

12/20/22 Tuesday

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Central, Eastern US Buckles Down for Christmas Arctic Blast Bringing Sub-Zero Temperatures
By - Fantine Gardinier

A dangerous storm system is set to sweep across the central and eastern United States over the Christmas holiday weekend, bringing life-threatening cold temperatures as well as ice and snow to as many as 46 million Americans.

The US National Weather Service (NWS) has warned of “very cold air” descending from western Canada across the Great Plains region, bringing at least one foot of snow to the northern US plains states.

However, behind the storm is a mass of extremely cold Arctic air that will sweep far to the south and east, creating wind chills as low as -40 degrees Fahrenheit. A wind chill is lower than the air temperature, and describes how the air feels to living creatures as a result of wind. That said, the air temperatures will also be very cold, dropping to between 35 and 50 degrees below average, and in northern states could reach -30 to -40 degrees Fahrenheit on Thursday and Friday.

"This level of cold can be life threatening and lead to frostbite on exposed skin in as little as 10 minutes," the NWS warned.

The storm is expected to rapidly strengthen as it moves southward, becoming a “bomb cyclone” as it crosses the Midwest and Great Lakes, bringing blizzard conditions to the region.

The burst of cold air will be so sudden, the NWS has warned of a “flash freeze,” and subzero air temperatures stretching from Denver, Colorado, to Minneapolis, Minnesota. As far east as Washington, DC, and as far south as northern Texas, temperatures are expected to reach the teens for several days.

Coming amid the holiday travel fervor, with Christmas on Sunday, the storm has the potential to paralyze travel across much of the United States for tens of millions of people. Flights will be grounded or delayed and roads and railways will become difficult and dangerous to use. Some airlines, including United, American, Delta, and Southwest, have already begun issuing travel waivers for tickets to travel through dozens of airports between December 21 and 25.

The situation recalls the “polar vortex” crises during the winter of 2013-14, when unusual weather systems destabilized the far northerly weather and sent it spilling down across lower latitudes, bringing temperatures of 21 degrees Fahrenheit to Houston, Texas, and a stunning wind chill in Chicago of -50, leading locals to coin the portmanteau “Chiberia” with Russia’s Siberia region.

More recently, a winter storm swept across the Great Plains and froze much of northern and central Texas in February 2021, wrecking the state’s fragile electrical system and killing at least 246 and possibly as many as 700 people, according to some estimates. Many died in homes that lacked sufficient heating or insulation, or due to carbon monoxide poisoning from improvised heating methods.

According to Texas media, the state's power company ERCOT has made changes in the wake of the 2021 storm, and the Electric Reliability Council said on Tuesday it did not expect significant power loss in the state as a result of the coming storm.

"As we monitor weather conditions, we want to assure Texans that the grid is resilient and reliable," ERCOT President and CEO Pablo Vegas said in a statement. "We will keep the public informed as weather conditions change."

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Musk Vows to Step Down From Twitter Once He Finds 'Someone Foolish Enough to Take the Job'

The tech billionaire has touched on stepping down from the CEO post, previously indicating that the workload required of the job was weighing on him. However, he has yet to indicate who would fill the position following his departure.

Twitter CEO Elon Musk announced late Tuesday that he would resign from his post but that it would only happen once he officially found "someone foolish enough to take the job."

"After that, I will just run the software & servers teams," he noted in a [Twitter post](#), which came two days after he published a poll asking netizens whether he should part ways with the role. The Tuesday announcement is the first time Musk has touched on him potentially stepping down since his weekend poll. Potential candidates have not been detailed; in fact, Musk earlier stated that he had no successor and was unaware of a qualified individual.

"No one who wants the job can actually keep Twitter alive," he said in a Sunday post.

The Sunday poll saw users overwhelmingly vote in favor for him to hit the road, with 57.5% of respondents voting "yes." Just 42.5% of netizens said they wanted the billionaire to continue manning the platform as CEO.

The entrepreneur has previously stated he would be willing to step down, lamenting he has far too much on his plate at the moment. Musk also heads SpaceX and automotive company Tesla, which recently saw its stock plummet.

Musk has only served as Twitter chief for about two months after officially purchasing the social media giant in late October in a \$44 billion agreement, of which only came after a monthslong court battle.

Shortly after Musk's acquisition, about half of the staff was axed as many opted to submit their pink slips not long after being informed of Twitter's new "extremely hardcore" work environment that was not friendly to remote work.

Drama at Twitter HQ under Musk's reign has also been prompted by a paid verification system that led to widespread account spoofing, loss of advertisers and allowing the return of users who had been previously been booted off the platform for misinformation and hate speech, among other issues.

However, more recently, the South African native went toe-to-toe with journalists, opting to suspend multiple individuals who had reportedly shared private information that Musk described

as "basically assassination coordinates." Many of the affected accounts have since been reinstated.

The ban itself came as Musk has portrayed himself as a free speech warrior, even going so far as allowing the publication of the "Twitter Files" series, which has so far delved into the platform's ties to government monitoring. The latest batch in the series touched on how the platform "directly assisted" with the US military's influence operations.

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Americans Cannot Stand Their Families for More Than 4 Hours at a Time During Holidays, Poll Finds

By - Ian DeMartino

Forty-seven percent of Americans plan to travel during the holidays, according to an October PricewaterCoopers poll.

If you have ever locked yourself in the bathroom just to get away from your family during the holidays, you are not alone. A survey polling 2,000 Americans who are traveling to visit their families this holiday season found that on average, they can only stand three hours and 54 minutes with their family before needing some time to themselves.

The survey found that 75% of those polled said they will need to take a moment to themselves over the holiday, with 37% saying they will find an excuse to leave the house to do so. Meanwhile, 25% admitted to finding a place to hide in a relative's house during family gatherings.

The top concerns for those staying with family include a lack of privacy (22%), family getting on their nerves (20%), family drama (20%), feeling like they are imposing (19%), and the house being too loud or busy (18%).

The survey was performed by OnePoll and funded by Motel 6. With that in mind, the survey found that planning for sleeping arrangements is one of the most stressful parts of hosting for the holidays for 40% of respondents.

Additionally, an average of two people per household with visiting families will be sleeping on something other than a bed during the holidays, according to the survey.

Despite the stressors involved, 95% of respondents still felt that seeing family was an important aspect of the holidays. They will, for an average of 3.5 days, presumably in something close to four-hour chunks.

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Spending Package Leaves Behind 'Dreamers' as DACA Protection Won't Be Included

By - Ian DeMartino

In October, a 5th Circuit of Appeals court upheld a lower court's ruling that the Obama-era Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was unconstitutional. The judge allowed current DACA recipients to continue under the program, pending a ruling by the Supreme Court, but blocked future applications.

The \$1.7 trillion spending package that was recently introduced in Congress does not include an expansion of or protection for the current DACA program, ending any reasonable hope that the program would be preserved before Republicans take control of the House of Representatives in January.

The DACA program protects "Dreamers," immigrants who arrived in the United States illegally as children. Since its 2012 creation, many of those protected under DACA have grown up, started families of their own, and entered the workforce or started college.

There is a not-unfounded fear that the conservative-leaning Supreme Court will strike down the program entirely.

According to [American Progress](#), there are 300,000 US-born children who depend on at least one DACA recipient parent. An estimated \$9.5 billion in taxes are also raised through DACA recipients every year, money that will be lost if DACA ends.

Democrats want to pass the omnibus spending bill, even without protections for "Dreamers," because they fear what a spending bill led by Republicans might feature, including further anti-immigration policies.

"While I am relieved that this omnibus government spending package didn't include anti-immigrant provisions, I am incredibly disappointed to see that protections for our nation's 'Dreamers' didn't make it into the final agreement," Rep. Lou Correa, a Democrat from California and one of the most outspoken pro-immigration lawmakers, [told The Hill](#).

The spending package will fund the government through fiscal year 2023, which ends on September 30.

Newly-Independent Sen. Kyrsten Sinema from Arizona and Republican Sen. Thom Tillis from North Carolina created the framework to protect current DACA recipients; however, it failed to get support from many Democrats because it also included increased interior immigration enforcement. That deal would have put the other 9 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States at greater risk of deportation.

The House has passed two immigration reform bills, but neither is likely to gather the 10 Republican votes needed to overcome the filibuster.

