

12/22/22 Thursday

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Debt From US Military 'Investment' Aid Will Make Ukraine 'Failed State' Controlled by West - Expert

[5 hours ago](#)

By - Fantine Gardinier

When Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky visited Washington, DC, on Wednesday, Congress was debating a large new military aid package for Kiev. Zelensky urged US lawmakers to think of the money not as “charity,” but as “an investment.” An expert in regional and military matters told Sputnik on Thursday that the [massive amounts of money](#) would be used to control and loot Ukraine, as well as enrich connected persons and institutions in the West, including the Democratic Party.

“The US is investing in the belief that they will be able to weaken Russia and eventually see a regime change and potentially to dismantle Russia which will then also enable a further containment of China,” said Earl Rasmussen, executive vice president of the Washington, DC-based Eurasia Center and a retired Lieutenant Colonel with over 20 years in the US Army. “This also acts to disrupt economic cooperation between Europe and Russia and [between] Europe and China, thus potentially leading to the deindustrialization of Europe, specifically Germany,” he explained. “Moreover, the US Military Industrial Complex (MIC) is profiting considerably from the ‘conflict’ and increased tensions. Additional opportunities may occur for western (US) companies to ‘reconstruct’ Ukraine and to obtain Ukrainian resources” at fire sale prices, he added.

The academic and veteran explained there are many in the US leadership who believe the US is “the indispensable nation which essentially rules the world,” and seeks to retain that position at almost any cost.

“The objective is to retain US hegemony and to prevent any potential global or regional challenger from emerging. Ukraine is seen as the key to containing and essentially weaken or even destroy Russia. The objective is not merely to contain Russia but to oversee a regime change and potentially dismantle/restructure Russia, as we know it,” he said.

“Regardless of the narrative being touted, the support is not about Ukraine nor ‘democracy,’” he said. “Ukraine is merely a pawn to global geopolitical objectives of people currently in power. As we found out [in recent interviews](#) from [former Ukrainian President Petro] Poroshenko and [former German Chancellor Angela] Merkel, the Minsk Agreements were never meant to be implemented but rather were merely a means to ‘buy time’ in order to strengthen Ukraine, providing NATO equipment and training.”

The \$45 billion most recently pledged to Kiev is almost double the \$48 billion it has been given in the year 2022, [according to](#) the Council on Foreign Relations, an influential US think tank. Of that, \$22.9 billion was for military efforts, including grants, loans and purchases of military

equipment, training, logistics, and other support measures. However, Rasmussen noted that most of the funds haven't really been "given" to Ukraine, but to defense contractors.

"Many of these systems are not 'donated' and will need to be paid back to the US by Ukraine. Direct funding goes straight to the government or to other organizations."

"There currently is no audit function or accountability in place for neither weapons nor funds," he noted. "As we have seen, already weapons are finding their way into the hands of terrorist cells in Africa and the Middle East. This should really be no surprise. Indications are that a majority of supplies are being traded on the Black Market. Direct funds are another issue, however there seems to be some evidence that Ukraine was a major 'investor' with the since discredited [crypto company FTX](#)."

"By coincidence, FTX was a major political contributor to US political parties, primarily the Democratic Party. Thus some funds after some 'laundering' ended up in the political contributors of US politicians. I am sure Ukrainian oligarchs have also been beneficiaries of the US taxpayer 'investments,'" he added.

Indeed, Rasmussen noted that Ukraine would eventually have to "pay back" for the "investments," creating the same kind of debt crisis as the [Lend-Lease program](#) did in World War II, which the US used to give the UK and China while staying out of the hostilities.

"Other means may be from the heavily discounted transfer of ownership of land and industries to non-Ukrainian 'partners,'" he said. "Regardless, Ukraine will be indebted for generations into the future."

"Economic hardship will last for the foreseeable future and perhaps decades or even generations," he also predicted. "The country will essentially be a failed state. I would expect social and political unrest for a long period. The US is the ultimate decider or overseer of the payments. They may have some joint roles with other G7 countries or through the IMF or World Bank but for the most part the US [will] be the main influencer/debt collector."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Tesla Turbulence: EV Maker Offers \$7500 Discount on Popular Models as Investors Fume Over 'No CEO'

By - Fantine Gardinier

The electric vehicle manufacturer has had another turbulent year in 2022, with its shares steadily falling as demand slackens and its CEO, Elon Musk, pours his attention into his most recent purchase: social media giant Twitter.

Tesla announced on Thursday it slash the price by \$7,500 on two of their two most popular models: the Model 3 sedan and the Model Y sport utility vehicle. It's also added 10,000 free miles of use of its specialized Supercharging stations, used to rapidly recharge the company's car batteries.

