looks forward to working with her administration to achieve a more democratic, prosperous, and secure region.”

But neighboring governments in Argentina, Colombia, Bolivia and Mexico are insisting that Castillo be released, describing the Peruvian president as the victim of “anti-democratic persecution.” On Tuesday, they issued a [joint statement](#) expressing their “deep concern” regarding the situation, which they described as an effort to “reverse the popular will expressed with free suffrage.”

The governments called for Castillo’s human rights to be respected, and reiterated that they continue to recognize Castillo as the legitimate president of Peru.

The government of Honduras also [expressed](#) alarm at the “serious constitutional breach.” Hours after Castillo was arrested, the Honduran foreign ministry conveyed its “strong condemnation of the coup d’état that took place in Peru,” which it said is “the result of a series of events to erode democracy.”

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Peru’s Authorities Declare State of Emergency as Uprising Intensifies After President Arrested
By - Wyatt Reed

Just one week after detaining the country’s first working-class indigenous president, the unelected regime in Peru granted itself extraordinary powers to crack down on widespread opposition in the streets.

The newly-minted regime of Dina Boluarte in Peru has declared a state of emergency, suspending the right to “personal security and freedom” just one week after state security forces arrested the elected president, Pedro Castillo, in what many of the country’s neighboring governments are characterizing as a coup d’etat.

The declaration authorizes the deployment of troops alongside police, nixes the right to assembly and freedom of movement and allows security forces to search the residences of any Peruvians as they see fit, without needing to demonstrate cause or seek the permission of homeowners.

At least seven protesters – including multiple teenagers – have been killed amid the police and military crackdown on the huge demonstrations which have rocked Peru this week.

Claiming the unrest demanded “a forceful and authoritative response from the government,” the new regime’s Defense Minister, Luis Otarola Peñaranda, announced the mobilization of security forces throughout the country Wednesday.

“The immediate protection by the Armed Forces of the strategic points of national assets, airports, hydroelectric plants and all that infrastructure that, due to its strategic value, serves to guarantee the life and subsistence of all Peruvians, has been ordered,” Peñaranda declared in an address aired on state-run television.

The repression is reportedly set to extend throughout the nation’s major roadways as well.

“We are going to assume control of the national road network throughout the country, to ensure the free transit of all Peruvians,” Peñaranda noted during the address.

“In a session of the Council of Ministers, the declaration of a state of emergency at the national level for 30 days was agreed” upon, Peñaranda wrote Wednesday on Twitter. “With this measure we seek to guarantee order, the continuity of economic activities and the protection of millions of families.”

Supporters of President Castillo gathered Wednesday outside the detention center in Lima where the beleaguered head of state is being held in anticipation of his release, but Judge Juan Carlos Checkley announced at a virtual court session that he’s ordering Castillo held until at least Thursday.

In a hand-written note published to Castillo’s Twitter page Wednesday, he thanked the presidents of Colombia, Argentina, Mexico, and Bolivia for speaking out on his behalf, and urged his backers to stay strong.

In the face of a “pro-coup sector” which seeks to “silence” Peru’s working and indigenous populations, “we will remain firm and we will not renounce or abandon the just cause and the popular will of the Peruvian people,” Castillo [promised](#).

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Citing Russian Drone ‘Threat,’ NATO Official Demands Greater Air Defense Spending
By - Wyatt Reed

The top NATO official’s call for even greater military spending comes as US officials are reportedly promising to deliver the exorbitantly-priced Patriot missile system to Kiev regime forces.

NATO is seeking to acquire new air defense systems in response to the proliferation of drones and cruise missiles, a high-ranking official [claimed](#) Wednesday.

Citing the relative cheapness of the hardware Russian forces are currently deploying in Ukraine, Air Marshal Johnny Stringer, the deputy commander of NATO’s Allied Air Command reportedly told a corporate news outlet that the challenges facing the aggressive military alliance have increased over the past decade.

Calling to boost spending on new weapons which are “reflective of the threat we face,” Stringer insisted that “NATO will now — and are already — [be] looking at what that future posture and what a future raft of capabilities will need to be.”

Per the article, Stringer also expressed concern about Russian hypersonic missile capabilities. Russia has deployed its cutting-edge Kinzhal hypersonic missiles at least three times since its

military operations in Ukraine began in February, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said in an [interview](#) in August.

Reports circulated widely in Western media this week that the US government is planning on supplying the Kiev regime with Patriot surface-to-air missiles despite its previous rejection to do so. Officials have frequently noted that the move would likely provoke military escalation with Russia.

Former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev [cautioned](#) in a Telegram post earlier this month that “if NATO supplies Kiev fanatics with Patriot complexes along with NATO personnel, they will immediately become a legitimate target of our Armed Forces.”

But the US seems to be unfazed by the warning, with mainstream media reports [stating](#) the Biden administration is in the “final stages” of delivering the missiles. However, the Pentagon [earlier stated](#) on Tuesday that there were no plans regarding the deployment of the defense system.

It’s unclear how effective the Patriot missiles — which carry a hefty price tag of approximately \$3 million per system — will prove in combating the inexpensive Russian drones which have long plagued Ukrainian air defenses.

As internet mogul and free speech activist Kim Dotcom noted on social media giant Twitter, “The Russians can fire 100 drones for each US Patriot missile.” And yet, somehow, “the Pentagon strategists call this ‘unbalancing Russia.’”

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Elon Musk Deletes Twitter Account Tracking His Jet, Promises Legal Action
By - Wyatt Reed

The controversial billionaire says his about-face on permitting a Twitter account to track his jet — “even though that is a direct personal safety risk” to him — came after a stalker jumped on the hood of a car carrying his young child.

Twitter owner Elon Musk suspended an account dedicated to tracking the movements of his private jet for a second time after a stalker endangered his young son, the famed investor explained in a Wednesday post.

“Last night, car carrying lil X in LA was followed by crazy stalker (thinking it was me), who later blocked car from moving & climbed onto hood,” Musk wrote in a Twitter post.

However, no evidence was provided to show that location data had been a factor in the incident. Musk promised in the post that “legal action is being taken” against Jack Sweeney, a 20-year-old Florida college student who operated the account that published the movements of the tech billionaire’s private jet.