Without the enshrinement of DACA or an expansion to cover all "Dreamers," immigrants who grew up in the United States are in limbo, unsure of what their future holds. The roughly 600,000 current DACA recipients may lose their work permits and deportation protections if the Supreme Court strikes down DACA. Meanwhile, the 1.5 million "Dreamers" without DACA protection are stuck without a path to legal residency in the country they grew up and built a life in.

The average DACA recipient came to the United States in 1999 at the age of seven.

Progressive Democrats wanted to pass a provision including DACA protections in the social spending bill passed this summer. However, conservative Democrats squashed their attempts, fearing what a controversial issue like immigration would do to their election chances.

The issue was put off until after the midterm elections, and now the issue is dead in the water at least until 2024 when Democrats will have a chance to retake the House.

"This is just another example of the political malpractice that has been waged against our immigrant communities for decades, perpetuating cycles of false hope for millions. We can, and must, pass meaningful immigration reform—and I won't stop fighting until we fulfill that promise," said Correa.

Meanwhile, Republicans have made it very clear that immigration and border security will be a priority of theirs once they take power in the House. They have also promised investigations and threatened impeachment for Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for his handling of the southern border, though they have not put forth any accusations that would warrant impeachment.

Watch Stunning Video of US Train Slamming Into Truck Stuck on Tracks Before Derailing
By - Fantine Gardinier

A freight train flew off the tracks in southeastern Tennessee on Tuesday after striking a concrete truck that had become stuck at a grade-level road crossing. According to railway officials, the train is not believed to have been carrying any hazardous cargo.

Just after noon on Tuesday, a large truck carrying a 60-foot-long concrete barrier intended to protect roadside construction became stuck as it tried to navigate a rail crossing in Collegedale, Tennessee. As it waited for the traffic light to turn green, a Norfolk Southern freight train came barreling through town, smashing through the truck and its cargo that lay straddled across the tracks.

A bystander captured the stunning incident on film. The train can be seen slamming into the concrete barrier, dragging the pieces of it along with the truck for a significant distance. By the end of the footage, the entire area is covered in dust.

While it cannot be seen in the footage, the train's three locomotives all fell off the tracks, as did 10 freight cars carrying a variety of cargo, snarling the rails and creating a tangled mess of steel, wood, and stone.

The Chattanooga Fire Department responded to the scene, where a large amount of diesel fuel was leaking from two of the locomotives. Fortunately, no fire was sparked by the crash. However, two people were taken to area hospitals for treatment, although reportedly neither was the truck driver.

The Norfolk Southern Railway told area media that "initial reports do not indicate any hazardous material cars involved."

Traffic remains blocked on the road where the truck was hit, as well as nearby roads, as cleanup efforts continue.

According to industry statistics, in 2021, there were 9,251 accidents or incidents involving railways in the United States, including industrial accidents and crashes, with 901 people being killed in them. The US has about 140,000 miles of railway.

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Biden Reportedly Preparing to Hold Netanyahu 'Personally Responsible' for Far-Right Cabinet Members

By - Fantine Gardinier

As the Israeli Knesset prepares to swear in the new coalition government, the White House is preparing for the fallout from some of the incoming administration's more extremist members, according to US media reports.

Benjamin Netanyahu, who was assigned by Israeli President Isaac Herzog to form a coalition government after a strong electoral showing last month, is laying the final preparations on the political deals with which he has stitched together a ruling majority coalition. However, that coalition includes several figures far to the right of the already-conservative Likud leader - figures about whom Israel's greatest ally, the United States, has made clear its objections. On Tuesday, Biden administration officials reportedly made anonymous statements to US media in which they said US President Joe Biden is planning to hold Netanyahu "personally responsible" for his cabinet, including Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, who have called for leveling the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem and denying citizenship to non-Jews. Ben-Gvir is [set to be Netanyahu's](#) Minister of Public Security, and Smotrich will control part of the Finance Ministry, with his Religious Zionism party also controlling Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), the part of the defense ministry responsible for Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and the Constitution, Law and Justice Committee in the Knesset.

The US objections stem from fears that the new ministers will further antagonize the delicate situation in the West Bank, East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip, which have exploded in violence several times in recent years. The Biden administration has made clear it supports the creation of a future Palestinian state, and has encouraged the Israeli government to reopen such talks.

"Bibi says he can control his government, so let's see him do just that," an unnamed US official [told Politico](#), using the statesman's nickname.

It's unclear what leverage Biden might have over Netanyahu's administration other than strongly-worded statements, since he has already ruled out cutting US military aid to Israel. However, it could potentially see the US withholding help in expanding the Abraham Accords, a set of peace agreements with Arab states that had formerly refused to give Israel diplomatic recognition. Saudi Arabia [reportedly recently told](#) US diplomats it was interested in one day doing so.

Biden's administration has previously raised its voice against the proposed expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem, two Palestinian-majority areas beyond Israel's 1948 borders that Israel has ruled since 1967. By contrast, Biden's predecessor, Donald Trump, threw his complete support behind Israeli settlement expansion, endorsing Israel's claims to have annexed East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, the latter of which was seized from Syria in 1967.

After the elections last month, in which Likud won a plurality of Knesset seats and Netanyahu was again [tapped to form a government](#), the White House made clear its objections to the

inclusion of Smotrich or Ben-Gvir in the new government, and has kept up that pressure in the weeks since.

Religious Zionism replied in an official statement, telling US ambassador to Israel Tom Nides that the party has "a lot of respect and appreciation for our ally the United States, the Biden administration should also respect Israeli democracy and not interfere in the establishment of an elected government."

The party's objection is somewhat ironic, since Israel in recent years [barred several US lawmakers](#) from entering the country, including Reps. Ilhan Omar (D-MN) and Rashida Tlaib (D-MI), following their criticisms of Israeli policy.

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Roads Torn Up, Thousands Without Power After Northern California Shaken by 6.4-Magnitude Quake

By - Fantine Gardinier

The San Andreas fault, which runs the length of California, is said by seismologists to be "overdue" for a massive earthquake, which hasn't happened in more than 160 years. The fault has suffered several strong earthquakes, but not the "big one" of magnitude 7.8 or higher, which would devastate the densely populated region.

At 2:34 am on Tuesday morning, a strong earthquake rocked northern California, destroying homes and tearing up roads and power lines, leaving nearly 100,000 people without electricity. According to the [US Geological Survey](#) (USGS), the earthquake was magnitude 6.4 on the Richter scale and centered about 15 kilometers southwest of the city of Ferndale, just off the coast of the Pacific Ocean. It occurred at a depth of 17.9 kilometers.

At least two people were injured in the quake, according to local authorities.

The area is known to seismologists as the Mendocino triple junction, a place where the Pacific, North America, and Juan de Fuca plates meet. According to the USGS, the quake was the result of a strike-slip fault, or side-to-side action, and thus no tsunami warning was issued.

Tsunamis are more commonly associated with thrust faults, in which the tectonic plate is shoved upward by another plate sliding underneath it.

California's Humboldt County, that closest to the epicenter, suffered the greatest damage from the quake. According to utility tracking data, 71,000 of 99,000 power customers were without electricity at 6:30 am Pacific Time.

The Humboldt County Sheriff's Office warned of "widespread damages to roads and homes" on its Twitter account Tuesday morning. Fissures were seen stretching across roadways, and cracks were reported in the Fernbridge, which carries California Route 211 across the Eel River. The bridge has been closed by Caltrans for inspection.

Twitter users posted videos and photos of the damage to their homes.

"That was a big one," a local journalist tweeted, with a video of an overturned china cabinet in her home. "House is a mess."

Sitting along a number of fault lines that form part of the Pacific Ring of Fire, California is the scene of regular earthquakes, most of which are minor, but which can also have extreme power. In 1906, a magnitude-7.9 quake destroyed 80% of San Francisco, killing more than 3,000 people. More recently, a magnitude-6.9 quake in 1989 centered near Loma Prieta Peak tore down highways, triggered a small tsunami, and halted a World Series baseball game happening nearby between two local teams.

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Zelenskyy Would Not Be Making Visit If Support in US Wasn't Decreasing - Psaki

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – Volodymyr Zelenskyy would not be coming to the United States for a visit amid the ongoing conflict at home if there were no signs of US support weakening, former White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Wednesday.

"He would not be making this trip if support in US wasn't decreasing while Russians take out energy sources and bombard cities. This is a sales pitch to congress and public," Psaki wrote on Twitter.