According to US media reports, the change was also motivated by the US Treasury saying on Thursday it was postponing new guidance on EV tax credits created by the Inflation Reduction Act until March. The law, signed by US President Joe Biden in August, offers \$7,500 in tax

credits to buyers of certain electric vehicles made in the United States in an attempt to stimulate domestic EV consumption and to motivate EV makers and their subsidiaries to relocate to the US.

However, according to Department of Energy [data released](#) earlier this month, several Tesla models qualify, including the Model 3 and Model Y, but had already hit the law's limitation on the number of units allowed to qualify. Tesla's equivalent price cut thus fills the gap.

On Thursday, Tesla's stock fell by nearly 7% on news of the new delivery credits. Year-to-date, it's lost over 67% of its value. While the company has struggled with a number of chronic issues, including keeping up delivery demand, its major investors are increasingly pointing the finger at Musk and his obsession with taking over Twitter.

"We all know why Tesla stock is down and it has nothing to do with the company," said Ross Gerber, head of Gerber Kawasaki Wealth and Investment Management, a Tesla shareholder, during a Twitter Spaces event earlier this week.

"The company is doing great. The company has the best environment it could possibly want. It's about to get a bunch of incentives from the government. The factories are ramping up. New products are launching. The only problem is the optics of having the CEO on Twitter every day discussing the problems of Hunter Biden," he said.

Musk initially made the deal to buy Twitter for \$44 billion in April, but amid fighting with the company's board over information on automated bots and other bugbears, Musk's takeover was delayed until late October. He pledged a "free speech" overhaul on the site, ending lifetime bans for several right-wing accounts, including former US President Donald Trump, and implementing a host of other changes to the site, all while purging nearly three-quarters of its staff.

Then in early December, Musk began releasing to several journalists treasure troves of information, dubbed "[The Twitter Files](#)," about Twitter's cooperation with the FBI to suppress everything from inconvenient news stories to alleged misinformation by accounts in countries targeted by the US for regime change, such as Cuba and Iran.

Gerber also took a swing at Musk on Twitter, saying Tesla "has no CEO" and that it was "time for a shakeup."

After Musk replied, asking for his "great ideas," Gerber laid out three demands, including that Tesla needs a communications and media team, that it needs a succession plan and clarity on when Musk would return from Twitter, and that the company needs to communicate about Musk's massive sales of Twitter stock and reach a stand still agreement.

Recent filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission show that Musk has sold \$3.5 billion in Tesla stock in recent days, in addition to \$3.9 billion he sold in early November, just after buying Twitter. Since late last year, Musk has unloaded about \$40 billion in Tesla stock. Following a Twitter poll earlier this week, Musk said he was "actively searching" for a new Twitter CEO and would step down as soon as one could be found.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden's New Moscow Envoy Should Look to Peace-Broker Roosevelt for Inspiration, Professor Says

By - Fantine Gardinier

On Wednesday, the US Senate voted to confirm Lynne Tracy, presently the US ambassador to Armenia, in her new appointment as US ambassador to Russia. Her appointment comes at a low point for Moscow-Washington relations, with US sanctions seeking to strangle the Russian economy as US aid prolongs a bloody conflict in Ukraine.

That same day, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky came to Washington and delivered a far different message from US President Joe Biden, who stood alongside him. Biden predicted Zelensky would be prepared to negotiate with Russia to end the 10-month-long conflict that has killed 100,000 Ukrainians, according to US estimates, but instead, the Ukrainian leader denied the possibility of peace with Moscow. The US Congress is preparing to pass a [massive new \\$45 billion](#) aid package that would double the money given to Kiev this year; in fact, the [measure](#) has already cleared the US Senate.

John Tures, political science professor at LaGrange College in Georgia, told Sputnik that Tracy “checks all the boxes” for being a good envoy in Moscow, but the real test will be whether she can improve the dismal US-Russia relationship and help facilitate an amiable end to the conflict in Ukraine before it consumes all of Europe and beyond.

“When I look for quality in an ambassador, I look to see if he or she has [relevant experience and knowledge](#), and can get along with others, and isn’t some party hack or wealthy donor (and yes, America has had some of those in the past),” he noted.

“Lynne Tracy checks all the boxes for being an excellent nominee. She’s got the knowledge in her educational background, and the experience not just in being an ambassador, but being in the right region. Experience working with the Armenians should help Ambassador Tracy in her new role. She’s been nominated by presidents of both parties, and was confirmed by a much wider margin than her predecessor, who was more associated with one party.”

Tures said Biden needed “the right person for the job,” since his pick could be “the most consequential” since the Cold War ended in 1991.

“Definitely this administration needed the right person for the job, given her education, experience and ability to work with multiple sides. She’s not a partisan or a prominent donor, so this pick was about professionalism,” he said.

However, qualifications are one thing, but practice is another. Tracy will have a mountain of tasks before her, not the least of which is finding a solution to the conflict in Ukraine that doesn’t involve nuclear weapons or an all-out brawl between NATO and the Russian Federation.