The offending ElonJet account had initially been suspended earlier Wednesday before being temporarily reinstated and then suspended again for a second time. In addition to ElonJet, Sweeney’s personal account has also been axed.

Musk had previously promised that the account could remain in operation despite constituting “a direct personal safety risk” to him. His son, however, is apparently off-limits.

"Any account doxxing real-time location info of anyone will be suspended, as it is a physical safety violation," Musk explained on Twitter Wednesday. "This includes posting links to sites with real-time location info."

The South African entrepreneur further indicated that similar lawsuits would be pursued against other "organizations who supported harm to my family."

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US to Add Several Russian Companies to Entities List - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States will remove nine Russian companies from its red-flag "unverified list" and place them on its stricter entity list after Moscow prevented US officials from carrying out end-use checks, the Commerce Department said on Thursday.

"The Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) is amending the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) by removing 9 persons from the Unverified List (UVL) and adding them to the Entity List, all under the destination of Russia. BIS has been unable to verify the bona fides of all 9 persons being removed from the UVL and added to the Entity List, due to the foreign government's prevention of timely end-use checks. BIS is also amending the EAR by removing 27 persons from the UVL, one under the destination of Pakistan and 26 under the destination of China, because BIS was able to verify their bona fides," the statement said.

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Biden Admin. Restarts Free COVID-19 At-Home Test Program as Part of Winter Plan

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States will again offer free at-home COVID-19 tests as part of the winter preparedness health plan, the White House said on Thursday.

"Today, the Biden Administration is announcing a plan to stay ahead of an increase in COVID-19 cases this winter," the statement read.

Medical tests will be available through a special COVIDTests.gov web portal, which is open for a limited round of ordering this winter, according to the statement. "Starting today, all US households can order a total of four at-home COVID-19 tests that will be mailed directly to them for free," it added.

The White House noted that COVID-19 is not as disruptive now as it was before, but still remains a threat to public health. The administration calls on Americans to use at-home COVID-19 tests when they have symptoms of COVID-19, before and after traveling for the holidays.

"The Administration has made free COVID-19 testing widely available and easily accessible. This includes providing over 15,000 free community testing sites nationwide, covering over-the-counter tests under Medicare, and requiring all health insurance plans to cover eight free at-home tests per month per individual, which can be easily accessed at local pharmacies and online," the statement read.

The US Congress did not allocate additional funding for the program, so the administration said it is using own resources to provide additional tests.

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US Sanctions 36 Entities in Japan, China, Including Chinese Chipmaker YMTC

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Commerce announced on Thursday it is adding 36 entities in Japan and China, including Chinese chipmaker YMTC, to its entity list for acting against US national interests.

"The Department of Commerce is amending the Export Administration Regulations (EAR) by adding thirty-six entities to the Entity List. These entities have been determined by the U.S. 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 the People's Republic of China (China) and Japan," the Commerce Department said in a statement.

Japan's Yangtze Memory Technologies Co., Ltd (YMTC) was added to the list for "posing a significant risk of becoming involved in activities contrary to the national security of the United States."

The measure regarding YMTC was taken since the company poses a risk of "diversion" to Huawei Technologies, the Commerce Department explained.

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US Watchdog Secures 'Complete Access' to Inspect Chinese Auditors – PCAOB

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Public Company Accounting Oversight Board (PCAOB) has secured "complete access" to inspect and investigate audit firms in China, according to a release.

"For the first time in history, the PCAOB has secured complete access to inspect and investigate registered public accounting firms headquartered in mainland China and Hong Kong," PCAOB Chair Erica Y. Williams said in a release.

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Siemens Says Canada Sanctions Concern Nord Stream Turbine Exports, Not Maintenance

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Canada's announcement about revoking the sanctions waiver on Nord Stream 1 turbines is about their exports, not their maintenance, a Siemens spokesperson told Sputnik.

"As far as I understand it is not about allowing maintenance, it's about exporting the turbines," the spokesperson said.

There are currently no turbines at a Siemens maintenance facility in Montreal, the spokesperson added.

On Wednesday, Canada's Minister Foreign Affairs Melanie Joly and Minister of Natural Resources Jonathan Wilkinson announced that Ottawa was lifting the sanctions waiver that was granted to allow turbines being repaired at the facility in Montreal to be returned to Germany.

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US to Provide Africa With Over \$165Mln in Elections Assistance – White House

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The United States plans to provide over \$165 million in elections assistance to African countries, with six upcoming elections on the continent next year, the White House said on Thursday.

"Working with Congress, the United States plans to provide over \$165 million to support elections and good governance in Africa in 2023," the release stated.

It described the elections in Africa in 2023 as "consequential."

"While the United States does not support any specific candidate or party, the United States is committed to supporting electoral processes to deepen democracy in Africa," the White House stated.

US President Joe Biden met on Wednesday with six presidents – President Felix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, President Ali Bongo Ondimba of Gabon, President George Manneh Weah of Liberia, President Andry Nirina Rajoelina of Madagascar, President Muhammadu Buhari of Nigeria, and President Julius Maada Bio of Sierra Leone – to discuss their countries' upcoming elections next year.

The leaders reaffirmed their commitment to hold free, fair, and transparent elections, and discussed the challenges of holding elections and exercising the right to vote, including foreign interference and political violence. They also shared best practices for how to manage these risks and ensure transparency and public confidence in the electoral process.

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RPT - Over 1,000 Migrants Line Up on US Side of Southern Border Waiting to Be Processed

CIUDAD JUAREZ, Mexico, December 15 (Sputnik) - More than a thousand asylum-seeking migrants lined up on the US side of the border with Mexico, wrapped in blankets on a bitterly cold afternoon, patiently waiting to be processed by American immigration authorities, a week before a Trump-era expulsion policy is expected to terminate, a Sputnik correspondent reported. Title 42 is scheduled to be suspended on December 21, however, several Republican states and the Biden administration's Justice Department are seeking to postpone the termination date due to concerns the US immigration system will be overwhelmed beyond the strain it is currently facing.

More than a thousand migrants formed a line on Wednesday afternoon that stretched more than 300 yards between the banks of the Rio Grande river and the towering steel US border wall layered with barbed wire fencing.

The migrants have been lining up to enter the United States from Juarez since Sunday despite the Trump-era Title 42 policy still in place, which risks that US immigration enforcement may use it to immediately expel them.

