

12/21/22 Wednesday

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Who is State Department Veteran Lynne Tracy, Biden's New Ambassador in Moscow?
By - Fantine Gardinier

On Wednesday, the US Senate voted to confirm US President Joe Biden's nomination as the new ambassador to the Russian Federation, Lynne Tracy. But who is this new envoy that will represent Washington's interests?

Tracy is currently the US ambassador to Armenia, a position she has held since 2019, when her appointment by then-US President Donald Trump was confirmed. She was nominated to be the US ambassador to Russia in September, after then-ambassador John Sullivan stepped down. Speaking before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last month, Tracy defended her [appointment to Moscow](#), saying she supported efforts to "put sand in the gears of the Russian economy" through sanctions, but also that she wanted to promote "people-to-people ties" between Russians and Americans in spite of the hostility.

Tracy told the Senate she supports tightening sanctions on Russia, including imposing a unilateral price cap on Russian petroleum exports.

Tracy also said she would "work to keep a spotlight" on dissidents in Russia, and work toward the return of US citizens charged with crimes in Russia, including WNBA player Brittney Griner, who has since returned to the United States after [being traded for Vitkor Bout](#), a Russian citizen accused by the US of smuggling arms.

Tracy's performance in Yerevan wasn't received well by the Armenian-American community. In the wake of the [2020 Karabakh war](#) between Armenia and Azerbaijan, the Armenian National Committee of America [gave Tracy an "F" grade](#) for her failure to push US interests while on station in Yerevan. Among their objections was the US decision to stop supporting demining efforts in Artsakh, the breakaway republic of ethnic Armenians inside of Azerbaijan.

Other objections included a lack of additional assistance for Armenia as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and a refusal to condemn Azeri attacks or Turkish support for Baku during the 2020 war.

Decades of Service

Born in the small city of Barberton in northeastern Ohio, Tracy earned a B.A. in Soviet Studies from the University of Georgia and later a Juris Doctor from the University of Akron School of Law.

Tracy has [a long career](#) in the US Foreign Service, especially in Central Asia. From 1995 to 1997, she was principal officer in Astana (now Nur-Sultan), Kazakhstan; from 1997 until 2000 she was consular officer in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan as well as political/consular officer in Peshawar, Pakistan; and from 2002 to 2003 she was political officer in Kabul, Afghanistan. She also filled roles in Washington, DC, serving as desk officer at the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs for Georgia from 2001 to 2002, and for Kazakhstan from 2003 to 2004. She was also staff

assistant for the Special Envoy for the Newly-Independent States at the Department of State from 2000 to 2001.

From 2007 to 2009, Tracy was consul general of the US Consulate General in Peshawar, Pakistan. In 2008, her car was sprayed with bullets by gunmen, shooting out her car's front tires. However, she, her bodyguard, and her driver all escaped, and she was awarded the Secretary's Award for Heroism by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for her quick thinking during the attack and for completing her mission despite the threats against her life.

From 2011 until 2012, Tracy was director for Central Asia at the White House National Security Council and from 2012 to 2014 she was deputy assistant secretary for Central Asia in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs.

From 2014 to 2017 she was in Moscow, serving as deputy chief of mission at the US embassy there, for which she received a Distinguished Honor Award. In 2018, she was nominated to her current position in Yerevan.

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Only 75% in US Say They Have 'Good' Mental Health, Lowest Reported in Two Decades
By - Fantine Gardinier

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated a number of social crises, including social isolation, burdensome debt, addiction, and depression. Millions lost their jobs and more than one million have died from the virus in the US, all while the fears of war and prospects of climate change continue to loom.

Fewer Americans describe themselves as having good mental health, a recently published [Gallup poll](#) has revealed.

According to the poll, just 31% of Americans describe their mental or emotional well-being as "excellent," with another 44% saying their mental health was "good." Together, that 75% is the lowest number to say so since Gallup began collecting data on the subject in 2001.

The other data points are also at their highest-ever, with 17% saying their mental health was "fair" and 7% saying they had "poor" mental health. The survey was conducted between November 9 and December 2.

A number of newer developments have also had a sizable impact on the mental health of youth especially. The isolation of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and the dramatic increase in anti-LGBTQ legislation and attacks have both been [identified in studies](#) published in [recent months](#) as causing sharp spikes in depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation.

A [study published](#) in the in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine in September reported that one American in 10 suffers from depression, with the highest rates among teenagers and young adults.

"Our results showed most adolescents with depression neither told or talked with a healthcare professional about depression symptoms nor received pharmacologic treatment from 2015 through 2020," said Dr. Renee D. Goodwin, an adjunct professor in the Department of

Epidemiology at Columbia Mailman School of Public Health and professor of epidemiology at the City University of New York, who co-authored the study.

Many of these trends began many years ago, which a recent New York Times op-ed by a mental health worker described as “a chronically underfunded mental health system, a house of cards built on sand that the Covid pandemic crushed.”

Indeed, Gallup’s numbers from past polls show that self-reporting of good mental health peaked in 2004, 16 years before the COVID-19 outbreak swept the globe. However, after the outbreak, the numbers quickly plunged.

On top of that, the time that the Gallup survey was performed might also have impacted the results. The respondents gave their self-evaluation of mental health in November and December, when the length of daylight in the United States is nearing its shortest time of the year. Seasonal affective disorder (SAD), a type of depression heavily influenced by the change of seasons, is similarly at its worst during the period. [As many as 10%](#) of Americans may also suffer from SAD, especially in northern latitudes.

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Zelensky’s DC Christmas Visit Meant to Evoke Churchill, Comes at End of Scrutiny-Free Aid:
Experts

By - Fantine Gardinier

As Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visits Washington, DC, Congress is considering a massive new \$45 billion aid package for Kiev, and the White House has revealed it is preparing to send Patriot air defense systems as well. But what’s the real message behind the comedian-turned-leader’s trans-Atlantic trip?

Sputnik spoke with two political scientists about Zelensky’s visit, and what is likely to come – or not come – of it.

Professor David Woodard, Clemson University political scientist and former political consultant for Republican congressmen, told Sputnik on Wednesday that Zelensky’s trip was part of a time-honored tradition for recipients of US military aid.

“Ever since Winston Churchill came to the US for Christmas after the attack on December 7, 1941 at Pearl Harbor, foreign leaders have felt this time of the year was a good time. Like Churchill, Zelensky is coming to make future plans and to say 'Thank You' for past aid. The timing is good, the president has just survived a midterm election referendum and Congress is in the last days of its session,” he explained.

Dr. Harvey Schantz, a professor of political science at State University of New York at Plattsburgh, agreed, adding that Zelensky’s visit was also “intended to advertise to the world the strong ties between Ukraine and the US, and the Ukrainian point of view, and to boost the morale of the Ukrainian people, as well as demonstrate Zelensky’s leadership.”

When it came to the new aid package, Schantz predicted few problems with getting it approved, although he foresaw more difficulties after the newly-elected Republican-Majority House of Representatives is sworn in in January.

“The proposed aid for Ukraine in the current budget, known as a continuing resolution, will most certainly pass,” he noted. “The federal spending bill that is currently being considered is for the balance of fiscal year 2023, which stretches from October 1, 2022 through September 30, 2023, and it encompasses about \$1.7 trillion, the approximate \$45 billion in aid for Ukraine within the budget is only a small percentage of the budget and will therefore pass along with the rest of the budget.”

“Continued aid for Ukraine in the fiscal year 2024 budget, which is due September 30, 2023, is a long way off, but one could foresee stress within the House Republican Party over how to handle this spending issue. Every year there are issues which delay the prompt passage of the 12 required annual appropriations bills,” Schantz also said.

Woodard rejected any notion that Zelensky would be seen by US politicians as a “beggar asking for a handout,” as some commentators have mused, because the Ukrainian president is seen as a “knight” doing what the Americans planned for but never got to do: fight Russia.

He noted, however, that the Americans were likely to continue to be hesitant in sharing technology with Ukraine, out of fear of giving adversaries like Russia or China too much insight into US defensive capabilities and thinking.

“American defense depends on technology, and having an advantage in that realm when it comes to weapons. The problem, and it is very big, is that China now has equal-to-superior technology when it comes to the battlefield. In sharing your weapons systems with your friends you are in effect giving your opponent an insight into what you are thinking about future defense,” Woodard explained.

“Think back to the 'Enigma' machines used by Nazi Germany in WWII, and you will see that wartime intelligence can determine the outcome of the conflict. The US will continue to dribble-out weapons to Ukraine, but they will be cautious about what they share.”