“In addition to helping state the US position on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, and where NATO stands, Ambassador Tracy will be asked to help negotiate the release of Paul Whelan, and may be called to work a solution through a third party, so knowledge of other regions might help here. I am sure [outgoing] Ambassador John Sullivan must have done a good job for the USA, or President Biden would not have kept him, but the new ambassador will be called upon to do more for helping resolve the regional conflict.”

“Ambassador Tracy should make it clear that the US should not require regime change or acts that would break up Russia, a major concern in Russia I am sure. I spoke with a pro-Russian professor who articulated this to me, and I had not heard that concern in the USA media. But now I am seeing similar concerns by pro-Russian Republican elected officials, which may be leading to an existential misperception,” he said.

"The best way to resolve the conflict is to go back to the pre-2022 state of affairs, so this conflict does not go nuclear or bleed both combatants militarily and economically dry. At this point, both sides should seek that deal. It's not worth [weapons of mass destruction] being used for Ukraine to retake even Crimea at this time, or the USA to support that."

"Long ago, US [President] Teddy Roosevelt won the Nobel Prize by helping broker a peace for the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. The USA should return to that role of broker, even if it means Ukraine doesn't get everything they want."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

CDC: US Life Expectancy Falls for Second Straight Year, Hits 25-Year Low

By - Mary Manley

The report is based on data collected on American death certificates tracked by the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics and affirms the declining rates from Augusta when they revealed their preliminary data for the study. According to the CDC, the life expectancy for 2021 is now the worst two-year decline on record since 1923.

The Centers for Disease Control and [Prevention](#) released a new [report](#) on Thursday revealing the shocking discovery that the average life expectancy for Americans has dropped for the second consecutive year and is the lowest it has ever been since 1996. Since COVID-19 was first detected in 2019, life expectancy has fallen by 2.7 years as of last year.

Those born in the US in 2021 are now expected to only live until they are 76.4 years old, which is down from a peak of 78.8 years in 2019. That is a significant drop considering the average life expectancy statistical change to range somewhere between 0.1 and 0.2 years.

"The declines in life expectancy since 2019 are largely driven by the pandemic," the agency explained in a news release. "COVID-19 deaths contributed to nearly three-fourths, or 74%, of the decline from 2019 to 2020, and 50% of the decline from 2020 to 2021."

One in eight deaths for 2021 were caused by COVID-19, which is an increase from one in 10 deaths in 2020.

According to Kenneth Kochanek, a co-author of the report, life expectancy in the US has been increasing for decades until COVID-19 hit the world in January of 2020. But the US, which already had a lower life expectancy when compared to other countries, still continues to rank the lowest among countries with large [economies](#).

"Then this one disease comes along and just wipes everything out..." Kochanek explains. "I've never seen anything with this much of an impact in a short period of time."

Heart disease remained the leading cause of death among Americans, followed by cancer. COVID-19 was the third leading cause of death and these three causes made up half of the deaths for 2021.

Another factor which contributed to the life expectancy decline was "unintentional injuries"; drug overdoses made up a third of the deaths in this category. For the year of 2021: 106,999 drug overdose deaths occurred which is equivalent to 32.4 people per 100,000 people.

Drug overdoses, which have been propelled by the [opioid epidemic](#), are now five times greater than they were two decades ago and contributed to the life expectancy decline by 15.9%.

"These data are very tragic but not surprising," said Dr. Nora [Volkow](#), director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse. "The pandemic had a magnifying effect on an already-devastating overdose crisis, and exacerbated many of the stressors in society that make people more vulnerable to taking drugs."

"We also know that substance use is more dangerous than it has ever been, as fentanyl has continued to permeate the illicit drug supply, increasing the risk for overdoses among both people with substance use disorders as well as those who use drugs occasionally," Volkow added.

While the death rate changes outlined in the CDC's report differed among demographics, white people saw a significant jump in their death rates (an increase of 7%) across both genders between 2020 and 2021. COVID-19 was the leading cause in the decline of life expectancy among white people in 2021 and contributed to 54.1% of their life expectancy decline last year. Meanwhile, women on average are living about six years longer than men and are expected to live past 79 years old. The CDC also found that death rates for Hispanic people and Black men decreased. Asian Americans also saw the smallest decline in life expectancy last year among any race, with cancer making up their leading cause of [death](#).

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Dramatic Footage Captures Moment Plane Crashed on Santa Monica Beach, Left Two Injured
By - Mary Manley

Two people were injured on Thursday after a small airplane was left flipped upside-down after it attempted to land on the shoreline of the Santa Monica Beach. According to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the pilot attempted an emergency landing after reporting engine issues.

A single-engine Cessna 150A plane attempted to land just south of Santa Monica's popular pier and slammed into the shoreline on Thursday, ultimately flipping and landing upside-down. The Los Angeles County Fire Department reported two people trapped inside the aircraft had been rescued.