Wilmer Mendoza, of Venezuela, arrived to Juarez four days ago but he's held off crossing into the United States because Title 42 is still in place and Venezuelan migrants are more prone to being expelled immediately under the policy.

"It's very cold, the temperature is dropping," Mendoza told Sputnik. "The people sleep in line so they don't lose their place."

Mendoza spent Wednesday afternoon crossing the Rio Grande river to take coffee and food to migrants in line on the US side.

He expressed sympathy for the women and children who have to spend hours in the freezing cold while waiting for their turn to be let into the United States.

The large groups of migrants have been lining up each day this week, Mendoza said. The Venezuelan estimates more than a thousand migrants have waited in line each day, consisting of mostly migrants from Nicaragua, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, and Arab countries. According to media reports, the Biden administration expects some 14,000 asylum-seeking migrants will cross the US southern border into the United States if Title 42 is rescinded next week.

The United States has seen two consecutive record breaking years of illegal crossings into the United States since President Joe Biden assumed office in January 2021.

Well over two million illegal crossings into the United States were recorded in fiscal year 2022, according to CBP data.

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US House Passes One-Week Government Funding Bill to Buy Time for Further Negotiations

(Gives final vote in para 2, adds background, details in paras 6-12)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a continuing resolution to fund the government for one week in a bid to buy more time for negotiations on a longer-term appropriations bill.

The continuing resolution passed by a 224-201 vote on Wednesday. The bill provides temporary funding and extends the deadline for a government shutdown from December 16 to December 23.

The Senate is expected to take up the measure on Thursday.

Continuing resolutions, under which the government is currently funded, continue appropriations levels from the prior year instead of approving a new budget.

The continuing resolution faced opposition from House Republican leadership, who called on members to vote against the measure.

"House Democrats failed to meet the fundamental duty of funding the government despite spending most of the year passing trillions in wasteful spending that has fueled inflation and driven up our debt," House Republican Whip Steve Scalise said in a statement. "This one-week continuing resolution is an attempt to buy additional time for a massive lame-duck spending bill in which House Republicans have had no seat at the negotiating table."

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has expressed confidence the upper chamber will pass the bill. A year-long omnibus spending bill could contain priorities of both parties, including further funding for Ukraine, Schumer also said.

However, some Senate lawmakers have instead pushed for a continuing resolution that extends into 2023, when Republicans will take control of the House.

Control of the House has shifted from one party to the other just five times since 1954, and in none of those instances did Congress pass comprehensive spending legislation in the "lame-duck" session, Senator Mike Lee said in a speech.

Biden administration officials including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin have called for swift passage of a full-year spending bill in order to fund new military projects and programs.

Congress is also slated to pass the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2023 during the lame-duck session. The House already passed the \$850 billion bill, with the Senate now considering the legislation.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said on Tuesday that he hopes the upper chamber can pass the NDAA this week. However, an agreement has been delayed by Democrats' attempts to include funding unrelated to defense into the bill, McConnell said.

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The continuing resolution, passed on Wednesday, provides temporary funding and extends the deadline for a government shutdown from December 16 to December 23. The tally was at 223-201 with seven lawmakers yet to vote.

The Senate will take up the measure on Thursday.

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UN Chief Urges Secure Movement Along Lachin Corridor, De-Escalation Between All Sides

UNITED NATIONS, December 15 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres is urging Armenia and Azerbaijan to de-escalate tensions and secure movement through the Lachin corridor, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

Since Monday, the sole road that runs through the Lachin District of Azerbaijan has been blocked by a group of Azeri citizens, described by state media as environmental activists protesting against Armenia's illegal mining in the area. In addition, Baku has cut off gas supplies to Nagorno-Karabakh, according to Armenian media. Yerevan has called the move a provocation by Baku meant to cause a humanitarian collapse.

"The Secretary-General is following with concern the ongoing developments around the Lachin corridor," Dujarric said in a press release on Wednesday. "The Secretary-General urges the sides to de-escalate tensions and to ensure freedom and security of movement along the corridor, in line with the previously reached agreements. The Secretary-General reiterates his support to the ongoing mediation efforts in the region."

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US-French Satellite Set to Launch on Mission to Measure Global Water Levels - NASA

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Surface Water and Ocean Topography (SWOT), the most ambitious space mission ever launched to measure the levels of surface water across the world, is on schedule to launch as a joint US-French project from Vandenberg Air Force Base in California before dawn on Thursday morning, NASA and French space officials said.

"SWOT will bring us a revolution in our understanding of how water moves around our planet," NASA Earth Sciences Director Karen St. Germain said during a press conference on Wednesday. "The satellite's sensors will provide "a ten times improvement in spatial resolution in measuring water heights: The data from SWOT will inform communities around the world." NASA, the French space agency Centre National d'Etudes Spatiales and SpaceX are now targeting 3:46 a.m. Pacific Standard Time (PST) on Thursday, for the launch of the satellite on a SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket, the US space agency said.

"SWOT will be NASA's first global survey of nearly all water on Earth's surface. Scientists plan to use its observations to better understand the global water cycle, furnish insight into the ocean's role in how climate change unfolds, and provide a global inventory of water resources," NASA said.

The SWOT mission is a collaborative effort between NASA and the French space agency with contributions from the Canadian Space Agency and the UK Space Agency.

The satellite will start its scientific work six months after being launched at an altitude of 871 kilometers, or just under 530 miles above the surface of the earth, the NASA officials said. It will examine lakes, rivers, reservoirs and oceans on 90% of the planet, they added.

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China's Xi Strengthens Trade, Energy Ties With Russia Behind Diplomatic Scenes - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Chinese President Xi Jinping is deepening economic ties with Russia despite the appearance of creating diplomatic distance between Beijing and Moscow, the Wall Street Journal reported, citing Chinese policy advisers.

Xi recently instructed his government to deepen economic ties with Russia, which have played a crucial role for Moscow amid the Western economic pressure since the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the report said on Wednesday.

The strengthening of economic ties with Russia includes increasing Chinese imports of Russian oil, gas and farming goods, as well as more joint energy partnerships in the Arctic and more investments in Russian infrastructure, the report added.