She expressed confidence that Zelenskyy will see "many well deserved standing ovations" during his address to US Congress later in the day. The former spokeswoman also called the visit a "sales pitch to congress and public."

Zelenskyy is due to visit the White House on Wednesday afternoon before delivering an address to a joint session of the US Congress in the evening, according to US officials.

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US Congress Working on Bill to Label Russia 'Aggressor State' - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration and Congressional leadership are in talks about introducing a bill to designate Russia as an "aggressor state" in an effort to avoid the "state sponsor of terror" label, which US officials believe is fraught with unintended consequences, The Hill reported, citing Republican congressional aides.

Zelenskyy is set to visit Washington later on Wednesday.

"Zelenskyy asked for the State Sponsor of Terror designation and instead the Biden Administration has told them it won't support it, but have concocted an alternative designation that doesn't even exist under US domestic or international law — there is no legal basis for it," a congressional aide familiar with the discussions told the newspaper.

The official called it a "half-baked PR measure that won't do anything to punish Russia, nor help the Ukrainian people."

If enacted, the measure will enable the US president to designate Russia an aggressor state. The president will also be able to designate any foreign country an aggressor state if he determines that it is involved in acts of aggression against Ukraine, according to the newspaper. The document will also allow the president to impose sanctions on any individual responsible for or involved in the crime of aggression.

Ukrainian officials told the newspaper that the status of an "aggressor state" does not satisfy their requests, but said they support the measure and may generally support creating a separate term if it provides additional tools to punish "aggressor states."

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Martyshev Released From US Custody – Bureau of Prisons

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Russian national Yury Martyshev, who served more than five years in a US prison on charges of computer hacking, has been released from custody, the Bureau of Prisons (BOP) said on Wednesday.

"Released On: 12/20/2022," BOP said on its website.

Martyshev's lawyer Alexey Tarasov told Sputnik on Tuesday that, once released, his client will be transferred to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement to be deported to Russia. He also expressed hope that Martyshev will be able to return home before the New Year's holiday. In April 2019, a US federal court sentenced Martyshev to 78 months in jail on charges of computer hacking.

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US Working 'in Lockstep' With Zelenskyy to Ensure Security During His Visit - Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration was heavily involved in security arrangements for Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to the United States, White House National Security Council Coordinator John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We are working in lockstep with him [Zelenskyy] and his staff to make sure that he can make this trip safely — both coming to the US and going back — and we are going to continue to support his travel requirements," Kirby told CNN.

CNN, citing a senior administration official, also reported that a US military aircraft was involved in transporting Zelenskyy to Washington.

Kirby said that the decision to visit Washington was ultimately up to Zelenskyy, who concluded that the security measures were adequate.

Zelenskyy is due to visit the White House on Wednesday afternoon before delivering an address to a joint session of the US Congress later in the evening, according to US officials.

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Biden Says 'Thrilled' to Meet Zelenskyy at White House

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he is "thrilled" to welcome Volodymyr Zelenskyy at the White House later on Wednesday.

"I hope you're having a good flight, Volodymyr. I'm thrilled to have you here. Much to discuss," Biden tweeted.

The two leaders will discuss a range of topics, including battlefield strategy in Ukraine, energy, and sanctions against Russia, among other matters, a senior US official told reporters. The US president is also expected to announce a new \$2 billion security assistance package that will include a Patriot air defense system, the official said.

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Kirby Declines to 'Get Ahead of Biden' on New Russia Sanctions During Zelenskyy Visit

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The White House declined to confirm whether the United States will unveil new Russia sanctions as President Joe Biden is set to host Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Washington on Wednesday.

"I'm not going to get ahead again of the president's discussion with President Zelenskyy, there will be some announcements that the president will make, but again, I'll let him do that," National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby told CNN.

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Biden, Zelenskyy to Discuss Zelenskyy's Idea of Just Peace for Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will discuss with Volodymyr Zelenskyy how the latter views a just peace for Ukraine, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Wednesday.

Zelenskyy is expected to arrive in Washington later in the day.

"I have no doubt that they're gonna talk about President Zelenskyy's notion of a just peace and what does that look like, what are the components of that and how we help Ukraine get to that point. But look, no question about it, Mr. Putin is not interested in diplomacy right now," Kirby told CNN.

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Envoy of Fallen Afghan Gov't Lauds UN Delaying Decision on Post-Taliban Representation

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The representative of the fallen Afghan government at the United Nations told Sputnik he welcomes the decision of the UN Credentials Committee to again postpone its recommendation on who should represent the country after the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) took over.

"I would like to welcome this decision of the Credentials Committee," Naseer Ahmad Faiq said. "And my main goal is to play an important role to contribute to the discussion on Afghanistan at this very critical juncture when the people of Afghanistan really need the support of the international community and the United Nations particularly."

In September 2021, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres received a letter from the foreign affairs minister of the Taliban government requesting that he participate in the 76th session of the UN General Assembly. Back then, UN officials said that they will have the UN Credentials Committee decide on whether to give the Taliban credentials as the official representatives of Afghanistan.

Last year in December, the General Assembly adopted a resolution reaffirming the decision of the UN Credentials Committee not to allow Taliban officials to represent the country at the United Nations.

Last week, the UN Credentials Committee again postponed the decision on who should represent Afghanistan.

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Envoy of Fallen Afghan Gov't Says Afghanistan Issue Being Sidelined by Ukraine, Economy

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The representative of the former Afghan government at the United Nations expressed concern to Sputnik that differences within the UN Security Council, the Ukraine conflict and economic issues have pushed aside UN-led actions on Afghanistan.

"The division among the members of the Security Council and also other international issues, the crisis in Ukraine and economic crisis, unfortunately, have really impacted the other issues, including Afghanistan. We don't want the Afghanistan issue to be sidelined or affected by these issues," Naseer Ahmad Faiq said.

The diplomat said they expect the permanent members of the UN Security Council to act based on the UN Charter and "the moral responsibilities they have."

The Taliban came to power in Afghanistan in August 2021, prompting the collapse of the US-backed civilian government and mass evacuations. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund suspended financial aid, which previously accounted for nearly 75% of the

country's public expenditure, while the United States froze billions of dollars in assets belonging to the Afghan Central Bank.

No foreign government has officially recognized the Taliban as the legitimate authority.

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UN Envoy of Ousted Afghan Government Says 'Not in Touch' With Taliban

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The representative of the former Afghan government at the United Nations told Sputnik he has no lines of communication with the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism), which retook control of the country in August 2021. "No, I am not in touch," Naseer Ahmad Faiq told Sputnik. "But not only me, most of the Afghan embassies abroad, they are continuing still their services under the name of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and that system which was established in Afghanistan in the past 20 years with the support of international community and the hard work and sacrifices of Afghan professionals."

The diplomat said that the mission is struggling financially and staff do not receive salaries from the capital, but they are "proud to keep serving."

The Taliban are unsuccessfully seeking to appoint their own representatives at the UN. Last week, the UN Credentials Committee again postponed the decision on who should represent Afghanistan after the change of power.

The United Nations has insisted on many occasions that the interim Afghan government formed by the Taliban has to grant basic rights to the population, including women and minorities. It has been largely criticized for not delivering on its promises.

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Sikorsky Wins \$676Mln Supply Chain Contract to Keep US Navy Helicopters Flying - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Sikorsky, a division of Lockheed Martin, has won a more than two-thirds of a billion dollar supply chain maintenance contract to keep the US Navy's fleets of CH-53E Super Stallion and MH-53E Sea Dragon helicopters with full supplies of spare parts and all other maintenance essentials, the Defense Department announced.

"Sikorsky Aircraft Corporation [of] Stratford, Connecticut is awarded a \$676,702,069 ...logistics requirements contract for the supply chain management [for the two helicopter forces," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

The deal will include 196 weapon replaceable assemblies/shop replaceable assemblies in support of the CH-53E and MH-53E helicopters, the release said.

"The contract will [also] include a five-year base period with one two-year option. If the option is exercised, the contract will be a not-to-exceed amount of \$752,324,052," the release added.

Work on the contract will be performed over the next five years in Cherry Point, North Carolina (77%); and Stratford, Connecticut (23%), according to the release.