One passenger on board suffered a cardiac emergency and both passengers were taken to the hospital for treatment; however, their current conditions are unknown. No other injuries were reported.

A video shared on Twitter shows the plane's crash landing, revealing how the plane came to an abrupt stop and flipped after it hit the shoreline.

The plane had departed the Santa Monica Airport before reporting an engine failure to the FAA. The pilot attempted an emergency landing at around 3:15 p.m. local time, and crash-landed belly up on the Santa Monica beach.

The FAA and the National Transportation Safety Board will be investigating the crash and releasing the preliminary results of their investigation in the coming days.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

House Jan. 6 Panel Releases Final Report on Capitol Riot Findings

The Thursday release unfolded as the panel released the transcript of 34 witness testimonies the day prior. Among the previous release were testimonies from former Justice Department official Jeffrey Clark and Trump lawyer John Eastman.

The House select committee investigating the events that took place during the January 2021 Capitol riot released its final report late Thursday, outlining how former US President Donald Trump engaged in a "multi-part conspiracy" to overturn the 2020 election.

The [845-page report](#) includes various documents based on more than 1,000 interviews and obtained emails, texts and phone records, among other evidence.

"This report will provide greater detail about the multistep effort devised and driven by Donald Trump to overturn the 2020 election and block the transfer of power," Committee Chair Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS), wrote in a foreword in the report.

The report goes on to underscore that "none of the events of January 6th would have happened without" the former commander-in-chief playing as ringleader.

The panel effectively mapped out its findings in the same manner it held its hearings, describing the pressure that was placed across the board on states, federal officials, lawmakers and ultimately US Vice President Mike Pence.

Between the November 2020 election and the Capitol riot, Trump and his inner circle "engaged in at least 200 apparent acts of public or private outreach, pressure, or condemnation, targeting either state legislators or state or local election administrators, to overturn state election results."

The report comes hours after the panel had earlier [released transcripts](#) of witness testimony from former Director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency Chris Krebs, former Defense Secretary Mark Esper, former White House Deputy Press Secretary Sarah Matthews, Justice Department employee Ken Klukowski and Stephen Ayres, who attended the riot.

The findings were also released three days after the nine-member committee voted at its final meeting to refer Trump and a group of allies to the Justice Department on four criminal charges: insurrection, obstruction of an official proceeding, conspiracy to defraud the United States government, and making false statements to the United States government.

The former president has repeatedly spoken out against the investigation and more recently against the referred criminal complaint, referring to the charges as "fake."

"The people understand that the Democratic Bureau of Investigation, the DBI, are out to keep me from running for president because they know I'll win and that this whole business of prosecuting me is just like impeachment was — a partisan attempt to sideline me and the Republican Party," he wrote at the time.

Aside from bringing the 18-month investigation to a close, the late Thursday release also marks the final act for House Democrats, the party of which will no longer be in the majority in the lower chamber.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Meta to Pay \$725Mln to Settle Lawsuit Over Cambridge Analytica Scandal - Court Filing

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Facebook's parent company Meta (banned in Russia over extremism) has agreed to pay \$725 million to settle a class action lawsuit that accused the company of sharing users' personal data with the political consultancy firm Cambridge Analytica.

"The proposed Settlement of \$725,000,000 is the largest recovery ever achieved in a data privacy class action and the most Facebook has ever paid to resolve a private class action," Keller Rohrback L.L.P., the law firm representing the plaintiffs, said in a court filing late Thursday.

The lawsuit was filed in 2018 after Facebook disclosed that it had harvested the information of around 87 million users and shared it with Cambridge Analytica, a political consultancy firm linked to the 2016 campaign of former President Donald Trump.

The consultancy reportedly used the data for the purpose of voter profiling and targeting of political advertising.

The court filing states that "Facebook has meaningfully changed the practices that gave rise to Plaintiffs' allegations" and "meaningfully enhanced its ability to restrict and monitor how third parties acquire and use Facebook users' information."

The proposed settlement does not admit any wrongdoing and must still be approved by a judge in the Northern District of California.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

About 1Mln Americans Face Power Outages Due to Severe Weather Ahead of Christmas

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) – Strong winds, heavy rains and cold weather have caused power outages in the eastern and some other parts of the United States, affecting about 1 million people, the Poweroutage.com web portal reported on Friday.

More than 500,000 people have no electricity in the states of Connecticut, North Carolina and Georgia. Another 160,000 are experiencing the same problem in Texas and South Carolina. In 17 other states, from 11,000 to 50,000 people are facing power outages, according to the portal.