Woodard also expected the Republicans to be more cautious about doling out military hardware or funding to the Ukrainians without some kind of guarantees, such as a plan for ending the war. The memories of stalemates in Korea and Vietnam likely still haunt their decision-making about whether or not to keep funneling support to Kiev, he said.

“The Republican capture of the House of Representatives is significant. Congress, meaning the House, controls the 'purse strings' of the government. In a recession-likely environment, they will not be in a generous mood. The Republicans will now be asking Zelensky 'When will it end?' They are unlikely to be the spendthrifts that Democrats were, they'll ask for 'benchmarks' or 'guidelines for an exit,' topics that have been avoided until this point,” he predicted.

“'Isolation' is a central premise of conservative thought from the beginning,” Woodard further noted.

“It is traceable to the Revolutionary War, when American colonists didn't want to be involved in 'European Wars.' Before WWII, the 'America First' movement against involvement in the war in Europe had deep and abiding support, especially in the American Midwest. Once there were 450 chapters of the 'America First' sentiment nationwide, then Pearl Harbor changed the whole discussion. Americans don't want to see their children buried on foreign battlefields, so this issue will always be a significant one with Republicans.”

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Ryugu Samples Reveal Asteroid Likely Originated From Solar System's Outermost Reaches
By - Fantine Gardinier

A new analysis of samples returned from the asteroid Ryugu by a Japanese space probe may have uncovered the bizarre object's birthplace.

By using a scanning electron microscope and secondary ion mass spectrometer to examine a sample taken from Ryugu's surface by the [Hayabusa2 probe](#), scientists at Hokkaido University in Japan believe they've found the telltale signs that Ryugu formed in the outer reaches of the solar system, rather than anywhere near Earth, where it presently orbits the Sun.

The scientists found high levels of oxygen-16, a stable isotope of oxygen that's formed late in the life of stars, when they've run out of hydrogen and have begun fusing together progressively heavier elements. Objects from the outer solar system have [more of this isotope](#) than inner system objects, since solar radiation tends to split up heavier oxygen isotopes.

In addition, the scientists found that Ryugu's chemical composition looks a lot like 81P/Wild, a comet from the tail of which NASA's Stardust spacecraft captured particle samples in a 2004 mission. Comets, which also form at the edges of the solar system, tend to be made more of ice than of rock, as asteroids are. Carbonate minerals and amino acids also point to Ryugu forming in very low temperatures, since it has retained much of its water.

However, the scientists also found some crystals more typically associated with inner solar system objects, such as olivine, spinel, and perovskite, in small numbers. This, they concluded, meant that Ryugu had also been struck by inner solar system objects at some point.

The scientists' report was [published last week](#) in Science Advances.

The capsule of dust from Ryugu that was captured by the Hayabusa2 probe [arrived back on Earth](#) just over two years ago, when the capsule touched down in Australia. The spacecraft observed Ryugu and performed a number of tests on it, including landing on its surface twice and firing a small projectile into it.

The bizarre object, which orbits close enough to Earth to be of concern, is some 3,000 feet across and has a very low visibility. While it is considered an asteroid, Ryugu is actually a rubble pile held together by its own gravity, and mostly hollow in the center.

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Incoming US 'Bomb Cyclone' Could Trigger Carbon Monoxide Deaths, Officials Warn
By - Mary Manley

The National Weather Service (NWS) has warned the US midwest is set to experience a winter storm that they are describing as a “once-in-a-generation-type event.” The winter storm will disrupt holiday travel across multiple states and could bring “life-threatening” wind chills for millions of Americans.

The US Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) issued a [warning](#) on Wednesday that a winter storm headed for the central US may increase the chances of power outages across the Midwest, as well as below-freezing temperatures, heavy snow, and dangerous wind chills. These conditions could leave people in desperate need of portable generators, the CPSC said. “Consumers need to be especially careful when storms knock out electrical power,” the CPSC said in a statement. “Portable generators create a risk of [carbon monoxide] poisoning that can kill in minutes.”

Carbon monoxide (CO) is an odorless and colorless gas that can poison individuals causing them to lose consciousness, become nauseous, dizzy or weak and even lead to death. The engines of some portable generators can emit as much CO as 450 cars, and if a person were to be exposed to those levels of CO for at least five minutes the effects would be fatal.

According to the CPSC more than 900 people died from carbon monoxide poisoning caused by portable generators between 2005 and 2017. Michelle Seifer, who had CO poisoning in 2019, told a US [media](#) that she thought she had the flu after losing power in a winter storm; however, she later concluded she was suffering from CO poisoning after conducting a home test.

“That’s when I went to the hospital and learned that my levels were high enough where they needed to admit me,” said Seifer, a finance manager and mother of five in Hartland, Michigan. “Because if I didn’t receive the proper treatment for the carbon monoxide poisoning, if I were to fall asleep I wouldn’t wake up.”

“Opening doors or windows will not provide enough ventilation to prevent the buildup of lethal levels of CO,” the CPSC said in their Wednesday statement, adding generators should be operated only outside at least 20 feet away from the person’s home with exhaust directed away from any person’s building. Only portable generators with built-in safety shut off feature should be used.

The commission also urged the public in their announcement to install battery-operated CO alarms throughout sleeping areas in the home and to make sure smoke alarms are installed on every level of the home and inside each bedroom, to not ignore an alarm and to get outside immediately while calling 911. The CPSC also addressed safety uses of portable heaters, charcoal and candles in their [release](#).

The “[once-in-a-generation](#)” storm began in the Pacific Northwest on Tuesday and will strengthen over the Northern Plains through Wednesday with heavy snow piling up over the Rockies, the Northern Plains and the Midwest. Thursday is expected to be the worst day for travel in the Midwest with Western Minnesota facing blizzard conditions, and potentially deadly wind chills through Thursday and Friday.

Chicago, Illinois, could face blizzard conditions with wind gusts as high as 50 mph, while Denver, Colorado, will experience temperatures of -14 degrees Fahrenheit early Thursday. Wind chills between -25F and -40F for most midwestern states are also expected to begin on late Thursday into Friday night and will affect the cities of: Des Moines, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Kansas City, Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit, Buffalo, Indianapolis, Cleveland, New York and [Boston](#).

The storm, which is predicted to become a 'bomb cyclone' Thursday evening heading into Friday, will affect more than 90 million across the United States with 87 million of those under wind chill alerts in 37 states. In some areas in the Plains and Midwest, this will be the coldest Christmas in an estimated [40 years](#).

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White House Announces Release of Flu Medicine From National Stockpile Amid Skyrocketing Cases

By - Mary Manley

Shortages of over-the-counter pain relievers and medicines have been reported across the US, with retailer CVS having to limit the number of children's pain relief products customers can buy to just two products per customer. Fellow retailer Walgreens has also been limiting the purchasing amount for customers to six fever reducing products.

The Biden administration announced Wednesday that it will release doses of flu medicine Tamiflu from the Strategic National Stockpile following an unusually early and heavy flu season that has hit the country.

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the severe outbreak has left 15 million people ill, 150,000 people hospitalized and 9,300 people dead so far this year. "Jurisdictions will be able to get the support they need to keep Americans healthy as flu cases rise this winter," [Dawn O'Connell](#), an assistant secretary for preparedness and response at the Health and Human Services Department (HHS), which oversees the CDC, said in a statement. While the flu has not been a serious issue for the last two years, a move away from wearing masks and isolating following the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the flu season to begin about six weeks sooner than it normally does. As a result the HSS has allowed jurisdictions to access the stockpile, which was originally collected between 2006 and 2009 in anticipation of a pandemic; however, the HHS says the stockpile can be accessed in such instances.

While the White House has not revealed how many doses they will be releasing from the stockpile, states will be able to make requests for Tamiflu doses, which can be prescribed to treat the flu in people over the age of two weeks old.

The United States has been grappling with widespread flu cases alongside skyrocketing cases of respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) in children and climbing COVID-19 cases. The onslaught of cases has been coined a "triple-demic."

While COVID-19 cases are still lower than when they were last winter, cases are increasing across the country and as of [December 19](#), 78% of the inpatient beds in almost 5,000 US hospitals were filled and nearly the same percentage of intensive care beds being used, the HHS reported, with just 6% of those beds being used for COVID-19 patients.

The upswing in cases has led pharmacies to restrict the number of fever-reducers customers can buy, including those for children who have been affected by an unseasonal early surge of various illnesses, specifically among babies and toddlers, which is startling doctors.