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UN Not Aware of Any Plans for Zelenskyy to Visit New York Headquarters - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is unaware of any plans for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to visit UN Headquarters in New York, Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters.

"We have received lots of queries regarding a possible visit by Volodymyr Zelenskyy, President of Ukraine, to the United Nations. As far as we know, we are not aware of any such visit. We advise you to contact the Ukrainian mission for any further questions," Dujarric said.

US media earlier in the day reported that Zelenskyy is expected to be in Washington on Wednesday for a White House visit and to deliver a speech to a joint session of Congress. CNN said the visit is meant to coincide with the unveiling of another Ukraine weapons package by the Biden administration.

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Boeing Wins \$2Bln Contract to Modernize US Navy's F/A-18 Fighter Force - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Boeing has won a more than \$2 billion new contract to upgrade and modernize the US Navy's fleets of F/A-18 Super-Hornet fighters and EA-18G electronic reconnaissance aircraft, the Department of Defense announced.

"The Boeing Company [of] St. Louis, Missouri is awarded a \$2,020,956,832 ... contract," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

The contract provides for system upgrades for the F/A-18 and EA-18G aircraft, including Foreign Military Sales (FMS) variants, the release said.

The \$2 billion-plus deal will also cover deliverables and services based on systems configuration set requirements consisting of all software and hardware required to implement new capabilities on the aircraft for the Navy and FMS customers, the release added.

Most of the work on the contract (86%) will be performed over the next five years at Boeing's main facility for military work at St. Louis, Missouri, with another 11% being carried out at El Segundo, California, according to the release.

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US House Ways And Means Committee Approves Motion to Release Trump's Tax Records to Public

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The House Ways and Means Committee approved a motion to release former President Donald Trump's tax records to the public.

The committee voted 24-16 Tuesday night in favor of releasing Trump's tax records.

Last month, the US Supreme Court rejected Trump's effort to block the US House Ways and Means Committee to obtain his tax records for the last six years.

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Biden Asks US Supreme Court to Deny Bid to Delay End of Border Expulsion Policy - Filing (Updates with details, background in paras 4-11)

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has filed an appeal to the US Supreme Court requesting it to deny a Republican bid to end the Title 42 policy that authorizes expulsions of migrants on the basis of health status, a court filing revealed.

"The government recognizes that the end of the Title 42 orders will likely lead to disruption and a temporary increase in unlawful border crossings. The government in no way seeks to minimize the seriousness of that problem. But the solution to that immigration problem cannot be to extend indefinitely a public-health measure that all now acknowledge has outlived its public-health justification," the US Justice Department said in a court document on Tuesday. The Justice Department said it is prepared to surge resources and to implement new policies in response to the temporary spike in migrants expected to cross the US-Mexico border should Title 42 be terminated.

Although the Biden administration is asking the Supreme Court to end Title 42, it is also asking the court to keep the policy in place until December 27 if there is a ruling before December 23. However, if the Supreme Court provides a ruling on the fate of Title 42 on or after December 23, the Biden administration requests that the policy be left in place for an additional two days.

National Border Patrol Council vice president Chris Cabrera told Sputnik that morale among US Border Patrol agents is extremely low as they brace for the border crisis to intensify once Title 42 is lifted.

The Biden administration claims it has been surging resources to the US southern border to prepare for the lifting of the Title 42 policy. However, Cabrera said there isn't enough manpower to deal with the crisis.

According to media reports, the Biden administration expects some 14,000 asylum-seeking migrants to cross the US southern border into the United States if Title 42 is rescinded.

Cabrera said the agency expects huge numbers of illegal border crossings and is uncertain how immigration authorities will be able to sustain such a situation, considering there have been well over 200,000 illegal border crossings each month over the last two years-and-a-half years.

The only way to address the crisis on the southern border is through legislative action, but Democrats and Republicans for the most part have failed to make any substantial progress on the issue, Cabrera said.

Most migrants coming into the United States illegally are being released into the United States after they are apprehended on the US southern border, Cabrera added.

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UN Teams in Armenia, Azerbaijan Ready to Respond to Humanitarian Needs - Official

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations country teams in Armenia and Azerbaijan have established communication with the host governments and are ready to help ease the humanitarian crisis, Miroslav Jenca, assistant to the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, said.

"The UN country teams in both, Armenia and Azerbaijan, continue to maintain open channels with the authorities and stand prepared to respond to emerging humanitarian needs, if requested and as conditions allow," Jenca said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on Tuesday.

At the invitation of the host governments, the country teams engage in inter-agency need and program assessments, including for programs to accessible conflict-impacted areas, Jenca added.

Since December 12, 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 the contested region of Nagorno-Karabakh, according to Armenian media. Yerevan has called the move a provocation by Baku that is meant to cause a humanitarian collapse.

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Zelenskyy Visit Meant to 'Shake Down' US Lawmakers to Include \$45Bln in New Aid - Source

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to the White House and plans to deliver a speech to a joint session of Congress on Wednesday is an effort to persuade US lawmakers to include \$45 billion in additional assistance to Ukraine in the new US spending package for 2023, a congressional aide told Sputnik.

"It appears to be an effort to shake down Congress for \$45 billion in funds in the omnibus. Joint session on Wednesday," the aide said on Tuesday.

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Russia Expects Armenia-Azerbaijan Agreements to Be Implemented - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - Russia expects that Armenia and Azerbaijan implement the agreements brokered by Moscow on ceasefire and non-use of force, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Anna Evstigneeva said.

"We expect that all of the agreements arrived at with Russian mediation - the agreements on ceasefire and non-use of force - will be implemented," Evstigneeva said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on Tuesday.

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Planning Underway for Zelenskyy Visit to US, Patriot Missile Announcement - Reports

(Adds details in para 5)

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US officials are planning a meeting for President Joe Biden with his Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy when the latter visits Washington on Wednesday for the reveal of a new \$54 billion defense aid package for Ukraine, including Patriot missile systems, CNN reported.

The visit, during which Zelenskyy is also expected to address a joint session of Congress, will be his first to the United States since the Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24.

Zelenskyy's visit has not been finalized and details are tightly held due to security concerns, the report said on Tuesday.

The visit comes as US lawmakers consider an omnibus government funding bill, which includes a new \$45 billion in emergency assistance for Ukraine.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi in a statement encouraged colleagues to be physically present at the House session Wednesday night.

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World Bank Approves \$610Mil Financial Package to Address Ukraine's Urgent Needs

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The World Bank issued a release announcing that it has approved a new \$610 million financial package for Ukraine that includes projects to boost the country's recovery efforts.

The World Bank said \$500 million will be mobilized under the Public Expenditures for Administrative Capacity Endurance (PEACE) project and \$110 million will go toward the Health Enhancement and Life-Saving (HEAL Ukraine) project, the release said on Tuesday.

The \$500 million for the PEACE Project will help the government of Ukraine with expenditures for families and children, salaries for public employees and to cover utility payments, the release said.

The new financing package contributes to several previously announced packages for the PEACE Project, including a \$4.5 billion grant that was approved in November, the release added.

The HEAL Ukraine Project seeks to improve and strengthen the country's primary health care, address the increased demand for mental health and rehabilitation services, restore and strengthen services delivery in hospitals and support capacity building for key health care institutions, according to the release.

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US Capitol Police Boosts Security Ahead of Potential Zelenskyy Visit - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police is stepping up security ahead of a potential visit to Washington by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, Axios reported, citing multiple sources in the know.

Zelenskyy is expected to come to Washington on Wednesday in a first in-person visit since the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the report said.

The Biden administration has not yet officially confirmed the visit will actually take place.

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Ukrainian President Zelenskyy to Visit US on Wednesday - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky will visit the United States on Wednesday and he is expected to meet high-profile US political figures, Punchbowl News reported.

Zelenskyy will reportedly leave his country for the first time since Russia undertook a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, according to the news site.

Zelenskyy is expected to meet with congressional leaders and national security committee senior lawmakers from the Democratic and Republican parties.

Additional support for Ukraine would require legislation that Congress will have to process tomorrow, Punchbowl News founder Jake Sherman said via Twitter.

Zelenskyy's visit to Washington was known to a very small number of lawmakers in Congress, he added.

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US Senator Paul Says More Concerned by Omnibus Debt Than Ukraine Defense Funding

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US Senator Rand Paul said he is more worried about the impact the \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill will have on the national debt than the excessive funding it would provide to the Ukrainian military.