The head of the Federal Customs Service of Russia, Vladimir Bulavin, said in November that the country's trade with China could grow by 27% to \$160 billion in 2022.

The volume of Russia-China trade reached the \$100 billion mark in 2018. On February 4, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Xi set a new target of \$250 billion in trade turnover by 2024 at a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, increasing the previous objective of \$200 billion agreed to by both leaders.

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US Lawmakers Introduce Resolution Urging Removal of Russia From UN Security Council

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Congressmen Steve Cohen and Joe Wilson introduced a resolution calling on the Biden administration to pursue the removal of Russia from the UN Security Council amid its special military operation in Ukraine.

The resolution, introduced Tuesday, would express the sentiment of the House of Representatives that Russia's operation violates the purposes and principles of the UN. It would also urge US President Joe Biden to direct his administration to pursue limitations, suspension or termination of Russia's place on the Security Council.

The resolution holds that Russia's continued participation in other UN organs and specialized agencies also violates its purpose and principles, as well as conflicts with the interests of the United States.

The resolution has been referred to the Foreign Affairs Committee.

Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzya told the Security Council on Wednesday that the conflict in Ukraine is just one element of a multidimensional crisis. Nebenzya accused NATO and its partners of using the situation to expand their own interests.

The ambassador contended that a majority of countries would benefit from a multipolar UN that makes decisions based on mutual respect and without attempts at establishing hegemony.

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Canada Revokes Sanctions Waiver for Maintenance of Nord Stream 1 Turbine - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Canada has revoked the sanctions waiver given to German industrial giant Siemens Energy to maintain the Nord Stream 1 turbines in Montreal, Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly said.

"Given that Putin has been forced to show that his intention was never to return Nordstream 1 to full operation, and that the pipeline itself has been rendered inoperable, the Government of Canada has decided to revoke the time-limited sanctions waiver that was granted to allow turbines being repaired at the Siemens facility in Montreal to be returned to Germany," Joly said in a statement via Twitter on Wednesday.

Joly issued the statement together with Canada's Natural Resources Minister Jonathan Wilkinson.

The two officials said the decision was taken in close collaboration with Ukraine, Germany and their European allies.

On July 9, Wilkinson granted Siemens Energy an exemption for a period of two years.

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US Stock Market Regulator Undertakes Sweeping Overhaul of Trading Practices

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The main regulator for the US stock market said on Wednesday it was undertaking a sweeping overhaul of trading practices that had severely disadvantaged small investors in the marketplace.

"There isn't a level playing field among different parts of the market: wholesalers, dark pools and lit exchanges," Gary Gensler, chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) said in remarks released ahead of a hearing held to discuss ways to fix the problem. "The markets have become increasingly hidden from view, especially for individual investors."

SEC officials said the proposals would produce the biggest changes to US equity trading rules since 2005 by injecting more competition into the business of executing deals for smaller investors.

Among the SEC's proposed rules is a new auction system that would force brokers to offer retail investor orders of under \$200,000 to a wider group of trading venues.

Another rule, riding on the so-called best execution practice, required brokers to be transparent in stating how they got the best price for client orders.

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Delivering Patriots to Ukraine Can Lead to 'Unpredictable Consequences' - Russian Embassy

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The possible delivery of Patriot air defense systems to Ukraine would be another provocative step by the Biden administration and can lead to "unpredictable consequences," the Russian embassy in the United States told Sputnik in a statement.

"If this information [about Patriot systems delivery to Ukraine] is confirmed, then we will witness another provocative step by the administration, which can lead to unpredictable consequences," the statement said on Wednesday.

Such a decision can also cause enormous damage not only to the bilateral relationship between the United States and Russia but also create additional risks for global security, the statement added.

On Tuesday, US media reported that the Biden administration is finalizing plans to provide Ukraine with the Patriot air defense system amid a series of Russian strikes on the country's energy infrastructure and other targets.

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Fed Slows US Rates Hikes But Says a Pause Will Need Greater Drop in Inflation

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve slowed the pace of its rate hikes for the first time since beginning them in March, with Chairman Jerome Powell saying inflation needs to drop convincingly and consistently for the US central bank to stop rate increases altogether.

"It will take substantially more evidence to give us confidence that inflation is on a sustained downward path," Powell told reporters on Wednesday after the Fed announced a 50-basis point rate hike for December in the first slowing of an aggressive monetary tightening cycle that began after inflation hit 40-year highs.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, grew by 7.1% in the year to November. That compared with a peak of 9.1% for the CPI in June. The US Labor Department said the November inflation rate represented "the smallest 12-month increase since the period ending December 2021."

The Fed's target for inflation is, however, just 2% per year. To try and meet that, the central bank has added 425 basis points to rates since March via seven increases. Four of those hikes involved 75 basis-point hikes, done back-to-back between June and November.

The December increase of 50 basis points represented a pivot, raising hopes that the Fed would settle into a regime of slowing rates from hereon before stopping them altogether. Powell somewhat endorsed that thinking on Wednesday when he said: "It's now not so important how fast we go. It's far more important to think what is the ultimate level" for rates. But even so, he went back to talking about inflation and how it would be the ultimate decider for rates.

"We have covered a lot of ground and the full effects of our rapid tightening so far are yet to be felt. Even so, we have more work to do. [The] historical record cautions strongly against prematurely loosening policy. We'll stay the course until the job is done."

The Fed's other problems were jobs and wages expanding a little too robustly than necessary, causing demand spikes that ultimately fed into inflation, Powell said. The labor market has been the juggernaut of the US economy, propelling its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic. Slowing the job market puts the Fed in a dilemma as the central bank is also responsible for ensuring "maximum employment" among Americans, a target it has handily achieved for a year now by keeping the jobless rate at or below 4%.

Powell acknowledged that the US economy has softened a lot and that Americans were probably beginning to feel the pain of the Fed's rate hikes via higher payments on mortgages and other expenditures.

"The largest amount of pain, the worst pain would come from a failure to raise rates high enough and from allowing inflation to become entrenched in the economy so that the ultimate cost of getting it out of the economy would be very high in terms of unemployment meaning very high unemployment for extended periods of times. The kind of thing that had to happen when inflation got out of control and the Fed didn't respond aggressively or soon enough in a prior episode 50 years ago."