The US National Weather Service warned that 200 million people, or roughly 60% of the US population, are under winter weather warnings or advisories across the country. "Historic winter storm to produce widespread disruptions to large portions of the nation heading into the holiday weekend," the warning said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Fed's Main Inflation Indicator at 5.5% on Year in November - Commerce Department

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve's preferred inflation gauge, the Personal Consumption Expenditures Index, grew 5.5% during the year to November, easing slightly from a previous rate of 6%, the Commerce Department said on Friday.

"From the same month one year ago, the PCE price index for November increased 5.5 percent. Prices for goods increased 6.1 percent and prices for services increased 5.2 percent. Food prices increased 11.2 percent and energy prices increased 13.6 percent," the department's Bureau of Economic Analysis said in a statement.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Over 4,000 US Flights Canceled, Delayed Due to Severe Winter Weather - Tracker

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) – More than 4,000 US flights were canceled or delayed on Friday due to severe winter weather in most of the country, the FlightAware.com portal reported.

"Total cancellations within, into, or out of the United States today: 3,315," the tracker said. Another 1,400 flights were delayed, it added.

Well over 300 flights were canceled in such airports as LaGuardia near New York City, Seattle-Tacoma International in the state of Washington, as well as in Detroit and both airports in Chicago.

In the US capital area, more than 170 flights, or almost 20%, were canceled in the Reagan National Airport. Almost 140 flights were canceled in two other airports in the region – Baltimore-Washington and Dulles International.

The National Weather Service (NWS) issued a warning about heavy snow, strong winds and life-threatening cold for the central and eastern US.

"A powerful winter storm and sharp cold front will continue to produce snow from the Midwest and Ohio Valley through the Great Lakes and interior Northeast into this weekend. The combination of very cold temperatures and gusty to high winds over much of the central and eastern U.S. will continue dangerous wind chill temperatures behind the sharp cold front.

Flooding is possible in the Northeast," the warning read.

Over 200 million people, or roughly 60% of the US population, are under winter weather warnings or advisories across the country, it added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

RPT - ANALYSIS - US Faces Uphill Battle Against China's Rare-Earth Dominance

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The US will be hard-pressed to break its rare earth dependence on China in the near future, a reliance the Biden administration has deemed a national security threat, due to steep regulatory hurdles along with a lack of capabilities and technologies, the types of which Beijing has been developing for more than three decades, experts told Sputnik.

China has a virtual monopoly on nearly all of the 17 rare earth elements (REEs) on the periodic table - critical minerals used in a wide-range of advanced applications, some of which are indispensable for developing green technology like electric vehicle motors. The US Geological Survey (USGS) listed sixteen of the REEs among 50 critical minerals - critical being defined as essential to US economic and national security and highly vulnerable to supply disruption. The Biden administration has allocated or invested billions on developing critical mineral capabilities with demand for some metals expected to rise as much as 400% in the next two decades amid the green transition.

A US State Department official in early December said the US is looking at funding about a dozen mineral projects overseas to mine resources used in low-carbon technologies. The official said the United States will need an "exponential" amount of rare earths. The funding may come through a mineral security partnership program with about ten allies, including Australia, Canada, Japan, and the EU.

In terms of domestic production, the United States currently has one active rare-earth mine, owned and operated by MP Materials. However - the company must send 100% of the rare earth oxide (REO) mined to China for processing to deliver finished products.

Marina Zhang, an associate professor of research at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, believes the Asian giant's edge will not be easy to overcome. Beijing, she added, has developed massive capacity and technical capabilities that have allowed China to control 90% of rare earth metallic production and 85% of refined production. "China has clear structural advantages over its competitors, if any, for the next 10-15 years," Zhang told Sputnik. "Such advantages include lower mine and factory permit and licensing costs and timelines, and relatively lower labor and environmental costs, as well as advantages in talent and patent accumulations."

The US is particularly concerned with reliance on imports of Neodymium-Iron-Boron (NdFeB) permanent magnets used in critical products like electric vehicle (EV) motors and guided missile actuators. In September, the Commerce Department ruled that dependence on China for this product constituted a national security threat, but stopped short of imposing tariffs.

The Biden administration has invested at least \$200 million to boost domestic production to close this permanent magnet gap. MP Materials, which secured \$35 million of the funding, forecasted that it could produce the magnet - from cradle to grave - at a newly-built facility in Texas by the end of 2023.

Zhang, however, said even if MP Materials delivers NdFeB magnets, the US still lacks access and know-how to incorporate two key rare earth elements - terbium (Tb) and dysprosium (Dy) - which are necessary to ensure high heat resistance.

"Standard NdFeB magnets, without Tb or Dy, cannot be used in high-temperature applications such as EV drive motors, wind turbine motors, elevator motors, industrial robotics and advanced weapons systems," Zhang said. "No other country can make a high-temperature NdFeB magnet without Chinese inputs of separated Tb and Dy. China is, so far, the only source for a guaranteed, uninterrupted supply of high-energy NdFeB magnets."