"The clamor is to vote, vote now," Paul said during a press conference on Tuesday. "Are we at risk for being invaded by a foreign power if we don't put \$45 billion into the military [of Ukraine] or are we more at risk by adding to a \$31 trillion debt? I think the greatest risk to our national security is our debt."

Paul brought a printed copy of the 4,155-page omnibus bill to the press conference, saying the text is too long relative to the amount of time lawmakers have to consider the legislation.

The bill provides \$45 billion in emergency funding for Ukraine - approximately \$7 billion more than requested by the Biden administration - and \$858 in defense funding overall.

Paul said he will demand two amendments, one to make the legislation in compliance with budgetary rules on offsetting spending and another to require a two-thirds vote to evade budgetary rules instead of a 60-vote requirement.

Paul and fellow Republican Senators Mike Braun, Ron Johnson, Mike Lee and Rick Scott gathered to hold the press conference to express their opposition to the way the legislation was formulated and introduced with an artificial deadline.

Earlier on Tuesday, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said he expects Congress to pass the omnibus bill before the Friday government shutdown deadline. Minority Leader Mitch McConnell likewise spoke in favor of the bill, praising the increase in defense spending.

US House Republicans, including chamber leader Kevin McCarthy, have expressed opposition to the omnibus bill and threatened to thwart the legislative efforts of any members who vote in favor when they take control of the lower chamber of Congress next year.

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US Stocks Up 1st Time in 5 Days in Thin Pre-Holiday Trade After Band of Japan Pivots

NEW YORK, December 21 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's three major indexes rose for the first time in five days as investors sought discounted blue chip stocks in thin pre-holiday trading.

But market sentiment remained weak after an unexpected hawkish maneuver by the Bank of Japan that signaled to the Federal Reserve and the European Central Bank that they may need to do more to fight inflation.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which serves as Wall Street's broadest equities indicator with stocks of 30 large US corporations, closed up 92 points, or 0.3%, at 32,850.

Notwithstanding the rebound, the Dow remained down about 10% on the year.

The S&P 500 Index, which represents the top 500 US stocks, finished up 4 points, or 0.1%, at 3,822. Year-to-date, the index was down 20%, remaining in bear-market territory.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee names in technology such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, rose a mere 1 point, or 0.01%, at 10,547. The Nasdaq is down 33% on the year in the deepest bear market experienced by the three indexes.

With less than two weeks to the year's close, most investors have wound down position-taking, leading to lackluster trading on global stock markets. Sentiment has not been helped by signs that central banks plan to keep rate hikes relatively high in 2023 to beat inflation. In contrast to falling stock prices, US Treasury yields have also been rising - a sign that investors ditching risk for safe-haven instruments.

The Bank of Japan further rattled investors on Tuesday after announcing that it would allow ten-year Japanese government yields to rise as much as 50 basis points, or 0.5%. That was up

from the previous 25 basis point cap, and signaled the bank's "first step toward tighter monetary policy by widening the target range for bond yield," Commerzbank said in a note.

The surge in Japanese government bond yields pushed up yields on global bonds including US Treasuries, keeping in check gains across equity markets, particularly rate-sensitive tech stocks that come under NASDAQ.

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Russia Expects Transport Connection Restored Through Lachin Corridor – UN Deputy Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) – Russian expects that full transport connection through the Lachin corridor will be restored in the new future, Russian Deputy Representative to the United Nations Anna Evstigneeva said during a United Nations Security Council meeting.

"We expect that full transport connection [via the Lachin corridor] will be restored in the very near future," Evstigneeva said on Tuesday.

Last week, the long-standing conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the breakaway Nagorno-Karabakh region was exacerbated further, after Azerbaijani citizens, described by state media as environmental activists protesting against Yerevan's illegal mining in the area, blocked the Lachin Corridor, which links Armenia with the Nagorno-Karabakh region. Yerevan called the move a provocation by Baku meant to cause a humanitarian collapse.

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UN Lauds Russian Peacekeepers for Facilitating Safe Passage Via Nagorno-Karabakh Corridor

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations appreciates the efforts of Russian peacekeeping forces to enable safe passage through the Lachin corridor in the Nagorno-Karabakh region, Assistant Secretary-General Miroslav Jenca said on Tuesday.

"It is imperative that the population, particularly those in need, be allowed to travel freely and be provided access to basic services. We welcome in this regard the commitment of Russian peacekeeping forces to facilitate and ensure the safe passage through the corridor," Jenca told a UN Security Council meeting.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) -

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Kiev continues strikes against residential areas in Donetsk, targeting civilians, while no foreign media and human rights activists say anything about this, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Tuesday.

* The White House welcomes additional funding for Ukraine included in the 2023 omnibus appropriations bill proposed by Congress, Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said.

* Belarus is unlikely to join the Ukraine conflict on the Russian side in the short term despite strong military cooperation between Minsk and Moscow, UK Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said.

* Moscow is extremely dissatisfied with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Turk's response to the shooting of Russian prisoners of war in the Donbas, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin told Sputnik

* Ukraine's agriculture has suffered more than \$40 billion worth of damage caused by hostilities in the country, Ukrainian Deputy Minister of Agrarian Policy and Food Taras Vysotskyi said.

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

* Russian companies are interested in cooperating with Iran on gas turbine technologies and the establishment of joint production, Russian Energy Minister Nikolay Shulginov said on Tuesday.

* The events of 2022 have confirmed the importance of fossil fuels for the global economy, and the interest toward decarbonization has declined in most countries, Gazprom said.

* A new participant of the Sakhalin-2 oil and gas project, which will replace Shell, has not yet been determined, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.

US BORDER CRISIS

* Texas Governor Greg Abbott said in a letter to President Joe Biden on Tuesday that federal assets must be sent to communities on the US southern border to help them protect migrants sleeping on city streets from the approaching polar vortex that may be deadly.

BLAST AT GAS PIPELINE IN RUSSIA

* Three people were killed and another one was injured as a result of an explosion at a gas pipeline in the Republic of Chuvashia in Russia, Olga Smirnova, the head of the Kalininskiy rural settlement, told Sputnik on Tuesday.

* The fire at the section of the gas pipeline Urengoy-Center in Chuvashia was contained, gas is supplied to consumers in full through parallel gas pipelines, the causes of the incident will be established by a specially created commission, Gazprom Transgaz Nizhny Novgorod said.

EU PRICE CAP ON GAS

* The European Union made another political decision, agreeing on a gas price cap, but this is not an economic instrument, it carries risks for the supplies to the European market, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak told reporters.

* It is necessary to study all EU legal documents concerning the gas price cap, which do not exist yet, before Russia issues any kind of response, Novak said.

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UN Urges Armenia, Azerbaijan to Abide by Ceasefire Obligations, Achieve Lasting Settlement

UNITED NATIONS, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United Nations calls on Armenia and Azerbaijan to comply with the peace agreements and work harder on reaching a sustainable political settlement, Miroslav Jenca, assistant to the UN Secretary-General, said on Tuesday. "Regrettably, despite these promising diplomatic engagements, the tensions, both on the Armenia-Azerbaijani border and around areas under the control of the Russian peacekeeping forces have not abated as hoped, with various incidents being reported," Jenca told the UN Security Council. "The parties must abide by their obligation to fully implement the trilateral statement on the ceasefire of November 9, 2020 and the subsequent agreed statements and commitments and to redouble their diplomatic efforts to achieve a negotiated lasting peaceful settlement, before it is too late."

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Making Trump's Tax Returns Public to Unleash Political Retribution in Congress - Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – Publication of former US President Donald Trump's tax return documents will unleash a cycle of political retribution between the Democrats supporting the move and the Republicans opposing it, Ways and Means Committee Ranking Member Kevin Brady said on Tuesday.

The House Ways and Means Committee convened on Tuesday to discuss whether to release the information to the public about Trump's tax returns after years of the fruitless efforts by Democrats.

"If taken, this committee action will set a terrible precedent that unleashes a dangerous new political weapon that reaches far beyond the former president and overturns decades of privacy protections for average Americans that have existed since Watergate," Brady told reporters.

"[W]e worry this will unleash a cycle of political retribution in Congress."

Republicans are concerned that if the committee moves forward with its action in Trump's case, it will "jeopardize the right of every American to be protected from political targeting by Congress," Brady added.