In its latest summary of economic projections, the Fed said the economy is expected to grow by a slower rate of 0.5% next year from a previously forecast expansion of 1.2%.

The economy sputtered in the first two quarters of 2022, with back-to-back negative growths of 1.6% and 0.6% in gross domestic product, or GDP, that technically placed the nation in a recession. Third-quarter GDP, however, came in at a resilient 2.6%, raising questions of whether another economic slowdown was likely or a soft-landing was possible instead.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) -

FEDERAL RESERVE

* The Federal Reserve on Wednesday announced a 50-basis point rate hike for December as data pointing to cooling US inflation allowed the central bank to slow for the first time this year its aggressive monetary tightening aimed at curbing the worst price pressures in four decades.

* The US economy is expected to grow by a slower rate of 0.5% in 2023 from a previously forecast expansion of 1.2%, the Federal Reserve said.

WESTERN MILITARY AID TO UKRAINE

* The White House cannot confirm reports of the United States sending Patriot missile systems to Ukraine, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Wednesday.

* Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, commenting on possible supplies of US Patriot air defense systems to Ukraine, said that there is no official information on the matter yet.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* A US citizen has been transferred as part of a Russia-Ukraine prisoner swap, White House National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Wednesday.

* The use of the US High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) by Kiev has killed 44 civilians and injured 98 others in the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), the LPR representative office in the Joint Center for Control and Coordination of the ceasefire regime (JCCC) said.

IEA REPORT

* The production of crude oil and condensates in Russia increased by 90,000 barrels per day in November and reached 11.2 million barrels per day, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said in a fresh report released on Wednesday.

* The IEA has upgraded its forecast for the global oil production growth in 2022 and expects it to rise by 4.7 million barrels per day to 100 million barrels per day.

* The IEA has slightly upgraded its forecasts for the global oil demand growth to 99.9 million barrels per day in 2022 and to 101.6 million barrels per day in 2023.

RUSSIAN CITIZEN DETAINED IN ESTONIA

* The detention of Russian citizen Vadim Konoshchenok in Estonia at the request of the United States is unacceptable, Russia will respond to the actions of Washington and Tallinn, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Evgeny Ivanov told Sputnik.

* An employee of the consular department of the Russian Embassy in Estonia visited Konoshchenok, who was detained by the Estonian authorities, on Wednesday, the Russian Embassy in Tallinn said.

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North Dakota Governor Bans TikTok From State-Owned Devices Citing Security Concerns

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – North Dakota governor Doug Burgum has banned TikTok from state-owned devices issued by executive branch agencies over alleged national security concerns, the governor's office said in a press release.

"Gov. Doug Burgum signed an executive order banning the social media app TikTok from state-owned devices issued by executive branch agencies, citing growing national security concerns," the press release said.

The order prohibits executive branch agencies and their employees from visiting the TikTok website or downloading the app on any government-issued equipment or while connected to the state network, the release said.

On Tuesday, US Senator Marco Rubio introduced bipartisan legislation to ban the Chinese social media platform TikTok from operating in the United States. According to Rubio, the parent company of TikTok, ByteDance, is required by Chinese law to make the application's data available to the Chinese Communist Party, which poses a risk of TikTok being used as a spying tool.

The previous US administration attempted to ban Chinese social platforms TikTok and WeChat in 2020 in order to protect Americans' privacy. The Biden administration did not continue to fight for the implementation of the predecessor's initiative. However, recently the accusations against the company have started to resume.

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Chinese Student Arrested in US for Insulting Person Who Supported Democracy in China

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - A Chinese student in the United States has been arrested for insulting a person who was spreading fliers in support of democracy in China, the US Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"A Berklee College of Music student, who is citizen of the People's Republic of China (PRC), has been arrested and charged with stalking in connection with threatening and harassing communications he allegedly made towards an individual who posted fliers in support of democracy in China," the Justice Department said in a press release.

The authorities identified the student as Xiaolei Wu, 25, the release said.

Xiaolei has been charged with one count of stalking and will make an initial appearance in federal court in Boston, Massachusetts, later in the afternoon, the release added.

Xiaolei has been living in Boston while attending the Berklee College of Music, according to the release.

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US Concerned Over Istanbul Mayor Sentencing - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – The United States is “gravely concerned” over the decision of the Turkish court to sentence Ekrem Imamoglu, the mayor of Istanbul and a possible opposition presidential candidate to more than two years in prison, US State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Wednesday.

“The Department is deeply troubled and disappointed by today’s sentencing of the Istanbul Mayor,” Patel told reporters.

This decision is inconsistent with respect for human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law, Patel said.

He also urged Turkey to respect these freedoms and to find a resolution to this case. "We remain gravely concerned by the continued indictment of civil society, media, political, and business leaders in Turkey," Patel said.

A Turkish court has sentenced Imamoglu to 2 years, 7 months and 15 days in prison for insulting Supreme Election Board (YSK) officials after he described their decision to invalidate his 2019 city election win as an act of foolishness, Turkish broadcaster A Haber reported. The mayor was also banned from political activities, which will prevent him from running in the presidential election next year.

The opposition politician's defense has already announced its intention to appeal the decision.

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Fed Projects US Economy to Grow at Slower Rate of 0.5% in 2023

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US economy is expected to grow by a slower rate of 0.5% next year from a previously forecast expansion of 1.2%, the Federal Reserve said in its latest summary of economic projections.

Gross Domestic Product, or GDP, which is a measure of economic growth, is, however, expected to improve by 2024, with a forecast rise of 1.6%, and 1.8% in 2025, the Fed said in the projections released along with its interest rate decision for December.

The US economy sputtered in the first two quarters of the year, with back-to-back negative growths of 1.6% and 0.6% in GDP that technically placed the nation in a recession.

Third-quarter GDP, however, came in at a resilient 2.6%, raising questions of whether another economic slowdown was likely or a soft-landing was possible instead.

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UN Economic Council Expels Iran From Commission on Status of Women After Amini's Death (Adds details in paras 5-7)

UNITED NATIONS, December 14 (Sputnik) - The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has voted to expel Iran from the Commission on the Status of Women, a 45-member body which meets annually, amid the unrest following the death of Mahsa Amini.

The final tally for the vote was 29 in favor, eight opposed and 16 abstentions. Russia, China and Bolivia were among the countries that rejected the measure.