Zhang also pointed out that if the Americans close the capability gap, they at some point will again face a dearth of raw rare earths.

"Another hurdle: US regulatory and permitting process for opening a new mine typically exceeds a decade or more, which will limit MP Materials, for example, to explore new mine sites," Zhang said.

The MP Materials mine in California sits on top of a mere 2.1 million tons of rare earth reserves while China has at least 44 million tons. The company, in its most recent quarterly filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), conceded there is a risk environmental regulations will impede development of resources.

Zhang also underscored that, as the US takes steps to enhance capabilities, China will not stand idly by.

"China will not stay still for its competitors to catch up," Zhang said. "Instead, it continues to use industrial policy to support both state-owned and private enterprises to strengthen its entire RE value chain, including preserving its RE reserves and developing technological capabilities in applications for high-end RE products, such as high-energy NdFeB magnets."

In addition to minerals, the US has fueled a trade war with China on the microchip front by blacklisting over 30 entities last week in a bid to deny them advanced equipment needed to make high-end semiconductors.

Professor Sunitha Raju of the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade in New Delhi told Sputnik that China could respond by indigenizing the entire microchip value chain and boosting its already-dominant position in the lower node chip domain. Moreover, a number of US tech giants might resist because they rely on China for a substantial portion of revenue, Raju added.

Raju also said China could "weaponize" its dominance in rare earth materials that are used for chip manufacturing. At that point, she warned, the US-Chinese trade confrontation could take an "ugly turn."

DEEPER SECURITY CONCERNS

In addition to the economic and supply chain impact, Washington is also worried about more sinister threats posed by Chinese critical minerals - especially those that can be found on thousands of US weapons systems.

Earlier this year, the Pentagon halted delivery of F-35 jets upon discovery that a subcontractor used a Chinese-origin rare earth magnet on an engine part.

In October, the Defense Department issued a waiver allowing Lockheed Martin to resume deliveries of the jets while setting about looking for alternative sources. The Pentagon confirmed that the component was not transmitting sensitive information back to China and did not affect the safety or airworthiness of the fighter jets.

The crisis prompted lawmakers to introduce a bill in early December that calls for investing \$1 billion to ensure the Pentagon secures "critical mineral independence" from China by 2027.

A member of the US Defense Policy Board, Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Michael O'Hanlon, indicated that although a full blown trade war with China is not necessary, caution should be taken with respect to security-related materials.

"It's not crucial that we decouple from China on basic commodities. I just wouldn't want exclusive sourcing from China," O'Hanlon told Sputnik. "On components, however, we don't want Chinese input in case it's doctored."

China has repeatedly pushed back against US anti-trade policies and rhetoric, accusing Washington of economic coercion, unfair market segregation, and hindering cooperation.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

REVIEW - Keystone Oil Spill Continues to Raise Questions as Cleanup Timeframe Unclear

WASHINGTON COUNTY, KANSAS, December 23 (Sputnik) - More than two weeks since the Keystone oil pipeline leaked into a creek in Kansas in what became one of the largest onshore crude disasters in US history, hundreds of workers continue to clean up the contaminated area and water, yet the completion date remains unclear, a Sputnik correspondent reported from the scene.

On December 7, approximately 14,000 barrels of oil leaked from the Keystone pipeline in Washington County, Kansas, according to Canadian operator TC Energy. The cause of the leak is still unknown, but the company continues to investigate and repair the damaged portion of the pipeline.

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said in a press release last week that the oil leaked from the ruptured pipeline was diluted bitumen, a heavy crude oil, which may be harder to recover because it tends to sink in water rather than float on the surface. Incoming colder weather may also impact recovery efforts, the agency said.

HUNDREDS WORKING NON-STOP

Washington County residents estimate that more than 500 people are taking part in the response efforts. Towards the end of the day, a string of cars arrive at a local gas station with a grocery store. The majority of people from these cars wear workers' uniforms.

In addition to the emergency responders from TC Energy, experts of EPA, as well as the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE) are working on the site, Randy Hubbard, Washington County's emergency management coordinator, told Sputnik.

"No negative impact to humans (drinking water, air, etc.). All other items mentioned are being monitored by the EPA and KDHE," Hubbard said.

The EPA also confirmed non-stop work in the area of the accident.

"As of Dec. 18, 5 p.m. CT, TC Energy has recovered an estimated 7,233 barrels of oil from the creek (13,877 barrels of oil and water). The recovery rates have the potential to slow by the upcoming cold weather in the area," Hubbard said.

As of Tuesday evening, the number of employees involved in the cleanup had reached 625 people, doubling in the last 10 days, the EPA said. TC Energy told Sputnik that the number of its employees on the site is about a third less.

"We have a team of over 400 onsite," the company said.

Meanwhile, it is impossible to get closer to the area since nearby roads are fenced off with signs saying "Road Closed." In addition, checkpoints with guards are seen in the area.