Both babies and preschool-aged children are being diagnosed with the flu, RSV, parainfluenza viruses, adenoviruses, rhinoviruses and enteroviruses. A third of hospitalizations for the flu are in children and a third of those hospitalizations are for kids under the age of five, according to the CDC.

Some hospitals in the US have also detected an extreme and invasive form of strep that has killed at least 15 children in the United Kingdom since [mid-September](#).

"There is no one virus that's causing pediatric respiratory viruses this fall," said Dr. [Deanna Behrens](#), a pediatric critical care physician at Advocate Children's Hospital in suburban Chicago. "Unfortunately, it's all of them."

"We see kids where, when we do the nasal swab, not only do they test positive for influenza, but they may have RSV or enterovirus or adenovirus at the same time," said Dr. Mark Kline, the physician-in-chief at Children's Hospital New Orleans. "We've seen kids where we've gotten two or three viruses at once."

Children who were kept inside during the COVID-19 pandemic, which first took hold in 2020, were not able to strengthen their immune systems. Those same coddled immune systems are now being exposed, leaving children vulnerable to viruses. According to the [CDC](#) at least 30 pediatric deaths related to the flu have been recorded as of December 16.

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US Senators Reach Deal on \$1.7Trln Spending Bill, Will Begin Voting Today - Schumer

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US senators have reached a deal to ensure the passage of a \$1.75 trillion funding bill and will begin voting on Thursday ahead of a Friday deadline to avert a partial shutdown of the federal government, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said.

"We have an agreement now, and we will vote on all of the amendments in order," Schumer said in remarks on the Senate floor.

The massive \$1.7 trillion spending bill to fund the government in fiscal year 2023 includes \$858 billion in defense funding, as well as \$45 billion for Ukrainian military aid.

The bill must pass both the Senate and House, and US President Joe Biden must sign the bill by Friday at midnight to avoid a partial government shutdown.

However, some House Republicans, including leader Kevin McCarthy, have expressed opposition to the omnibus. The lawmakers contend that Congress should instead pass a short-term continuing resolution to temporarily fund the government until the new Congress, in which Republicans will hold the House majority, can draft a comprehensive budget. The new Congress takes office on January 3.

Lawmakers heard from Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday evening, who spoke in favor of the legislation and further security assistance for Ukraine, thanking the members of Congress for the billions already provided.

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Only 86 of 213 House Republicans Attended Zelenskyy's Speech at US Congress – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – Only 86 of 213 House Republicans attended Volodymyr Zelenskyy's address to a joint meeting of the US Congress, The Hill reported. On Wednesday, Zelenskyy visited Washington to meet with US President Joe Biden and appeal to Congress for further security assistance for Ukraine.

According to the newspaper, the goal of Zelenskyy's visit was to secure support from Republicans as they are set to take control of the House next month.

Over a third of House members had active letters to vote by proxy on Wednesday, with many worrying about weather-related travel disruptions just before Christmas, the report said. Even though Republican supporters of aiding Ukraine welcomed Zelenskyy's speech, critics of this aid showed little openness to changing their minds even following the Ukrainian leader's address, the report said.

Prior to the speech, Republican Rep. Thomas Massie wrote on social media that he is in Washington but "will not be attending the speech of the Ukrainian lobbyist."

Rep. Warren Davidson, in turn, doubted that Zelenskyy should be speaking from the House floor. The United States "should be focused on trying to contain the war, not expand the war," the lawmaker argued.

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US Senators Closer to Deal on \$1.7Trln Spending Bill But 'Still Not There' - Schumer

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US Senators are still working to reach a deal on a \$1.7 trillion funding bill ahead of a Friday deadline to avert a partial shutdown of the federal government, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Thursday.

"We're getting ever closer to reaching an agreement, but we're still not there. I hope that we will lock in an agreement later this morning," Schumer said as the Senate readjusted at 8:00 a.m. local time (13:00 GMT) following a session that lasted until 2:00 a.m.

Senators are working to reach a deal on a massive \$1.7 trillion spending bill to fund the government in fiscal year 2023. The legislation includes \$858 billion in defense funding, as well as \$45 billion for Ukrainian military aid.

US President Joe Biden must sign the bill by Friday at midnight to avoid a partial government shutdown.

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which Republicans will hold the House majority, can draft a comprehensive budget. The new Congress takes office on January 3.

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

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (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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Clash Over Title 42 Amendment Delays US Senate Vote on \$1.7Trln Omnibus Bill - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - A US Senate vote on a \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending package - that contains \$45 billion in aid for Ukraine and NATO allies - is being delayed due to disagreements over a Trump-era border expulsion policy amendment, The Hill reported, with government funding set to run out at midnight on Friday.

An effort by Senator Mike Lee to maintain Title 42 is threatening efforts to pass the sweeping government funding bill before a shutdown deadline, the report said.

Lee's amendment calls for cutting funding for Homeland Security unless the Biden administration reinstates the border control policy known as Title 42, according to the report.

One Hill reporter, Alex Bolton, tweeted late on Wednesday that senators have been told to go home and no votes are expected on the omnibus package tonight.

The Biden administration has filed an appeal on Tuesday 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.

The policy was due to expire on December 21. However, 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.

The package contains \$858 billion in defense funding, including \$44.9 billion in emergency assistance to Ukraine and NATO allies, along with \$772.5 billion for non-defense discretionary programs.

On Tuesday evening, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi during a press conference alongside Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said she expects Congress to pass the legislation within the next 48 hours.

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.

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Zelenskyy in Speech to Congress Says Ukrainians Can Operate US Tanks, Planes

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a speech to a joint session of Congress said Ukrainian armed forces are capable of operating American tanks and aircraft.

Kiev for some time has been requesting US Abram tanks and fighter jets to use against Russia amid its special military operation in Ukraine.

"I assure you that Ukrainian soldiers can perfectly operate American tanks and planes themselves," Zelenskyy said on Wednesday night.

Earlier on Wednesday, a Fox News correspondent said Zelenskyy was expected to ask Congress for additional Patriot air defense systems, High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), long range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS), and DPICM cluster munition, US battle tanks, and the start of pilot training.

Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, after the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian provocations. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow and have been supplying weapons to Ukraine.

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Zelenskyy Asks US Congress to Strengthen Sanctions Against Russia

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy during a speech to a joint session of US Congress asked lawmakers to strengthen sanctions against Russia over its special military operation in Ukraine.

"You can strengthen sanctions... it is in your power to help us bring to justice everyone who started this unprovoked and criminal war, let's do it," Zelenskyy said on Wednesday night. Zelenskyy met with President Joe Biden at the White House earlier on Wednesday to discuss battlefield strategy, Ukraine's energy needs and sanctions against Russia.

The Biden administration during Zelenskyy's one-day visit to Washington announced some \$1.85 billion in additional security assistance to Ukraine that include one Patriot air defense system.

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Zelenskyy in Speech to Congress Says Biden Supported His 10-Point Peace Plan

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a speech to a joint session of Congress said President Joe Biden supported a 10-point peace initiative that they discussed earlier in the day during a bilateral meeting.

"I just discussed with President Biden our peace formula, 10 points, which should and must be implemented for our joint security guaranteed for decades ahead," Zelenskyy said Wednesday night. "I'm glad to share that President Biden supported our peace initiative today."

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FBI Says Normal to Converse With Twitter, Attempts to Discredit Agency 'Unfortunate'

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - It is standard practice for the FBI to engage with social media companies, the agency said in a statement, following allegations that it exerted influence over Twitter to suppress the Hunter Biden laptop story.

Information released as part of the so-called Twitter Files, shared by reporters in coordination with Twitter CEO Elon Musk, recently revealed the FBI's considerable influence over the company. The Twitter Files alleged an organized effort by the US intelligence community to discredit the Hunter Biden laptop story prior to its publication.

“The correspondence between the FBI and Twitter show nothing more than examples of our traditional, longstanding and ongoing federal government and private sector engagements, which involve numerous companies over multiple sectors and industries,” the FBI said on Wednesday. “It is unfortunate that conspiracy theorists and others are feeding the American public misinformation with the sole purpose of attempting to discredit the agency.”

The FBI provides critical information to the private sector in an effort to enable companies to protect themselves and their customers, the statement said.

The Twitter Files revealed frequent contact between the FBI and Twitter officials, including a high number of requests to take action on purported misinformation.

The disclosures also provided insight into Twitter’s decision to remove former US President Donald Trump from the platform and their collaboration with the US military on psychological operations.

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Hunter Biden Adds Former Bill Clinton Attorney to His Legal Team - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, has added a high-powered Washington lawyer who has previously worked for former President Bill Clinton and for former President Donald Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to his legal team before the incoming Republican-controlled House of Representatives starts its promised inquiries into his business dealings, NBC News reported.