"Going forward, the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee and the Senate Finance Committee will have nearly unlimited power to target and make public the tax returns of private citizens," Brady said.

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New Twitter Files Release Shows Company Gave Protections to US Military PsyOps Accounts

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Twitter gave accounts connected to US military psychological influence operations special protections on the social media platform, reporter Lee Fang said in the latest release of the so-called Twitter Files.

"Twitter has claimed for years that they make concerted efforts to detect and thwart government-backed platform manipulation... But behind the scenes, Twitter gave approval and special protection to the US military's online psychological influence ops," Fang said via Twitter. The Twitter Files are based on internal company records, released in collaboration with new CEO Elon Musk.

In 2017, a US Central Command official provided Twitter with a list of 52 Arab language accounts used to amplify certain messages, requesting priority service for six of the accounts and "whitelist" abilities for others, Fang said.

Twitter granted the whitelist request, essentially providing verified status to accounts without the standard blue checkmark, making them exempt from spam flags and more likely to show up on the platform, Fang said.

Despite knowledge that Pentagon propaganda accounts used covert identities, Twitter did not suspend many of the accounts for more than two years, while others remain active, according to Fang.

In 2020, high-level Twitter officials discussed the covert network, sharing the 2017 list, as well as 157 other undisclosed Pentagon accounts, Fang said.

In August, a Stanford Internet Observatory report revealed a cross-platform US military propaganda network used to push anti-Russia and anti-China narratives. One account identified by Stanford was whitelisted by Twitter in accordance with the 2017 request, Fang said.

Previous Twitter File releases have provided insight into the company's decision to suppress the Hunter Biden laptop story and remove former US President Donald Trump from the platform.

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Texas Asks Biden for Aid to Southern Border to Shield Migrants From Polar Vortex - Letter

EL PASO, December 20 (Sputnik) - Texas Governor Greg Abbott said in a letter to President Joe Biden on Tuesday that federal assets must be sent to communities on the southern border to help them protect migrants sleeping on city streets from an approaching polar vortex that may be deadly.

"This terrible crisis for border communities in Texas is a catastrophe of your own making," Abbott said in the letter. "These communities and the state are ill-equipped to do the job assigned to the federal government – house the thousands of migrants flooding into the country every day. With perilous temperatures moving into the area, many of these migrants are at risk of freezing to death on city streets."

The Texas border city of El Paso in particular will be in dire need of federal assistance after the mayor declared a state of emergency over the high number of migrants sleeping on the city streets.

Thousands of asylum-seeking migrants arrived in El Paso over the past week, flooding US federal immigration facilities, which led to authorities releasing them into the streets in order to free up space.

The Texas governor blamed Biden's immigration policies for the ongoing border crisis, which consists of two-consecutive record-breaking years of illegal immigration. Abbott added that he will continue to deploy state resources to the border to address the situation, but they are becoming scarce.

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Pentagon Wants to Spend Another \$14.2Bln on F-35C Fighter Over Next 5 Years - GAO

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Department of Defense wants to spend an additional \$14.2 billion to further upgrade and address continuing deficiencies in its controversial F-35C Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) over the next half decade, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) announced in a new report on Tuesday.

"(T)he Defense Department is proposing investing \$14.2 billion in the F-35C over the next five years," the report said.

The plan follows an earlier GAO investigation this year which found that mission capable rates have been a challenge for the F-35, which is now the cornerstone of the US tactical aircraft fleet, the GAO noted.

"We reported in April 2022 that the F-35 was not capable of conducting missions at expected rates and was falling short of its reliability and maintainability metrics. Our work found that spare parts availability and maintenance were the two key factors driving the program's performance shortfalls," the report said.

The GAO recalled that in July this year, it had also reported that the Defense Department faced considerable challenges in sustaining the F-35 engine and it noted that the Pentagon needed a new engine sustainment strategy to meet the desired outcomes of the US military services, the report said.

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Pentagon Plans to Spend \$100Bln Over 5 Years to Upgrade Tactical Air Combat Fleet - GAO

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Defense is planning a massive five year \$100 billion acquisition program to upgrade, modernize or replace its existing fleet of

tactical combat aircraft, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Tuesday.

"Over the next five years, the Department of Defense is proposing to spend nearly \$100 billion on major investments and changes to its current mix of tactical aircraft," the report said.

The expenditure will include modernizing existing aircraft, buying and developing new aircraft and retiring a significant number of older planes, the GAO explained.

"We recommended that the Defense Department analyze its portfolio of tactical aircraft investments, including interdependencies and tradeoffs among the different planes, and report on its findings to Congress," the report said.

Recent studies conducted by the Defense Department's Joint Staff and the military services have found that the Pentagon needs to modernize its tactical aircraft fleet and seven of eight studies found that existing aircraft did not have the capabilities needed to compete in future combat scenarios, the GAO said.

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US State Dept. Says North Korea Poised to Undertake Additional 'Provocations'

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that North Korea is ready to undertake additional "provocations," State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"We continue to believe that the DPRK is poised to undertake additional provocations," Price said during a press conference.

If Pyongyang were to undertake a seventh nuclear test, the United States would impose additional measures on those responsible for the country's nuclear program, the official added.

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State Dept. Confirms Taliban Release of Two US Citizens in 'Gesture of Good Will'

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – The US State Department confirmed on Tuesday that two American nationals have been released by the Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) in a "gesture of good will."

"This was not part of any swap of prisoners or detainees. There was no money that exchanged hands. We understand this, or at least the Taliban characterize this to us as a goodwill gesture," spokesperson Ned Price said during a press conference.

The US welcomes their liberation but deplores that such a gesture was made on the same day the Ministry of Higher Education of Afghanistan announced that women are to be prohibited from attending universities.

Earlier in the day, CNN reported that the Taliban had released two imprisoned American nationals. Both are on their way to Doha.

One of the Americans released by the Taliban is said to be filmmaker Ivor Shearer, who was arrested while filming in Kabul in August. The second American's identity was not released at the request of the family.

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Raytheon Runs New Hybrid Propulsion System for 1st Time in Successful Test - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Raytheon Technologies on Tuesday issued a press release announcing that it has successfully tested its new hybrid-electric propulsion system for the first time at its Pratt & Whitney facility in Canada.

"Raytheon Technologies announced today the successful first engine run of the company's regional hybrid-electric flight demonstrator, marking a key milestone towards flight testing, targeted to begin in 2024," the release said. "The propulsion system's initial run took place at Pratt & Whitney's innovation facility in Longueuil, Quebec, and performed as expected."

The new system fully integrates a one-megawatt electric motor that was developed by Collins Aerospace with a Pratt & Whitney fuel-burning engine specially adapted for hybrid-electric operations, the release said.

"This power plant technology will enable more efficient engine performance during the different phases of flight, such as take-off, climb and cruise, reducing fuel burn and CO2 emissions by up to 30% compared to today's most advanced regional turboprop aircraft," the release added.

Hybrid-electric propulsion technology offers significant potential to optimize efficiency across a range of different aircraft applications, helping the aerospace industry meet its goal for achieving net zero emissions, according to the release.

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Pentagon Says Sees No Imminent or Pending Cross-Border Activities From Belarus to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department does not have information about any type of imminent or pending cross-border activities from Belarus into Ukraine, spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

"We don't have any information that would suggest that there is any type of imminent or pending cross-border activities from Belarus into Ukraine," Ryder said during a press briefing.

On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin arrived in Minsk to hold talks with his Belarusian counterpart Alexander Lukashenko and to discuss issues of mutual interest, including security in the region and undertaking joint measures to address security challenges.

Putin's visit caused speculation in Western media outlets with respect to the issues discussed in Belarus and whether the latter is getting ready to join Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov refuted media reports alleging that Putin was going to Minsk to force Belarus to participate in the special military operation in Ukraine, saying the allegations are stupid and unfounded.

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US Has B-52 Bombers, Other Capabilities to Compensate for Grounding B-2 Fleet - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has a variety of military capabilities, including B-52 bombers, to compensate for grounding the entire fleet of B-2 Spirit bombers, Department of Defense spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

"The Department of Defense, to include the Air Force, has a variety of capabilities at its disposal, particularly when it comes to our strategic bomber fleet," Ryder said during a press briefing. "We also have the B-52, which is both conventional and nuclear capable, which provides a redundant capability, broadly speaking, when it comes to our strategic forces."