The 22-year old woman died in police custody. The government contends Amini died of a heart attack while demonstrators claim she was beaten by the morality police, which arrested her for allegedly wearing a hijab improperly.

The US Mission to the United Nations authored the resolution and asked the members of the 54-member ECOSOC to vote in favor and remove "the ugly stain" from its credibility. Iran's mission to the UN urged the members to reject the draft.

Prior to the vote, Russia suggested asking for the legal opinion of the UN Legal Counsel. The majority of the countries, however, voted against considering the Russian proposal.

Later in the day, a spokesman for UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that Guterres respects the decision of the member-driven body. The opinion was echoed by the president of the UN General Assembly, Csaba Korosi, who said he respects the "will" of the member states. A UN source told Sputnik that Iran's removal from the body sets a bad precedent for the future.

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Fed Raises Rates by 50 Basis Points in First Slowing of US Rate Hikes This Year

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve on Wednesday announced a 50-basis point rate hike for December as data pointing to cooling US inflation allowed the central bank to slow for the first time this year its aggressive monetary tightening aimed at curbing the worst price pressures in four decades.

"The Committee decided to raise the target range for the federal funds rate to 4-1/4 to 4-1/2 percent," the Fed's FOMC, or Federal Open Market Committee, said in its monthly policy statement. Prior to this, the FOMC had applied a jumbo-sized 75-basis point rate hike on four straight occasions after starting with a 25-basis point increase and progressing to 50 basis points.

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US Users of Crypto Wallet MetaMask Will be Able to Buy Ethereum Using PayPal- Statement

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US users of the cryptocurrency wallet app MetaMask will be able to purchase Ethereum (ETH) from within the app using PayPal, Web3 company ConsenSys announced on Wednesday.

"Initially available to select PayPal users in the US, this integration enables the seamless purchase and transfer of ETH from PayPal to MetaMask," ConsenSys said in a statement. MetaMask is the world's leading self-custodial wallet, the United States being among its top user markets, the statement said. The wallet is the primary way millions of people interact with applications that include features such as non-fungible tokens and decentralized finance, the statement said.

The integration allows US users to seamlessly buy crypto through MetaMask and explore the Web3 ecosystem, the statement also said.

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Ukraine Crisis One Element of Multidimensional Crisis That Formed 3 Decades Ago - Nebenzya

UNITED NATIONS, December 14 (Sputnik) - The crisis in Ukraine represents only one part of the overall, "multidimensional" crisis of the international system that began forming gradually between two and three decades ago, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzya said on Wednesday.

"The Ukrainian crisis is just one of the elements of this multidimensional crisis. And this is the systemic crisis, the preconditions of which were formed gradually over the course of two or three decades," Nebenzya said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The Russian ambassador accused NATO and the collective West of attempting to use the situation in Ukraine to serve their own interests and that the West is trying to expand its interests towards more regions in the world.

Nebenzya also said that the majority of countries will benefit from a multi-polar United Nations-centric world, where all decisions are based on mutual respect and discussions take place without blackmail and attempts of domination by a world hegemon.

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Donald Trump to Make 'Major Announcement' on Thursday

WASHINGTON December 14 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump in a post on Truth Social said he will be making an announcement on Thursday.

In a video showing the former president as a superhero with lasers shooting out of his eyes, Trump said that America needs a new superhero and that he will be making a "major announcement" tomorrow.

Trump in a "big" announcement in November, one week after the midterms, officially declared he was joining the 2024 presidential election race - a move many in his own party suggested was a bit too early.

A poll released by The Wall Street Journal earlier on Wednesday found that Florida Governor Ron DeSantis leads Trump among likely Republican voters, 52 percent to 38 percent.

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Majority of Americans Support Restricting Hateful, Inaccurate Social Media Posts - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - A majority of Americans believe that hateful or inaccurate social media posts should be subject to restrictions, according to a USA Today/Suffolk University poll released Wednesday.

A majority of respondents, 52%, said that social media companies have a responsibility to restrict hateful or inaccurate posts, the poll found. Just 39% said that social media sites should be open forums regardless of whether speech is hateful or inaccurate.

However, the poll found that there were substantial differences in responses between demographic categories. Men endorsed an open forum approach by 11 percentage points, while women favored restrictions by 38 points.

Moreover, liberals and moderates overwhelmingly supported restrictions on speech online, while conservatives opposed it by a 2:1 ratio, the poll also found.

The poll surveyed 1,000 registered US voters between December 7-11 and maintains a margin of error of plus or minus 3.1 percentage points.

The first Amendment of the US Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to free speech and press as well the right to peaceful assembly and redress of grievances from the government.

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US, Africa Seal \$15Bln in New Trade Investments During Washington Summit - White House

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States committed to \$15 billion worth of two-way trade deals with several countries in Africa during a summit in Washington this week, the White House said on Wednesday.

"At today's US-Africa Business Forum, President [Joe] Biden announced over \$15 billion in two-way trade and investment commitments, deals, and partnerships that advance key priorities, including sustainable energy, health systems, agribusiness, digital connectivity, infrastructure, and finance," the White House said in a press release.

US goods and services traded with Africa totaled \$83.6 billion in 2021, the release added.

On Monday, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken signed a memorandum of understanding with representatives from Zambia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo on the development of the nations' electric vehicle battery value chains and advancing multilateral goals on critical mineral supply.

Biden is hosting nearly 50 African leaders in Washington this week as he seeks to improve the United States' ties with African countries amid concerns that China and Russia have also been increasing their presence in the region.

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US Oil Stockpiles Up 1st Time in 5 Weeks as Refiners Slow Work After Big Winter Fuel Build

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US crude oil inventories rose for the first time in five weeks as refiners slowed work last week after massively turning out fuel products ahead of the winter, data from the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed.

Crude inventories rose by 10.231 million barrels during the week ended December 9, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report, after a cumulative draw of 26.86 million barrels over the five previous weeks.

Refineries operated at 92.2% of their operable capacity last week, versus 95.5% in the previous week to December 2, the EIA said.

In accordance with the crude build, the roll out in fuel products thinned.

Gasoline stockpiles rose by 4.496 million barrels during the week to December 9, after a 5.32-million-barrel build the previous week. Gasoline is the top automobile fuel in the United States.