Hunter Biden has hired Abbe Lowell from the Winston and Strawn law firm to lead and coordinate his response to anticipated oversight investigations by two Republican-controlled House committees when the new Congress convenes for the first time in January, the report said on Wednesday.

The report cited a current attorney for Hunter Biden as its source but Lowell declined to comment on the report, the report added.

Lowell previously represented Jared Kushner in congressional investigations as well as former President Clinton and former Democratic senators John Edwards and Bob Menendez, according to the report.

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Pelosi Says Expects Congress to Pass Omnibus Spending Bill Within 48 Hours

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said during a press conference alongside Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy that she expects Congress to pass a \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill, including \$45 billion for Ukraine, within the next two days.

"Your visit comes as the Congress prepares to again pass another consequential round of security, economic and humanitarian assistance – within the next 48 hours, I believe this will be done," Pelosi said on Wednesday.

Pelosi spoke alongside Zelenskyy at the US Capitol, where he will deliver remarks to a joint session of Congress.

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Electric Boat Wins \$5.1Bln Order Extension for Nuclear Submarine Missile Tubes - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Electric Boat, a division of General Dynamics, has received a US Navy order extension worth more than \$5.1 billion to make more missile tubes for Columbia-class strategic nuclear submarines, the Defense Department announced in a press release.

"General Dynamics Electric Boat Corporation [of] Groton, Connecticut is awarded a \$5,134,324,189 ... modification to [a] previously awarded contract," the release said on Wednesday. "This modification procures missile tube long ... for follow-on Columbia-class submarines; and logistics/sustainment support for the US and UK programs."

The expanded contract also covers additional Submarine Industrial Base enhancements as part of the Integrated Enterprise Plan and multi-program material procurement supporting Columbia-class ballistic missile submarines and for the Virginia-class submarines and Ford-class nuclear-powered aircraft carrier programs, the release said.

"The industrial base development work is for the furtherance of the Navy's plan of serial production of Columbia and Virginia submarines. Pursuant to the president's budget for fiscal 2023, the requirements are included for SIB investment for strategic sourcing, supplier development, workforce development, and technology opportunities," the release added. Most of the work on the program will be performed in Groton, Connecticut (70%) and in Newport News, Virginia (25%) over the next five-and-a-half years and is expected to be completed by June 2028, according to the release.

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Raytheon Wins \$412Mln Deal to Maintain Taiwan's Radar Surveillance Systems - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Raytheon has won a more than \$412 million US Air Force contract to provide engineering support and maintenance for Taiwan's radar surveillance systems, the Defense Department announced.

"Raytheon Company [of] Woburn, Massachusetts was awarded a \$412,601,063 firm-fixed-price contract for follow-on sustainment," the Defense Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

Under the contract, Raytheon will provide contractor logistics support, engineering services, technical updates, spare parts, and other related elements of logistical and program support to the Taiwan Surveillance Radar Program, the release added.
Work on the contract will be carried out in Taiwan over the next five years and is expected to be completed by December 31, 2027, according to the release.

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US-Ukrainian Officials to Meet in Coming Months on Ukraine's Security - Zelenskyy

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US and Ukrainian officials will meet in the coming months after Ukrainian defense capabilities are strengthened, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said during a joint press conference with President Joe Biden.

"We will also meet as soon as our defense capabilities will be strengthened in the next few months," Zelenskyy said during remarks at the White House on Wednesday.

Biden said during the press conference that the United States is providing Ukraine with one Patriot surface-to-air missile battery - its most advanced air defense system - but it will take several months for Ukrainian forces to train on the use of the weapon system.

The US president also said that he expects the United States and its allies will do more to bolster Ukraine's security needs.

Zelenskyy highlighted that part of his discussion with Biden included talks about battlefield strategy and what they expect for next year.

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US Restricts Exports to Russia's Wagner Group as Military End User - Commerce Dept.

(Update: adds quote, details in paras 5-7)

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US government's multi-agency End-User Review Committee (ERC) is designating Russia's private military company Wagner Group as a military end user and is imposing export restrictions on the entity, the Commerce Department said in a notice.

"The agencies represented on the ERC determined to modify Private Military Company 'Wagner' on the Entity List, under the destination of Russia," the Commerce Department said in the notice on Wednesday.

Wagner was determined by the ERC to be a Russian military end user, according to the notice. Listed entities, which are believed to pose a threat to US national security or foreign policy interests, are subject to additional export restrictions.

Licenses for Wagner will now be reviewed under a policy of denial for all items apart from food and medicine, which will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, the notice said.

"Today we are sending a clear message to non-state actors seeking to pick up the baton of brutality for [Russian President] Putin's faltering military that the Department of Commerce will not hesitate to act against them," Under Secretary for Industry and Security Alan Estevez said in a statement.

Earlier this month, the US designated Russia and Wagner Group as a country and entity of concern for religious freedom – accusations Moscow claimed are baseless.

US senators also introduced legislation earlier this month to designate Wagner Group as a foreign terrorist organization.

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Zelenskyy Says Expects Continued Bipartisan, Bicameral Support for Ukraine by US Congress

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said during a press conference in Washington that he expects the US Congress to show continued bipartisan support for Ukraine in both chambers despite Republicans taking over the House next year.

"Regardless of changes in the Congress, I believe that there will be bipartisan and bicameral support. I know that everybody works for this," Zelenskyy said on Wednesday.

Zelenskyy is slated to address a joint session of Congress Wednesday evening to bolster support for further assistance to Ukraine.

Some Republicans, including Republican House leader Kevin McCarthy, have expressed a desire to be more judicious with US taxpayer funding of Ukraine, citing a need for transparency and accountability.

Zelenskyy's speech will come as Congress considers a \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill that includes \$45 billion for Ukraine.

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Biden Says US Looking to Do More in Comment on Additional Patriot Systems to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said the United States is looking to do more to provide additional air defense capabilities to Ukraine, including Patriot weapon systems.

"We're focused on working with allies and partners to generate capability in four key areas, air defense as we know today, the Patriot is the best of that ... and we're looking to do more," Biden said during a joint press conference with Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday.

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Biden Reiterates 'Defensive' Nature of Patriot Missiles in Response to Russian Concerns

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden reiterated the defense purpose of the Patriot surface-to-air missile system that is being delivered to Ukraine amid warnings by Russia that such a move could be considered provocative.

"It's a defensive weapons system. It's not escalatory," Biden said during a press conference alongside Ukrainian counterpart Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Biden administration announced a new \$1.85 billion security assistance package for Ukraine that includes the Patriot system. However, it will take several months to train Ukrainian soldiers on using the system in a third-party country, a senior Defense Department official said.

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Biden Says Does Not See Any Reason to Think There Will Be Lessening of Support for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said during a press conference that he does not see any reason to think there will be lessening of support for Ukraine.

"I don't see any reason to believe there'll be any lessening of support," Biden said during a joint press conference with Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday.

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Zelenskyy Says Ukraine Offered to US Steps on How Achieve Peace Formula With Russia

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said during a press conference at the White House that he offered President Joe Biden specific steps on how the United States can help facilitate a peace formula with Russia.

"It is very important that we have peace formula and for that we offer very specific steps what America can do to help us to implement them," Zelenskyy said during a joint press conference with Biden.

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Biden Says Zelenskyy Open to Peace Dialogue With Russia

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - US President Biden said during a joint conference with Zelenskyy on Tuesday that Ukraine is open to dialogue with Russia about peace.

"Well, let me put it this way. He's [Putin] not open but you're open to pursuing peace. You're open to pursuing a just peace," said Biden.

Zelenskyy appeared to nod in agreement as Biden was speaking.

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Biden Says USAID Committing Over \$374Mln in Humanitarian Aid for Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US Agency for International Development (USAID) is committing \$374 million of humanitarian assistance for Ukraine as part of a major aid package that also includes \$1.85 billion worth of military and security assistance, US President Joe Biden said during a press conference.