Ryder pointed out that the United States continues to maintain its bomber capability to deter adversaries and, if necessary, engage in conflict, despite grounding the B-2 bomber fleet.

On Monday, media reported that the US Air Force had grounded all 20 B-2 bombers until further notice amid an ongoing search for potential safety defects following an accident involving one of the bombers.

The decision to ground the B-2 fleet came after one bomber undertook an emergency landing on December 10 at the Whiteman Air Force Base, Missouri, due to an in-flight malfunction.

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Pentagon Says Ready to Help Homeland Security Department Secure US Southern Border

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department is prepared to help the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) secure the southern border amid an expected influx of migrants after the Trump-era COVID-19 expulsion policy ends, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Tuesday.

"As we look at the situation on the border, the Defense Department will continue to stand ready. We have not received any requests from the DHS at this point in time to provide any specific support," Ryder said during a press briefing. "I think we all certainly have a vested interest in ensuring that the situation there remains safe for everyone involved."

Texas National Guard troops were mobilized to the border near the city of El Paso in anticipation of a massive influx of migrants due to the expected lifting of Trump-era border restrictions.

However, the US Supreme Court on Monday blocked the Biden administration's attempt to reverse the policy.

The morale of US Border Patrol agents is extremely low amid the crisis, National Border Patrol Council vice president Chris Cabrera told Sputnik.

According to media reports, the Biden administration expects approximately 14,000 asylum-seeking migrants to come to the United States-Mexico border, claiming to have surged resources to the area.

On Saturday, El Paso Mayor Oscar Leeser declared a state of emergency over the city's ability to handle the anticipated influx of migrants.

The Biden administration is taking steps to handle the impending surge of migrants, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said earlier this month. On Monday, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre also reiterated the administration's calls for Congress to pass border security funding.

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Ukraine to Receive Thousands More Starlink Antennas to Enhance Security - Reports
WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Ukrainian government reached a deal with Starlink to receive thousands of additional antennas that will be used to enhance the country's air defenses, Bloomberg News reported on Tuesday.

More than 10,000 Starlink antennas will be delivered to Ukraine in the coming months, the report said, citing Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Mykhailo Fedorov.

Starlink has provided Ukraine with an estimated 22,000 devices since the start of Russia's special military operation in February, the report said.

Several European Union countries will help Ukraine pay for the Starlink services, the report said, adding that Fedorov did not disclose which countries would help cover the cost.

SpaceX founder Elon Musk said earlier this year that he considered pulling the plug on his donation of Starlink services to Ukraine because it was becoming too expensive to maintain. However, Musk then decided to continue providing Starlink services to Ukraine.

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Two Americans Released by Taliban in Afghanistan - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Taliban (under UN sanctions for terrorism) released two imprisoned Americans who are now on their way to Qatar, CNN reported on Tuesday citing people familiar with the matter.

One of the Americans released by the Taliban is filmmaker Ivor Shearer, who was arrested while filming in Kabul in August, the report said.

The second American's identity has not been released at the request of the family, the report added.

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Sherman, Canadian Counterpart Discuss Haiti, Ukraine, Cooperation in Arctic – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman hosted Canadian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs David Morrison at the State Department to discuss the situation in Haiti, the Ukraine conflict and bilateral cooperation in the Arctic, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

It was the first in-person meeting of the two officials.

"They discussed the release of Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, coordination on the Arctic, support for the people of Haiti, and strong partnership to support Ukraine, including vital contributions towards repairing and reinforcing critical energy and water infrastructure," Price said in a press release.

Sherman praised the level of bilateral cooperation on a wide range of shared priorities, the spokesman added.

The two also discussed upcoming North America Leaders' Summit in Mexico in January, highlighting it as an opportunity to further cooperation.

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Consumer Protection Bureau Orders Wells Fargo to Pay \$3.7Bln for Illegal Activities

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Consumer Finance Protection Bureau (CFPB) announced on Tuesday that it has imposed a penalty of \$3.7 billion on Wells Fargo for engaging in widespread illegal activities.

"Today, the CFPB is ordering Wells Fargo to pay more than \$2 billion in redress to over 16 million consumers and a \$1.7 billion civil penalty for widespread illegal activity across its major product lines for which it has never been held to account," CFPB Chairman Rohit Chopra said. Wells Fargo's illegal conduct led to billions of dollars in financial harm to its customers and, for thousands of customers, the loss of their vehicles and homes, Chopra said.

The CFPB official explained that Wells Fargo has illegally repossessed vehicles, drained customer bank accounts because of illegal junk fees, froze accounts without cause and charged customers surprise overdraft fees.

"Wells Fargo has consistently been one of the most problematic repeat offenders of the banks and credit unions we supervise," Chopra said.

In 2015, the CFPB ordered Wells Fargo to pay \$24 million in penalties for its role in an illegal mortgage kickback scheme. The following year, the bank was ordered to pay a \$4 million fine

for scamming student loan borrowers and was also fined \$100 million for engaging in fake accounts fraud.

In addition, the CFPB assessed a \$1 billion fine in 2018 because Wells Fargo charged illegal fees and engaged in shady insurance practices in its auto lending and mortgage lending business.

"The list could go on and on, from defrauding the government to labor abuses and more. The Department of Justice, state attorneys general and other federal regulators have obtained billions more in forfeitures, including civil and criminal fines," he said. "Put simply, Wells Fargo is a corporate recidivist that puts one-third of American households at risk of harm. Finding a permanent resolution to this bank's pattern of unlawful behavior is a top priority. Today, CFPB is announcing an important step toward that goal: restitution for victims of Wells Fargo's widespread illegal activities."

The CFPB will continue its work with the other federal banking regulators to put an end to the "rinse-repeat cycle" of consumer abuse at Wells Fargo, Chopra added.

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The US Government Request New USMCA Consultations with Canada on Dairy Tariff-Rate Quotas

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – The US government has asked for renewed consultations on the ongoing dispute with Canada over its dairy tariff-rate quota policies, the United States Trade Representative (USTR) Katherine Tai said on Tuesday.

"United States Trade Representative Katherine Tai today announced that the United States is requesting new dispute settlement consultations with Canada under the United States – Mexico – Canada Agreement (USMCA) regarding Canada's dairy tariff-rate quota (TRQ) allocation measures," the USTR statement reads.

According to the new request, Canada will also be challenged on its use of market-share approach for determining the tariff-quota policies, as it currently impedes importers from fully utilizing the TRQ quantities.

The USTR believes that Canada is failing in its commitments as it undermines the market access it has agreed provide to USMCA signatory States, the statement added – "We remain very concerned by Canada's refusal to honor USMCA commitments," Tai said as quoted by the statement.

Ottawa's TRQ policies discriminate against US dairy industry and its workers, Tai said, adding that all available tools will be used to enforce the agreements in their entirety. The Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack weighted in by adding that ensuring the Canadian market is open to American dairy producers is an important priority of the current administration.

In January 2022, a USMCA dispute settlement panel found Canada's dairy TRQ allocation measures to be inconsistent with Canada's USMCA obligations, requiring Canada to change some of its policies which Washington still considers inconsistent with Ottawa's commitments under the agreement.

In May 2022, the US requested consultations with Canada to address its updated dairy TRQ allocation measure.

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Blinken, Pakistani Foreign Minister Discuss Floods, Climate Change - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed recent floods in Pakistan and climate change issues with his Pakistani counterpart Bilawal Bhutto Zardari, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Tuesday.

"The Secretary expressed his continued support for the people of Pakistan as they recover from the recent devastating floods," Price said in a readout.

Blinken and Zardari shared their mutual hope for a productive International Conference on Climate Resilient Pakistan in January and discussed the need for close coordination, he added. Blinken also offered condolences for lives lost in recent terrorist attacks and highlighted Washington's support for Pakistan in fighting against terrorism, Price added.

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Trudeau to Visit Mexico for North American Leaders Summit January 10 - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will attend the North American Leaders Summit in Mexico on January 10, the Prime Minister's Office said in a statement on Tuesday.

"The Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, today announced that he will travel to Mexico City, Mexico, to participate in the North American Leaders' Summit (NALS) taking place on January 10, 2023," the statement said.