Inventories of distillates, meanwhile, rose by 1.364 million barrels last week, compared with a rise of 6.159 million the week before. Distillates are refined into diesel for trucks, buses, trains and ships as well as fuel for jets.

Arrivals of new fuel supplies in the marketplace were mixed, indicating uneven demand.

Supply of finished motor gasoline in the marketplace was at 8.255 million barrels per day last week, down by 103,000 barrels per day.

Distillates fuel oil, meanwhile, saw a rise of 218,000 barrels per day to 3.768 million barrels per day.

Kerosene-type jet fuel saw a build of 377,000 barrels per day, to reach 1.386 million barrels daily.

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US Has No Expectation Fighting in Ukraine Will End During Winter Months - White House

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States does not expect that the fighting in Ukraine will end during the winter months, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We have no expectation fighting will stop in the winter months," Kirby said during a press conference.

The United States would like to see the fighting stop before the year's end, but it would be difficult to conclude whether it would end then given the current events on the ground and in the air, he said.

Kirby added that he expects the fighting in Ukraine to continue for "some time."

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Canada Eyes Net-Zero Emissions From On-Road Transportation by 2050 – Ministry

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government unveiled on Wednesday its Clean On-Road Transportation plan which eyes net-zero emissions from on-road transport by 2050.

"Today, the Minister of Transport, the Honourable Omar Alghabra, announced the release of Canada's Action Plan for Clean On-Road Transportation ... Canada's Action Plan for Clean On-Road Transportation outlines the Government of Canada's plan to reduce emissions from on-road transportation, and achieve net-zero emissions by 2050," Transport Canada said in a statement.

On an annual basis, the country will increase requirements toward achieving 100% light-duty zero-emission vehicle sales by 2035, including mandatory targets of at least 20% of all new light-duty vehicle sales by 2026 and at least 60% by 2030.

As for medium and heavy-duty, Canada wants 35% of such sales to be net-zero emission vehicles by 2030, while working on developing legislation to achieve the goal of 100% sales by 2040, according to the statement.

The transport sector is the second source of pollution in Canada.

The announcement comes in line with Canada's commitment under the Paris Climate Agreement and the goal to achieve net-zero emissions by 2050.

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White House Confirms US Citizen Transferred as Part of Russia-Ukraine Prisoner Swap

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - A US citizen has been transferred as part of a Russia-Ukraine prisoner swap, White House National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We welcome the news," Kirby said during a press briefing about the transfer of the US citizen. Earlier on Wednesday, Kiev said that it had secured the release of US citizen Suedi Murekezi in its latest prisoner swap with Russia.

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White House Says Cannot Confirm Reports of US Sending Patriot Missiles to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The White House cannot confirm reports of the United States sending Patriot missile systems to Ukraine, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"When it's ready to announce and speak to the details, we'll certainly do that," Kirby told a press conference.

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US Sees 'Unique' Opportunity to Reach Peace Between Armenia, Azerbaijan - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States sees a unique opportunity for Armenia and Azerbaijan to reach peace amid Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"In the context of the South Caucasus, we do believe that there is a unique opportunity to facilitate a peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan," Donfried told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee. "I think part of why this situation is different today does have to do with Russia's war against Ukraine. So that is changing the dynamic in the region."

The United States sees a fundamental lack of trust between Armenia and Azerbaijan, which have been mired in conflict for over three decades, as the main challenge to the peace process, Donfried said.

The long-standing conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh flared up in September 2020, marking the worst escalation since the 1990s. Hostilities ended with a Russia-brokered trilateral declaration of a ceasefire signed in November 2020. Armenia and Azerbaijan agreed to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers in the conflict-torn region as they started negotiations to delimit the border. In September 2022, border clashes erupted between Armenia and Azerbaijan, resulting in around 300 deaths and marking a new escalation in the region.

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UN Economic Council Expels Iran From Commission on Status of Women After Amini's Death

UNITED NATIONS, December 14 (Sputnik) - The UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has voted to expel Iran from the Commission on the Status of Women, a 45-member body which meets annually, amid the unrest following the death of Mahsa Amini.

The final tally for the vote was 29 in favor, eight opposed and 16 abstentions. Russia, China and Bolivia were among the countries that rejected the measure.

The 22-year old woman died in police custody. The government contends Amini died of a heart attack while demonstrators claim she was beaten by the morality police, which arrested her for allegedly wearing a hijab improperly.

The US Mission to the United Nations authored the resolution and asked the members of the 54-member ECOSOC body to vote in favor and remove "the ugly stain" from its credibility. Iran's mission to the UN urged the members to reject the draft.

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US to Sanction Russian Tycoon Potanin, His Companies – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – The United States intends to impose sanctions on Russian tycoon Vladimir Potanin and his companies, but will spare his mining giant Normickel, The Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday.

The sanctions may be reportedly imposed as soon as Thursday, and will target the businessman, his wife Ekaterina Potanina, and a yacht he owns.

Potanin's targeted businesses include investment and holding company Interros, and Rosbank. Several members of the Russian government will also receive sanctions designations, the report added.

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US Acknowledges Russia's Influence in South Caucasus Region - Senior Official

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States acknowledges Russia's role and influence in the South Caucasus region, including in Armenia and Azerbaijan, but has questions regarding Moscow's long-term intentions in light of its special military operation in Ukraine, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Karen Donfried said in a congressional hearing on Wednesday.

"[W]e acknowledge Russia's role and influence in the region, but what Russia is doing in Ukraine has had important influences in the region, and what we see is that while Russia continues to be a factor in the South Caucasus, their further invasion of Ukraine has raised real questions about Russia's long-term intentions," Donfried told the US House Foreign Affairs Committee.

The United States also acknowledges that Russia has long-standing interests in the South Caucasus region and the country's leadership regularly meets with officials from Armenia and Azerbaijan, Donfried said.

Earlier on Wednesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that there are no concrete agreements on a trilateral meeting between Russian President Vladimir Putin, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan and Azeri President Ilham Aliyev, but they can talk on the sidelines of the informal CIS summit in St. Petersburg.

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Biden Declares Day of Remembrance of 2012 Sandy Hook School Shooting

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Wednesday issued a proclamation declaring a Day of Remembrance for the victims of the 2012 Sandy Hook school massacre in the US state of Connecticut.