"Today, USAID is committing more than \$374 million in urgent need of humanitarian assistance for Ukraine. This will provide food and cash assistance for more than 1.5 million Ukrainian people as well as access to health care, safe drinking water, and help stay warm in the winter for more than 2.5 million Ukrainians," Biden said on Wednesday following a bilateral meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

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US Stocks Rise 2nd Day in Row After Positive Data on Consumer Confidence

NEW YORK, December 22 (Sputnik) - Wall Street's three major stock indices rose for a second day in a row after upbeat US consumer sentiment data eased investors' worries about the likelihood of a recession in 2023 from higher-for-longer interest rates planned by the Federal Reserve.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which serves as Wall Street's broadest equities indicator with stocks of 30 large US corporations, closed up 527 points, or 1.6%, at 33,377. The Dow has gained almost 2% in the past two sessions, though it remains down about 8% on the year. The S&P 500 Index, which represents the top 500 US stocks, finished up 57 points, or 1.5%, at 3,878. The S&P has risen 1.6% in the past two days of trade. Year-to-date, the index is down 19%, hovering almost at bear-market territory.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee names in technology such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, rose 162 points, or 1.5%, to settle at 10,709. The Nasdaq is down 32% on the year for the deepest bear market experienced by the three indexes. Stocks rose on Wednesday after the Conference Board reported that its US consumer confidence gauge jumped to 108.3 from 101.4, beating economists' forecast for a reading of 101.0.

Consumer activity makes up about 70% of the US economy.

"Consumer expectations for any potential deterioration in the labor market, more modest expectations for wage gains, and concern about a recession have seemingly retreated," Wall Street investment bank Jefferies said in a note.

In its bid to control inflation, the Federal Reserve has added 425 basis points to interest rates since March via seven hikes. Prior to that, interest rates were at a peak of just 25 basis points as the central bank cut rates to nearly zero after the global outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in 2020.

Inflation, as measured by the US Consumer Price Index (CPI) expanded by 7.1% over the 12 months to November, versus a 7.7% in the year to October. Historical data showed it to be the lowest annual reading for inflation since December 2021. Even so, it was still three-and-a-half times higher than the Fed's annual target of just 2% for inflation. As such, the central bank has indicated that it will continue its monetary tightening in 2023, stirring concerns among economists that higher-for-longer rates could land the US economy in a recession.

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US Restricts Exports to Russia's Wagner Group as Military End User - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US government's multi-agency End-User Review Committee (ERC) is designating Russia's private military company Wagner Group as a military end user and is imposing export restrictions on the entity, the Commerce Department said in a notice.

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Wagner was determined by the ERC to be a Russian military end user, according to the notice. Listed entities, which are believed to pose a threat to US national security or foreign policy interests, are subject to additional export restrictions.

Licenses for Wagner will now be reviewed under a policy of denial for all items apart from food and medicine, which will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, the notice said.

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UPDATE: Pentagon Looking for Signs of Fraud in Contracts Awarded to Help Ukraine - Reports (Updates with more details in para 4)

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS) at the Pentagon is looking for signs of fraud and abuse in the contracts being awarded as part of efforts to help Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation there, Defense News reported, citing the principal deputy director of the service.

DCIS is currently focused on a number of the Pentagon's contracting actions as well as on the potential black-market diversion of US assistance, the report said on Wednesday. While no contracting fraud has become public to date, both the Defense and State departments are taking steps to safeguard weapons provided to Ukraine, the report added. Later on Wednesday, the Department of Defense Office of Inspector General confirmed the accuracy of the report. Earlier in December, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said the United States has no credible information to indicate that any of the US weapons provided to Ukraine have been diverted to the black market. The Biden administration has committed nearly \$23 billion in military aid and more than \$25 billion in financial and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since January 24.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY
WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) -

ZELENSKYY VISIT TO WASHINGTON

- * Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy landed in the United States ahead of his meeting with President Joe Biden later on Wednesday afternoon, a White House official said.
- * Biden at a meeting with Zelenskyy said that the United States will continue to increase military support for Kiev, including through continued supply of air defense systems.
- * Biden during remarks alongside Zelenskyy claimed Russian President Vladimir Putin is trying to use winter as a weapon in Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- * The newly-announced \$1.85 billion US security assistance package for Ukraine includes one Patriot air defense system, additional ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), High Speed Anti-Radiation Missiles (HARMs), among other military equipment, the Pentagon said on Wednesday.
- * US President Joe Biden authorized the drawdown of up to \$1 billion in additional security assistance for Ukraine, the White House said.
- * The Ukrainian armed forces have suffered significant losses, with a substantial part of its weapons and equipment having been destroyed, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.
- * NATO officers, artillerymen and other specialists are in the combat zone in Ukraine, more than 500 US and NATO satellites are working for Kiev, Shoigu said.
- * The Russian armed forces are taking comprehensive measures to prevent civilian deaths in Ukraine, Shoigu said.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

- * The US Senate on Wednesday secured enough votes to confirm Lynne Tracy's nomination as ambassador to Russia.

WESTERN SANCTIONS ON RUSSIA

- * Switzerland expanded the sanctions list against Moscow due to the situation in Ukraine, including 141 Russian individuals and 49 companies, the Swiss Federal Department of Economic Affairs, Education and Research said on Wednesday.
- * 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.
- * The United States has renewed export restrictions on the Russian companies Nordwin, Pobeda and S7 Airlines, the US Department of Commerce said.

INTERNATIONAL ATOMIC ENERGY AGENCY

- * International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi will pay a visit to Russia on December 22, Russian Permanent Representative to International Organizations in Vienna Mikhail Ulyanov said on Wednesday.
- * No meeting is planned between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Grossi, who will visit Moscow on December 22, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

RUSSIA MILITARY PLANS

- * The new Russian nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarine, Generalissimus Suvorov, armed with Bulava submarine-launched ballistic missiles, has been commissioned into the Russian navy, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said on Wednesday.
- * The emphasis in the activities of the operational and combat training of the Russian army in 2023 will be placed on the threats associated with the expansion of NATO to the East, Shoigu said.
- * In the further development of the Russia Armed Forces, the conscription age should be gradually increased to 21-30 from 18-27 currently, Shoigu said at an expanded meeting of the ministry's board.

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UNSC Adopts Resolution Calling for Release of Myanmar's San Suu Kyi, Former President

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council adopted on Wednesday a resolution on Myanmar calling for the release of former State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, ex-President Win Myint and all arbitrarily detained prisoners.

The resolution was adopted in a 12-0 vote, with Russia, China and India abstaining.

The document "urges the Myanmar military to immediately release all arbitrarily detained prisoners, including President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi."

In February 2021, the military seized power in Myanmar using a constitutional mechanism for transferring powers in an emergency situation. The military's actions spurred major civil unrest. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Aung San Suu Kyi and then-President Win Myint were put under house arrest. San Suu Kyi, 77, has since been sentenced to over 20 years in prison.

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Patriot System Not a Comprehensive Air Defense Solution for Ukraine - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Patriot surface-to-air missile system that the United States will deliver to Ukraine is not a comprehensive solution to the country's air defense needs, a senior US defense official said on Wednesday.

"For air defense, there is no silver bullet. Our goal is to help Ukraine strengthen a layered, integrated approach to air defense," the senior defense official said. "This isn't a comprehensive air defense solution for Ukraine. This is another step in many steps that we have pursued ... to get air defense capability to Ukraine."

The Patriot system will complement a range of medium- and short-range air defense capabilities already available to Ukraine, the official said.

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US-Based Surgeons Operate on Kids in Iraq, Libya, Plan More Work in Africa - Team Leader

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - A group of pediatric cardiology surgeons from the US-based Bill Novick Cardiac Alliance conducted 80 operations of different levels of complexity during their recent trips to Iraq and Libya, team leader Bill Novick told Sputnik.

"We were in Iraq for five weeks and operated on 50 children. One of our teams right now is finishing up in Libya. They operated on 30 kids there," Novick said.

Most of the children suffered from simple or moderate heart problems, but the performed operative procedures on ten patients in Iraq were complicated, Novick added.

The Cardiac Alliance team plans to return to Iraq and Libya in 2023 and is also scheduled to start new projects in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola and Rwanda, Novick added. The Cardiac Alliance is comprised of medical specialists from different countries who usually work in "hot spots" around the world.

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US Pediatric Heart Surgeons Hope to Resume Russia Project Once Situation Allows - Leader

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - A group of pediatric cardiac surgeons from the US-based Bill Novick Cardiac Alliance is hoping to resume its project in Russia as soon as the situation allows, team leader Bill Novick told Sputnik.

The group was working with their colleagues in the Siberian city of Kemerovo for many years. Last year it had several trips in the schedule, but the Russian side asked to postpone them. Novick said he does not know when there will be a possibility to resume the project. "Would I go back? The answer is yes. Will we be able to go back? I think the answer is probably – who knows," he said.

The team, which is working all over the world, has a busy schedule, but is ready to find time to visit Russia. "We have a fairly full schedule for the next year but I can always make room for a trip to Russia," Novick said.