The leaders would seek to find solutions to current and future challenges at the summit and intend to work on growing their economies and creating middle-class jobs, the statement said. Some of the talks will focus on the supply chain of electric vehicles, including the exploration and mining of critical minerals needed for the vehicles' production. Improvements to health will also be addressed by the leaders, the statement pursued.

Other topics of discussion will include economic competitiveness, labor mobility as well as diversity and inclusion, the statement added.

Earlier on Monday, US President Joe Biden also announced his participation in the NALS summit.

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US Does Not See Iran Nuclear Deal Coming Together 'Anytime Soon' - White House

(Updates with more details, background in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The United States does not see the Iran nuclear deal coming together anytime soon and is doubtful any progress will be made while Tehran continues to crack down on its citizens and sells drones to Russia, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"We simply don't see a deal coming together anytime soon while Iran continues to kill its own citizens, and selling UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles or drones] to Russia," Kirby said during a press briefing. "Now we don't anticipate any progress anytime in the near future. That's just not our focus."

On Monday, a video surfaced showing US President Joe Biden saying during a political rally in California in early November that the Iran nuclear agreement is "dead." Biden also said he will not formally announce this fact and added that the issue of not reviving the nuclear agreement is a "long story."

Kirby said that Biden's comments are "very much in line" with everything his administration has been saying about the Iran nuclear deal.

The countries of the collective West, including the United States, have accused Iran of supplying military drones to Russia for use in the special military operation in Ukraine. Iran and Russia have rejected the allegation.

The United States and the European Union have also imposed sanctions against Iran due to its crackdown on demonstrators who protested the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in the custody of the Morality Police.

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House Republicans Threaten Consequences if Senate Counterparts Pass \$1.7Trln Omnibus

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - House Republicans, including leader Kevin McCarthy, are threatening to hold up the legislative initiatives of their Senate counterparts next session if they vote to pass a \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill released Tuesday.

On Monday, House Republicans including Congressmen Chip Roy, Andy Biggs and Matt Rosendale sent a letter to Senate Republicans warning that they will oppose even the smallest legislative and policy efforts of senators who vote to pass an omnibus. Republicans will take control of the House next session, with McCarthy slated to become House Speaker.

"When I'm Speaker, their bills will be dead on arrival in the House if this nearly \$2 trillion monstrosity is allowed to move forward over our objections and the will of the American people," McCarthy said on Tuesday via Twitter, sharing a copy of the lawmakers' letter.

Early Tuesday morning, members of Congress agreed to the \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending proposal, with a passage vote expected sometime this week. The government will shut down if the omnibus or a continuing resolution are not passed by Friday.

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White House Welcomes Additional Ukraine Aid in 2023 Omnibus Spending Bill

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The White House welcomes additional funding for Ukraine included in the 2023 omnibus appropriations bill proposed by Congress, Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"We welcome this negotiation on the omnibus, because it's important to keep the government going," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We welcome this additional funding to help continue to support Ukraine."

The \$1.7 trillion omnibus bill includes nearly \$45 billion in assistance for Ukraine and NATO allies – approximately \$7 billion more than requested by the Biden administration.

Congress is expected to vote on the legislation this week, with the government slated to shutdown on Friday without passage of the omnibus or a continuing resolution.

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US Does Not See Iran Nuclear Deal Coming Together Anytime Soon – White House

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – The United States does not see the Iran nuclear deal coming together anytime soon and is doubtful about any progress in the near future at a time when Tehran is "cracking down" on its citizens and selling drones to Russia, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Tuesday.

"We simply don't see a deal coming together anytime soon while Iran continues to kill its own citizens, and selling UAVs [unmanned aerial vehicles] to Russia," Kirby said during a press briefing. "Now we don't anticipate any progress [on the deal] anytime in the near future. That's just not our focus."

On Monday, a video surfaced showing US President Joe Biden saying on the sidelines of a midterm election rally that the Iran nuclear deal is "dead." The president added he will not formally announce this.

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Biden Says in Leaked Video 2015 Iran Nuclear Agreement 'Dead'

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - A video leaked on social media platforms on Monday showed US President Joe Biden saying that the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement is "dead."

"It is dead, but we are not gonna announce it. Long story," Biden told a woman during a November 4 election rally that presumably took place during his visit to California. Biden made the comment after a woman asked him to announce whether the Iran nuclear agreement, formally known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), is dead. A White House National Security Council spokesperson told the website Axios that the US government does not see a deal coming together anytime soon, pointing to Iran's crackdown on protesters and support for Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. The spokesperson also said the United States is focused on practical ways to confront Iran's nuclear program.

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Canada Investing \$7.2Mln to Support Critical Mineral Exploration in Newfoundland
WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government will invest \$7.2 million over three years in support of critical minerals exploration in the province of Newfoundland, the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) said on Tuesday.
"Today, the Honorable Seamus O'Regan Jr., Minister of Labor and Member of Parliament for St. John's South-Mount Pearl, announced an investment of \$5.2 million over the next three years for the government of Newfoundland and Labrador to deliver two new critical mineral initiatives focused on geoscience and exploration activities," the ACOA said in a statement.
In line with O'Regan's funding announcement, Newfoundland Minister of Industry Andrew Parsons said \$3.38 million would be invested over the next three years to support the provincial government through its own exploration assistance program, the statement said.
The funding will allow the province to carry airborne geographical screening in so-called "poorly understood" areas to help identify potential areas of mineral exploration, the statement added.
The mining industry is a major economic player in Newfoundland, employing more than 8,000 workers and generating more than \$2 billion in gross revenues per year.

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US Senate Could Take Up \$1.7 Trillion Omnibus As Soon as Today to Avoid Shutdown -
Schumer

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Tuesday that the chamber could begin consideration of the fiscal year 2023 omnibus appropriations bill as soon as today, with passage expected before the government shutdown deadline on Friday.
"For the information of Senators, we're going to get going on this process today. Members should be ready to vote to lay the omnibus before the Senate as soon as this afternoon. We must finish passing this omnibus before the deadline on Friday, when government funding runs

out, but we hope to do it much sooner than that,” Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor.

Schumer said the chamber is likely to consider the legislation sooner rather than later due to poor winter weather conditions expected in the northeastern United States on Thursday and Friday.

The omnibus spending bill, released by lawmakers early Tuesday morning, authorizes approximately \$1.7 trillion in government spending for 2023. The legislation includes \$858 billion in defense funding, \$44.9 billion in emergency assistance to Ukraine and NATO allies, and \$772.5 billion for non-defense discretionary programs.

The US government is currently funded under a continuing resolution, which maintains previously authorized spending levels. Members of the Biden administration and both parties in Congress have pushed for passage of an omnibus before the new year, although some Republicans have instead called for another continuing resolution.

Republicans including Senator Rand Paul and Congressman Thomas Massie have criticized the 4,155-page bill as too lengthy for lawmakers to responsibly vote on before the end of the week. Schumer said he hopes nobody stands in the way of funding the government, arguing neither party benefits from a government shutdown.

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Canada's Defence Minister Anand Thanks Troops Deployed Abroad in Middle East

WASHINGTON, December 20 (Sputnik) – Canada's Minister of National Defence Anita Anand traveled to Scotland, Kuwait, and Jordan ahead of the Holidays to thank Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) deployed abroad, the ministry said on Tuesday.

“Today, Defence Minister Anita Anand and Chief of the Defence Staff General Wayne Eyre, concluded a trip to Scotland, Kuwait, and Jordan, where they met with and thanked Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) members deployed abroad,” the National Defence statement reads. In Scotland, Anand and Eyre went to Prestwick Airbase, to visit an Air mobility Detachment deployment of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF), tasked with delivering military aid attributed to Ukraine by Ottawa, the statement said.

While in Kuwait, Anand and Eyre visited the CAF troops deployed under Operation IMPACT, at the Ali Al Salem Airbase, the statement said, adding that meetings with Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Salem Abdullah al Jaber Al-Sabah and Defence Minister Khaled Saleh Al-Sabah, were also held.

Canada thanked Kuwait for being a “good partner” and for its role in evacuating its citizens from Afghanistan after the Taliban (banned in Russia) took over the country in 2021, the statement pursued.

The official trip concluded with a visit to Jordan where Anand and Eyre visited CAF troops deployed in Jordan also deployed under Operation IMPACT, the statement added.

Meetings were also held with King Abdullah II and his Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff Major-General Yousef Huneiti, where Canada valued the bilateral relationship with Jordan as important.