"Ten years ago, a lone gunman killed 20 first-graders and 6 educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut," Biden said in a proclamation. "Today, those first-graders should be sitting in eleventh-grade classrooms, planning for their high school graduation and all the possibilities ahead. Those educators should be preparing lessons for new groups of students and enjoying full lives surrounded by their loved ones. Instead, their desks are forever empty, their families are left with holes in their hearts, and our Nation is missing a piece of its soul."

Biden said that day changed the lives of every survivor and many of them still feel physical and emotional wounds from the shooting.

The US president underscored the importance of protecting children in the United States.

"This summer, I signed into law the first major bipartisan gun safety legislation in nearly 30 years, which helps to keep firearms away from people who are a danger to themselves and others. And I have taken more executive action to reduce gun violence than any other President by this point in their Administration," he said.

Biden also noted that it is important to ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.

"I am optimistic because I have seen the courage and resolve of the Sandy Hook families. They have suffered unimaginable loss but have turned their pain into purpose," he said.

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Georgia Secretary of State Calls on Assembly to Reform General Election Runoff

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger on Wednesday urged the state's General Assembly to reform and eliminate its runoff process for general elections, following a US Senate runoff race earlier this month.

"Georgia is one of the only states in the country with a General Election Runoff," Raffensperger said in a statement. "We're also one of the only states that always seems to have a runoff. I'm calling on the General Assembly to visit the topic of the General Election Runoff and consider reforms."

While Raffensperger called for the elimination of runoffs in Georgia, he added they could select from a wide range of options to address the matter.

Georgia's General Assembly, its bicameral state legislature, convenes in January.

No one wants to deal with politics in the middle of their family holiday, Raffensperger said. It is also challenging for counties to complete an election audit and then execute a runoff in a four-week time period, according to Raffensperger.

Georgia continues to be a national leader in providing safe, secure, and accessible elections, Raffensperger also said.

Earlier this month, Democratic incumbent Senator Raphael Warnock won re-election in a runoff against Republican challenger Herschel Walker, granting Democrats a 51-49 majority in the

upper chamber. Neither candidate managed to garner a majority of votes during the initial election in November, prompting the runoff.

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Texas Jury Indicts 8 Men for \$114Mln Securities Fraud Scheme - US Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - A federal grand jury in Texas has indicted eight men for participating in a conspiracy to commit securities fraud in a social media scheme worth \$114 million, the US Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"Securities fraud victimizes innocent investors and undermines the integrity of our public markets," the Justice Department said in a press release. "As these charges demonstrate, the department will continue to prosecute those who defraud investors by spreading false and misleading information, including over social media, to line their own pockets."

The men allegedly used their extensive social media presence on Twitter and Discord to generate interest in particular securities by posting false and misleading information to increase their prices while concealing the intent to sell them at the artificially inflated prices, the release said.

From around January 2020 to around April 2022, the defendants profited at least approximately \$114 million from their scheme, the release said.

The defendants include: Edward Constantinescu of Montgomery, Texas; Perry Matlock of The Woodlands, Texas; John Rybarczyk of Spring, Texas; Gary Deel of Beverly Hills, California; Stefan Hrvatin of Miami, Florida; Tom Cooperman of Beverly Hills, California; Mitchell Hennessey of Hoboken, New Jersey; and Dan Knight of Houston, Texas, the release said.

All eight men have been charged with one count of conspiracy to commit securities fraud. In addition, Constantinescu has been charged with three counts of securities fraud and one count of engaging in monetary transactions in property derived from specified unlawful activity; Matlock and Deel have both been charged with five counts of securities fraud; Rybarczyk has been charged with four counts of securities fraud; and Hrvatin, Cooperman and Hennessey have been each charged with two counts of securities fraud, the release added.

The defendants made their initial court appearances on Tuesday, according to the release.

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US Lawmakers Ask Biden Admin. Officials to Provide Information on COVID-19 Origins

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – House Republicans requested on Wednesday that dozens of senior Biden administration officials provide information on COVID-19 origins to the House Committee on Oversight and Reform, the committee said in a press release.

"House Committee on Oversight and Reform Ranking Member James Comer and House Committee on the Judiciary Ranking Member Jim Jordan are pressing senior Biden Administration officials, the president of EcoHealth Alliance, and several virologists who authored 'The Proximal Origin of SARS-CoV-2' for information necessary to the Oversight Committee's investigation into COVID origins and, for the first time, outlined the names of 40 individuals with whom the Committee will be requesting transcribed interviews," the release said.

Jordan and Comer are requesting documents, communications, and information pertinent to the investigation from US Health Secretary Xavier Becerra, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Anthony Fauci, and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, among others, according to the press release.

To date, the committee's probe has found three facts: COVID-19 likely originated from the Wuhan Lab, the United States financed risky experimental research on novel bat coronaviruses at the Wuhan Lab, and Fauci acted to conceal the information by "intentionally downplaying the lab leak theory," the release said.

In October 2021, US intelligence released a declassified report on its investigation into the origins of the novel coronavirus, which found that the virus had not been developed as a biological weapon. However, the report also argued that Beijing continued to hinder the global investigation, resist sharing information, and blame other countries, including the United States.

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Autopsy Reveals US Soccer Journalist Died From Burst Blood Vessel - Wife

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – An autopsy has revealed that US soccer journalist Grant Wahl died from a burst blood vessel, putting to rest speculation about his death while covering the World Cup for CBS Sports in Qatar, his wife said on Wednesday.

The autopsy conducted in New York "showed that he had an aortic aneurysm that ruptured," his wife Celine Gounder told CNN in an interview.

An ascending thoracic aortic aneurysm means a weakness of the artery wall of his ascending aorta, which carries oxygenated blood from the heart. In rare cases, it can lead to a rupture, as in his case. Wahl, 49, had written that he had been feeling unwell in recent days from long reporting days.

There had been rampant speculation that his death was caused by the COVID-19 vaccine or even by the Qatari government in retaliation for his reporting on deaths of migrant workers. His brother had suggested on social media that he suspected foul play.

Wahl was covering his eighth World Cup in Doha when he collapsed in the press box. He previously worked at Sports Illustrated for more than 23 years.