The Cardiac Alliance has conducted some 500 surgeries in Russia since 2008. Previously, the Cardiac Alliance performed surgeries in several Russian cities, including Voronezh and Nizhny Novgorod.

The group is comprised of medical specialists from different countries who usually work in "hot spots" around the world.

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US Cardiac Surgeons Operate on 13 Children, Including Newborns, in Ukraine - Team Leader

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - A group of pediatric cardiac surgeons from the US-based Bill Novick Cardiac Alliance operated on 13 children during its recent trip to the Ukrainian city of Lviv, team leader Bill Novick told Sputnik.

"A total of thirteen operations, of which three on newborns less than 30 days of age. We did three older kids that I operated on ten years ago in Kiev. They needed a final operation," Novick said.

Six out of the thirteen cases were complex, but all children are doing well, he added. "Only one was left in the intensive care unit. He is still in the intensive care unit, but he is ok," he said. Speaking on the security situation, Novick noted that air radar signals were on every day, but there were no explosions near Lviv.

The team plans to visit Lviv four times next year – in March, June, September and December. Previously, the US doctors also discussed the idea of renewing their programs in Kharkiv, where they worked many years ago, but this project is not yet ready to start.

"We have already talked about the need to rebuild the Kharkiv program when everything is settled, but it is not settled right now," Novick said.

The Cardiac Alliance established a pediatric heart surgery project in Lviv last year given that there was no such program in the western part of Ukraine at that time and children had to travel to Kiev and other cities to receive relevant treatment.

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Pro-Trump Lawyer Advised Ex-White House Aide Hutchinson to Misperceive Jan. 6 Panel - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – Former top ethics attorney in the Donald Trump administration, Stefan Passantino, advised his then-client, former White House aide Cassidy Hutchinson to provide misleading testimony to the US House committee investigating the January 6 riot, CNN reported on Wednesday, citing sources familiar with the matter.

Passantino allegedly recommended that Hutchinson tell the committee that she did not recall what she did. The lawyer also did not share with the client that Trump's Save America committee was paying for his services, according to the report.

Hutchinson became one of the major witnesses in the committee probe. She dropped Passantino and hired a new legal counsel before her testimony in Congress, the report said.

Passantino told CNN that he never asked Hutchinson to mislead the committee.

"I believed Ms. Hutchinson was being truthful and cooperative with the Committee throughout the several interview sessions in which I represented her," he said.

Passantino added it is not uncommon for people to change lawyers "because their interests or strategies change." He noted that political committees sometimes cover client fees "at the client's request," the report said.

During her testimony, Hutchinson, a chief aide to former Chief of Staff Mark Meadows, revealed damning conversations between Meadows, former President Donald Trump and other senior officials which illustrate the level of their alleged involvement in and knowledge of the violence that took place during the January 6 riot.

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Training of Ukrainian Forces on Patriot Systems to Take Several Months - US Official

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – The training of Ukrainian troops on how to operate Patriot air defense systems is going to take several months, a senior US defense official said on Wednesday.

"Patriot does require training and we expect it will take several months to ensure Ukrainian forces have the training they need to employ it successfully," the official said during a press briefing.

The Department of Defense is currently considering several locations for the training, which is scheduled to start very soon, the official added.

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Biden Says Putin Trying to 'Use Winter As A Weapon'

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden during remarks alongside Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday claimed Russian President Vladimir Putin is trying to use winter as a weapon in Russia's special military operation in Ukraine. "He's trying to use winter as a weapon," Biden said during remarks in the Oval office. Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, after the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian provocations. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow and have been supplying weapons to Ukraine.

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Biden Tells Zelenskyy Military Aid for Kiev, Supply of Air Defense Systems Will Continue

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden at a meeting with Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Wednesday said that the United States will continue to increase military support for Kiev, including through continued supply of air defense systems. "We are going to continue to strengthen Ukraine's ability to defend itself, particularly air defense. That's why we're gonna be providing Ukraine with a Patriot missile battery and training Ukrainian forces to use it," Biden said at their bilateral meeting at the White House.

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Zelenskyy Arrives at White House for Meeting With Biden

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Volodymyr Zelenskyy arrived at the White House on Wednesday for a meeting with US President Joe Biden. Zelenskyy was greeted by Biden and the First Lady upon his arrival for bilateral talks on the conflict in Ukraine and views on a potential peace. Zelenskyy arrived in the United States earlier on Wednesday as part of a trip to Washington, which was not announced until the eve of his visit. Zelenskyy will also address a joint session of the US Congress on Wednesday evening as lawmakers consider spending legislation that includes billions more in aid for Ukraine.

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New US Aid for Ukraine Includes One Patriot Battery, HIMARS Ammo, HARMs - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The newly-announced \$1.85 billion US security assistance package for Ukraine includes one Patriot air defense system, additional ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), High Speed Anti-Radiation Missiles (HARMs), among other military equipment, the Pentagon said on Wednesday.

"Capabilities in this package include: One Patriot air defense battery and munitions; additional ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS); High-speed Anti-radiation missiles (HARMs)," the Pentagon said in a press release.

The package also provides 500 precision-guided 155mm artillery rounds, mortar systems and ammunition, armored vehicles, small arms, explosives, among other items, according to the press release.

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Zelenskyy Says Arrived in US, Will Hold Negotiations to Strengthen Ukraine's Defense

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said on Wednesday that he has arrived in the United States and stands ready to hold negotiations with US leaders to bolster Ukraine's defense capabilities.

"I am in Washington today to thank the American people, the President and the Congress for their much-needed support, and also to continue cooperation to bring our victory closer," Zelenskyy said via Telegram. "I will hold a series of negotiations to strengthen the resilience and defense capabilities of Ukraine."

Zelenskyy said Ukraine hopes to retake all of its territory next year, adding that he, in particular, will discuss with President Joe Biden the bilateral cooperation between Ukraine and the United States.

Zelenskyy is due to visit the White House on Wednesday afternoon for a meeting with Biden and his national security team to discuss a range of issues, including battlefield strategy, energy needs and sanctions, according to US officials.

Zelenskyy will then deliver an address to a joint session of Congress later in the evening, the officials said.

Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, after the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The United States and its allies have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia and supplied weapons to Ukraine worth tens of billions of dollars.

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US Announces New Iran-Related Sanctions for Government Protest Response - Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department on Wednesday announced new sanctions on five Iranian nationals and one entity, including Iran's chief prosecutor and individuals linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), for the government's response to protests against the regime.

"Today, the US Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) is targeting the Prosecutor General [Mohammad Montazeri] and key military and paramilitary officials in Iran, as well as a company manufacturing and providing Iran's Law Enforcement Forces with anti-riot equipment," the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The sanctions target Montazeri for overseeing the prosecution of protestors, as well as leaders of military and paramilitary organizations involved in crackdowns on demonstrations, the statement said.

The sanctioned company, Imen Sanat Zaman Fara Company, manufactures equipment for law enforcement officials, including the government's primary protest suppression force, the statement said.

The sanctions block targets' property and interests in the United States and restrict US persons from dealing with the targets. The sanctions come in a series of US government responses to the anti-government protests in Iran, sparked by the death of 22-year old Mahsa Amini in police custody.

The Iranian government asserts that Amini died of a heart attack after being detained for "improperly" wearing a hijab, while demonstrators contend she died after being beaten by the so-called Morality Police.

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US Announces New Iran-Related Sanctions - Treasury Department

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Zelenskyy Lands in US Ahead of Meeting With Biden, Address to Congress - White House

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy landed in the United States ahead of his meeting with President Joe Biden later on Wednesday afternoon, a White House official said.

"President Zelenskyy has landed in the US and events this afternoon are currently tracking on time," the official said in a statement.

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US Senate Launches Hotline to Negotiate Completion of Year-End Spending Deal - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The US Senate leadership has launched a hotline overnight to ease negotiations toward a year-end omnibus spending bill that Congress seeks to pass by the Friday government shutdown deadline, Politico reported on Wednesday.

Party leaders use hotlines to sort out objections by their caucus members in advance of efforts to pass legislation.

Senators are using hotlines to negotiate the consideration of the \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill and a package of nine amendments, the report said, citing a senator's aide.

The amendments include eight Republican and one bipartisan measure. Hotline negotiations could result in a deal to guarantee votes on the amendments in exchange for expedited final passage of the omnibus, the report said.

The Senate could pass the legislation as soon as Wednesday, the report said. Senator John Thune reportedly said on Tuesday night that he would like to see the omnibus passed before Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy addresses Congress on Wednesday evening.