CAUSE STILL UNCLEAR

Two weeks have passed since the accident, but the cause still remains a mystery. Until now, neither the authorities nor the owner of the pipeline has announced even preliminary conclusions.

"TC Energy has not released that information," Hubbard said, when asked what could have caused such an extensive oil spill.

The company itself did not respond to Sputnik's inquiry about what led to the accident and referred it to the latest press releases.

However, whatever caused the latest accident was far from the first in a series of similar incidents.

"This is not the first spill from the Keystone 1 pipeline, which has a history of spills. In fact, this is the pipeline's 22nd spill, a dozen of which happened in its first year of operation alone and in 2017 one of these spills dumped more than 400,000 gallons of oil into farmland in South Dakota," environmental nonprofit Sierra Club said in a statement.

The pace of the recovery efforts could potentially slow down due to the coming cold weather, Hubbard said.

The Washington County emergency management coordinator said it is unknown how long the entire cleanup will take.

"Some say - 2 months, others - 6 months. Maybe even a year," a local resident told Sputnik, speaking on how long it might take.

Alongside uncertainty around the timeframe for the cleanup efforts, there are questions about the spill's possible environmental impact. While oil was prevented from spreading further by a protective barrier, local residents say that the smell of gas was present in the air. This information was confirmed by the Washington County Kansas Emergency Management.

"Many residents in and around Washington have reported waking to what smells like gas. We are aware of the situation. Residents are not in danger and the situation is being monitored. More details to come as we gain more information," the agency wrote on social media.

The organization confirmed that barriers had been installed to contain the oil spill.

"A dam was constructed within 12 hours across Mill Creek, in the area locally referred to as the low water bridge, constructed by the County under guidance from the oil company, KDHE and the EPA, to prevent the oil from moving downstream, and potentially into larger waterways," it added.

Hubbard said he is not yet aware of any allegations, complaints or lawsuits from local residents in connection with the accident.

Kansas State Rep. Lisa Moser said 14 farms were affected by the disaster.

"Another 9 indirectly affected. Instructions to make a claim have been clearly communicated to those affected by this situation... Impact on wildlife: 71 fish, 4 mammals. 1 beaver has succumbed after cleaning," she said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Germany Struggles to Produce Enough Ammo to Support Own Security, Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Germany is struggling to produce enough ammunitions to support Ukraine and its own military readiness due to industrial base issues, The Wall Street Journal reported citing German officials and industry leaders.

The report said on Thursday that Germany only has enough ammunition to last more than two weeks if it were to have a direct military confrontation with Russia today.

Germany's industrial base is hampered by a scarcity of skilled workers, supply chain bottlenecks, high costs of financing, lack of production capacity, and environmental regulations, the report said.

Germany's solution to its problem includes plans to expand its production across Europe, refurbishing a Soviet-era factory in Romania to produce NATO-standard artillery shells and Soviet-standard weapons used by Ukraine, according to the report. More details about the project could be announced by the end of December, the report added.

Ukrainian armed forces are using about 6,000 artillery shells a day and are running low on anti-aircraft missiles, the report said citing intelligence officials.

NATO members are required to have enough ammunitions in their stockpiles to last for at least 30 days of combat.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

ANALYSIS - US Faces Uphill Battle Against China's Rare-Earth Dominance

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The US will be hard-pressed to break its rare earth dependence on China in the near future, a reliance the Biden administration has deemed a national security threat, due to steep regulatory hurdles along with a lack of capabilities and technologies, the types of which Beijing has been developing for more than three decades, experts told Sputnik.

China has a virtual monopoly on nearly all of the 17 rare earth elements (REEs) on the periodic table - critical minerals used in a wide-range of advanced applications, some of which are indispensable for developing green technology like electric vehicle motors. The US Geological Survey (USGS) listed sixteen of the REEs among 50 critical minerals - critical being defined as essential to US economic and national security and highly vulnerable to supply disruption.

The Biden administration has allocated or invested billions on developing critical mineral capabilities with demand for some metals expected to rise as much as 400% in the next two decades amid the green transition.

A US State Department official in early December said the US is looking at funding about a dozen mineral projects overseas to mine resources used in low-carbon technologies. The official

said the United States will need an "exponential" amount of rare earths. The funding may come through a mineral security partnership program with about ten allies, including Australia, Canada, Japan, and the EU.

In terms of domestic production, the United States currently has one active rare-earth mine, owned and operated by MP Materials. However - the company must send 100% of the rare earth oxide (REO) mined to China for processing to deliver finished products.