The amendment package includes a proposal by Senator Rand Paul to raise the threshold of votes needed to waive "PAYGO" rules, which require Congress to offset new spending by either increasing revenues or decreasing other spending, the report said.

The package also includes a proposal by Senator Ron Johnson to strike earmarks from the legislation and strip funding for transportation of migrants, the report said.

The 4,155-page omnibus bill includes \$1.7 trillion in total spending, including \$45 billion for Ukraine's defense needs and \$858 billion in overall defense funding.

Some US House Republicans have expressed opposition to the legislation and threatened to thwart the legislative efforts of congressmen who vote in favor of the measure when they take control of the lower chamber of Congress next year.

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US Oil Stockpiles Tumble as Fuel Demand Jumps Amid Holiday Travel, Package Delivery

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - U.S. crude oil inventories fell three times more than expected last week, data from the government's Energy Information Administration, or EIA, showed Wednesday, as fuel demand rose from higher public travel as well as activity by truckers to deliver packages for the year-end holidays.

Crude inventories fell by 5.894 million barrels for the week ended December 16, versus a drawdown of 10.231 million during the previous week to December 9, the EIA said in its Weekly Petroleum Status Report. Analysts polled by US media had expected a smaller drawdown of 1.657M barrels for last week.

Crude stockpiles in the government-controlled US Strategic Petroleum Reserve, or SPR, fell by 3.7 million barrels to reach 378.6 million last week, the EIA report showed. The Biden administration has drawn more than 200 million barrels from the SPR over the past year to bridge supply deficits in the marketplace, in order to keep both crude and retail prices of gasoline low. The dependency on the SPR has brought stockpiles in the reserve to the lowest levels since December 1983, although the government has announced plans to start refilling the reserve from February 2023.

Gasoline stockpiles rose by 2.53 million barrels, versus a forecast build of 2.14 million barrels. In the prior week, gasoline stockpiles rose by 4.496 million. Gasoline is the top automobile fuel in the United States.

Inventories of distillates, meanwhile, rose by 242,000 barrels last week, compared with a projected build of 336,000. In the prior week, gasoline inventories rose by 1.364 million.

Distillates are refined into diesel for trucks, buses, trains and ships as well as fuel for jets.

Total product supply of finished motor gasoline in the marketplace — an indication of demand — was at 8.714 million barrels per day last week, up by 489,000 barrels per day.

Supply of distillate fuel oil, meanwhile, rose by 247,000 barrels per day to 4.015 million barrels per day.

Supply of kerosene-type jet fuel fell by 52,000 barrels per day, to reach 1.712 million barrels daily.

Demand aside, gasoline and distillate inventories also experienced a larger inventory drop last week from reduced refining activity.

Refineries operated at 90.9% of their operable capacity last week, versus 92.2% in the previous week to December 2, the EIA said.

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US Senate Confirms Lynne Tracy as Ambassador to Russia

(Updates with final vote count in para 2, details in pars 3-8)

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday voted to confirm Lynne Tracy's nomination as ambassador to Russia.

The Senate voted overwhelmingly in favor of the nomination, with 93 approving and only two opposed - Senators Mike Lee and Rand Paul.

During her Senate confirmation hearing, Tracy said that she would make the plight of Americans detained in Russia a "top priority" during her service in Moscow. She also pledged to reach out to all Russian people at all levels as one of her priorities should she be confirmed.

The United States, however, should continue tightening sanctions on Russia, including reducing the country's energy revenues, Tracy believes.

Since March 2019, Tracy has served as US Ambassador to Armenia.

During her career in the Foreign Service, the diplomat has served in a number of US foreign missions, including in Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

Between 2014 and 2017, Tracy served as Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Moscow and received a Distinguished Honor Award for her contribution while in this role.

Prior to her service at the Moscow embassy, Tracy was Deputy Assistant Secretary for Central Asia in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs between 2012 and 2014.

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US Controllers Lose Contact With InSight Lander on Mars After 4 Year Mission - NASA

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Controllers at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena, California, have lost all contact with the Mars InSight lander after four years of successful operations, NASA announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"NASA's InSight mission has ended after more than four years of collecting unique science on Mars," the release said. "Mission controllers at JPL in Southern California were unable to contact the lander after two consecutive attempts."

The mission controllers have now concluded that the spacecraft's solar-powered batteries have run out of energy - a condition that engineers on the project refer to as "dead bus," the release said.

"The agency will continue to listen for a signal from the lander, just in case, but hearing from it at this point is considered unlikely. The last time InSight communicated with Earth was December 15," the release added.

InSight, also called Interior Exploration using Seismic Investigations, Geodesy and Heat Transport, successfully studied the interior layers of Mars and it discovered surprisingly strong remnants of the planet's magnetic dynamo, monitored weather patterns and 1,319 marsquakes, according to the release.

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Griffiths Asks UNSC to Back Resolution Extending Cross-Border Assistance in Syria

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) – The UN Security Council should support a resolution extending the cross-border aid mechanism for Syria in January to maintain the

humanitarian lifeline for millions of people, UN Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths said on Wednesday.

In July, the UN Security Council adopted a resolution to extend humanitarian aid delivery to Syria through the Bab al-Hawa border crossing from Turkey. Twelve member states voted in favor, with the US, the UK and France abstaining. The three nations wanted to extend cross-border deliveries by 12 months. Russia was prepared to adopt an extension for only a six-month period.

"In less than three weeks, Resolution 2642 (2022), which allows us to deliver cross-border humanitarian assistance to northwest Syria, is due to expire. I ask for yours and the Council's support to allow us to deliver assistance to all those who need it, no matter where they are," Griffiths said.

Griffiths said that the importance of maintaining the lifeline on which millions of Syrians depend cannot be understated. Not supporting the resolution would jeopardize UN efforts to deliver humanitarian aid to the country amidst cholera outbreaks and the winter season, he warned. The UN official also asked all parties involved on the ground to continue working on facilitating crossline access.

"We need to see more of these convoys, but they simply cannot compensate for the massive scale of the cross-border operation," Griffiths said, adding that on average, 600 trucks delivered humanitarian aid to northwestern Syria every month in 2022.

Griffiths said 2023 must not signal the end of the crossline lifeline, as "there is simply no alternative" to it.

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US Announces \$1.85Bln in New Military Aid for Ukraine, Including Patriot System - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide an additional \$1.85 billion in military assistance for Ukraine that will include a Patriot air defense system, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"\$1.85 Billion in Additional US Military Assistance, Including the First Transfer of Patriot Air Defense System," Blinken said in a press release.

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US Senate Confirms Lynne Tracy as Ambassador to Russia

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Wednesday secured enough votes to confirm Lynne Tracy's nomination as ambassador to Russia.

The Senate has so far voted overwhelmingly in favor of the nomination, with 80 approving and only one senator opposed as voting continues.

During her Senate confirmation hearing, Tracy said that she will make the plight of Americans detained in Russia a "top priority" during her service in Moscow. She also pledged to reach out to all Russian people at all levels as one of her priorities should she be confirmed.

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Biden Directs Drawdown of Up to \$1Bln in Extra Military Aid for Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden authorized the drawdown of up to \$1 billion in additional security assistance for Ukraine, the White House said on Wednesday.

"I hereby delegate to the Secretary of State the authority under section 506(a)(1) of the FAA to direct the drawdown of up to \$1 billion in defense articles and services of the Department of Defense, and military education and training, to provide assistance to Ukraine and to make the determinations required under such section to direct such a drawdown," Biden said in a press release.

Biden is expected to announce a total of nearly \$2 billion in new assistance for Ukraine, which will include a Patriot air defense system. Zelenskyy is due to visit the White House on Wednesday afternoon.

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US Renews Export Restrictions on Russia's Nordwin, Pobeda, S7 Airlines - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) – The United States has renewed export restrictions on the Russian companies Nordwin, Pobeda and S7 Airlines, the US Department of Commerce said on Wednesday.

"Pursuant to Section 766.24 of the Export Administration Regulations, 15 C.F.R. Parts 730-774 (2021) ("EAR" or "the Regulations"), I hereby grant the request of the Office of Export Enforcement ("OEE") to renew the temporary denial order ("TDO") issued in this matter on June 24, 2022. I find that renewal of this order is necessary in the public interest to prevent an imminent violation of the Regulations," Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Export Enforcement Matthew Axelrod said in separate orders regarding each of the three cases.

All orders are effective immediately and will be in place for 180 days, he added.

On June 24, 2022, the Commerce Department issued orders denying the export privileges of all three entities for a period of 180 days. These steps were necessary in the public interest to prevent an imminent violation of the regulations, Axelrod said.

On December 1, the administration submitted requests to renew these orders.

On June 24, the Commerce Department requested that seven aircraft from Nordwin airlines, 21 aircraft from Pobeda, and seven aircraft from S7 airlines be denied export privileges for a period of 180 days.

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CBS News Reporter Deletes Tweeting Indicating Zelenskyy's Arrival to US

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - A CBS News correspondent deleted a tweet from earlier Wednesday that initially announced Volodymyr Zelenskyy arrived in the United States at Joint Base Andrews in Maryland.

The reason for deleting the tweet is unknown.

The United States was heavily involved in security arrangements to ensure Zelenskyy's safety on the trip to Washington, DC, the White House confirmed earlier in the day.

US military aircraft escorted Zelenskyy to Washington, according to media reports.

Zelenskyy is due to visit the White House on Wednesday afternoon for a meeting with President Joe Biden and his national security team to discuss a range of matters including battlefield strategy, energy needs, and sanctions, according to US officials.

Zelenskyy will then deliver an address to a joint session of the US Congress later in the evening, US officials said.

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UN Sees No Large-Scale Military Operations in Syria But Situation Not Improved - Pedersen

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has not seen large-scale military operations in Syria but the situation in the country has still not improved, UN Special Envoy on Syria Geir Pedersen said on Wednesday.

"We have thankfully not seen further large-scale military operations by any one player this month. But the situation cannot be said to have improved in any way," Pedersen said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The special envoy also said there are reports of sporadic Syrian government airstrikes in the northwest of the country, Turkish airstrikes in the north and Israeli airstrikes in the southwest. In addition, the Islamic State terror group (outlawed in Russia) continues its activities across Syria, Pedersen added.

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Zelenskyy Arrives in US, Currently at Joint Base Andrews - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Volodymyr Zelenskyy arrived in the United States late Wednesday morning and is currently holding at Joint Base Andrews in the state of Maryland, CBS News reported on Wednesday.

The United States was heavily involved in security arrangements to ensure Zelenskyy's safety on the trip to Washington, DC, the White House confirmed earlier in the day.

US military aircraft escorted Zelenskyy to Washington, according to media reports.

Zelenskyy is due to visit the White House on Wednesday afternoon for a meeting with President Joe Biden and his national security team to discuss a range of matters including battlefield strategy, energy needs, and sanctions, according to US officials.

Zelenskyy will then deliver an address to a joint session of the US Congress later in the evening, US officials said.

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UN Ready to Resume Talks of Constitutional Committee in Syria - Special Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is ready to resume the meetings of the Constitutional Committee in Syria, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen said on Wednesday.

"As I told you last month, the United Nations stands ready to resume Constitutional Committee meetings in Geneva as soon as readiness to do so from others is there," Pedersen said during a UN Security Council meeting.

The war in Syria has been ongoing since 2011, with various armed insurgent groups, including terrorist organizations, fighting the Syrian Army in an attempt to topple the government of President Bashar Assad. Since 2016, the Turkish armed forces have also been conducting air and ground operations in Syria against armed Kurdish groups.

In 2017, Russia, Turkey and Iran launched a mediation group on the Syrian settlement in Astana. In January 2018, the Russian city of Sochi hosted a Congress of the Syrian national dialogue, the first such attempt since the start of the conflict, intending to gather an inclusive pool of Syrian political forces. The main result of the Congress was the decision to create a Constitutional Committee, which meets in Geneva and whose main task is to prepare a constitutional reform in Syria.

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Senate Majority Leader Says US Should Not Reduce Pace of Assistance to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said that it is not the time for the Biden administration to reduce the pace of assistance for Ukraine amid Russia's ongoing special military operation.

"Now is not the time, not the time to take our foot off the gas when it comes to helping Ukraine," Schumer said in a speech on the Senate floor.

Early Tuesday morning, negotiators in Congress reached a deal on a draft \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending proposal to fund the federal government through September 30 of next year. The government will shut down if the omnibus or a continuing resolution is not passed by both chambers of Congress by Friday.

Later on Wednesday, US senators are expected to consider the omnibus, which includes \$45 billion in new emergency assistance for Ukraine.

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UN Doubts Can Deliver Much Relief to Syrians in 2023 Amid Lack of Funds, Growing Needs

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) – The United Nations may be unable to provide Syria with much relief next year amid lack of funding and the staggering number of those in need, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths said on Wednesday.

"The socio-economic degradation is the worst it has been since the beginning of the crisis. I am afraid that 2023 will not provide much relief to the people of Syria. Madam President, despite funding challenges and a complex operational environment, our humanitarian partners delivered life-saving assistance to 7.8 million people each month in 2022, including 2.7 million people reached through cross-border operations," Griffiths said in his report.

Griffiths said that 6 million people, a significant increase of 33%, need urgent assistance as winter approaches.

Unfortunately, the UN Refugee Agency will be unable to provide all the funds required to relieve the growing number of people in need, as only 21% of the funds for winterization response has been collected.

"This means that more than two thirds of people who need help will not receive it. Families will not have fuel, heaters, blankets, winter clothes and other items they need to ward off the cold," Griffiths said.

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Pentagon Looking for Signs of Fraud in Contracts Awarded to Help Ukraine – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS) at the Pentagon is looking for signs of fraud and abuse in the contracts being awarded as part of

efforts to help Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation, Defense News reported on Wednesday, citing the principal deputy director of the service.

DCIS is currently focused on a number of the Pentagon's contracting actions as well as on the potential black-market diversion of US assistance, the report said.

While no contracting fraud has become public to date, both the Defense and State departments are taking steps to safeguard weapons provided to Ukraine, the report added.

Earlier in December, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said the United States has no credible information to indicate that any of the US weapons provided to Ukraine have been diverted to the black market.

The Biden administration has committed nearly \$23 billion in military aid and more than \$25 billion in financial and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine since January 24.

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Less Than One Third of Americans Believe They Have Excellent Mental Health - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - Less than one third of Americans believe they are in "excellent" mental health, the lowest figure since close to the beginning of the century, a new Gallup poll showed on Wednesday.

"Americans' positive self-assessments of their mental health are the lowest in more than two decades of Gallup polling," the polling organization said.

Only 31% of adults described their mental health or emotional well-being as "excellent," the worst rating recorded this century and 20 points lower than the figures of 20 years ago, Gallup said.

"Another 44% of Americans rate their mental health as 'good,' and the 75% combined excellent and good rating is the lowest on record and 10 points shy of the average since 2001," Gallup said.

In addition, 17% of US adults described their mental health as "only fair" and 7% as "poor." The latter figure is the highest in Gallup's trend, the polling company said.

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Pedersen Lauds Deepening Dialogue With Syrian Officials, Invitation to Damascus for Talks

UNITED NATIONS, December 21 (Sputnik) - UN Special Envoy Geir Pedersen said on Wednesday that the dialogue between UN and Syrian officials has deepened and he appreciates the invitation for him to return to Damascus for more talks next year.

"In Damascus, I had a long exchange with Foreign Minister Mekdad on this and I appreciated his willingness to engage. The dialogue has certainly deepened and I welcome the invitation to

return to Damascus in the New Year for a new round of talks," Pedersen told a UN Security Council meeting.

"I also met in Geneva with Badr Jamous, the President of the Syrian Negotiations Commission, and discussed a range of issues in resolution 2254, including steps that all parties could take to help build trust and confidence and bring an end to the suffering of all Syrians. And I look forward to further engagement with the SNC in the New Year as well," he added.

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ISS Conducts Avoidance Maneuver to Dodge Russian Space Debris - NASA

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik) - The International Space Station (ISS) has used the propulsion units of a Russian spacecraft to maneuver out of the way of some orbiting space debris from a Russian rocket, NASA announced in a blog post on Wednesday.

"The ISS conducted a Predetermined Debris Avoidance Maneuver (PDAM) today, December 21, at 8:42 am EST (Eastern Standard Time)," NASA said. "During the maneuver, the Roscosmos Progress 81 thrusters fired for 10 minutes, 21 seconds to provide ... an extra measure of distance away from the predicted track of the debris."

If the Roscosmos Progress had not conducted the maneuver, the debris could have passed less than a quarter of a mile from the space station, NASA said.

"The decision to conduct the maneuver was based on tracking data that showed a close approach to [the] station of a fragment of Russian Fregat-SB upper stage debris," NASA said, adding that the crew was "never in any immediate danger."

The decision to conduct the maneuver led to a postponement of today's planned spacewalk by NASA astronauts Frank Rubio and Josh Cassada, the blog statement added.