Marina Zhang, an associate professor of research at the Australia-China Relations Institute, University of Technology Sydney, believes the Asian giant's edge will not be easy to overcome. Beijing, she added, has developed massive capacity and technical capabilities that have allowed China to control 90% of rare earth metallic production and 85% of refined production. "China has clear structural advantages over its competitors, if any, for the next 10-15 years," Zhang told Sputnik. "Such advantages include lower mine and factory permit and licensing costs and timelines, and relatively lower labor and environmental costs, as well as advantages in talent and patent accumulations."

The US is particularly concerned with reliance on imports of Neodymium-Iron-Boron (NdFeB) permanent magnets used in critical products like electric vehicle (EV) motors and guided missile actuators. In September, the Commerce Department ruled that dependence on China for this product constituted a national security threat, but stopped short of imposing tariffs.

The Biden administration has invested at least \$200 million to boost domestic production to close this permanent magnet gap. MP Materials, which secured \$35 million of the funding, forecasted that it could produce the magnet - from cradle to grave - at a newly-built facility in Texas by the end of 2023.

Zhang, however, said even if MP Materials delivers NdFeB magnets, the US still lacks access and know-how to incorporate two key rare earth elements - terbium (Tb) and dysprosium (Dy) - which are necessary to ensure high heat resistance.

"Standard NdFeB magnets, without Tb or Dy, cannot be used in high-temperature applications such as EV drive motors, wind turbine motors, elevator motors, industrial robotics and advanced weapons systems," Zhang said. "No other country can make a high-temperature NdFeB magnet without Chinese inputs of separated Tb and Dy. China is, so far, the only source for a guaranteed, uninterrupted supply of high-energy NdFeB magnets."

Zhang also pointed out that if the Americans close the capability gap, they at some point will again face a dearth of raw rare earths.

"Another hurdle: US regulatory and permitting process for opening a new mine typically exceeds a decade or more, which will limit MP Materials, for example, to explore new mine sites," Zhang said.

The MP Materials mine in California sits on top of a mere 2.1 million tons of rare earth reserves while China has at least 44 million tons. The company, in its most recent quarterly filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), conceded there is a risk environmental regulations will impede development of resources.

Zhang also underscored that, as the US takes steps to enhance capabilities, China will not stand idly by.

"China will not stay still for its competitors to catch up," Zhang said. "Instead, it continues to use industrial policy to support both state-owned and private enterprises to strengthen its entire RE

value chain, including preserving its RE reserves and developing technological capabilities in applications for high-end RE products, such as high-energy NdFeB magnets."

In addition to minerals, the US has fueled a trade war with China on the microchip front by blacklisting over 30 entities last week in a bid to deny them advanced equipment needed to make high-end semiconductors.

Professor Sunitha Raju of the Indian Institute of Foreign Trade in New Delhi told Sputnik that China could respond by indigenizing the entire microchip value chain and boosting its already-dominant position in the lower node chip domain. Moreover, a number of US tech giants might resist because they rely on China for a substantial portion of revenue, Raju added. Raju also said China could "weaponize" its dominance in rare earth materials that are used for chip manufacturing. At that point, she warned, the US-Chinese trade confrontation could take an "ugly turn."

DEEPER SECURITY CONCERNS

In addition to the economic and supply chain impact, Washington is also worried about more sinister threats posed by Chinese critical minerals - especially those that can be found on thousands of US weapons systems.

Earlier this year, the Pentagon halted delivery of F-35 jets upon discovery that a subcontractor used a Chinese-origin rare earth magnet on an engine part.

In October, the Defense Department issued a waiver allowing Lockheed Martin to resume deliveries of the jets while setting about looking for alternative sources. The Pentagon confirmed that the component was not transmitting sensitive information back to China and did not affect the safety or airworthiness of the fighter jets.

The crisis prompted lawmakers to introduce a bill in early December that calls for investing \$1 billion to ensure the Pentagon secures "critical mineral independence" from China by 2027.

A member of the US Defense Policy Board, Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Michael O'Hanlon, indicated that although a full blown trade war with China is not necessary, caution should be taken with respect to security-related materials.

"It's not crucial that we decouple from China on basic commodities. I just wouldn't want exclusive sourcing from China," O'Hanlon told Sputnik. "On components, however, we don't want Chinese input in case it's doctored."

China has repeatedly pushed back against US anti-trade policies and rhetoric, accusing Washington of economic coercion, unfair market segregation, and hindering cooperation.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Pentagon Considers Training Ukrainian Forces on Patriot System in US - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States is considering training Ukrainian forces to use the Patriot air-defense system at a military base in the United States, Politico reported, citing two US defense officials.

The report said on Thursday that the decision to conduct training in the United States rather than in a third country in Europe is because of the weapon system's sophistication that requires several months of training.

A Patriot - the most advanced air defense system in the United States' arsenal - takes about 90 troops to operate, the report said.

If the United States decides to conduct training in the United States, Ukrainian forces will likely be stationed at Fort Sill in the state of Oklahoma, the report also said.

The United States will likely deliver a Patriot battery it has in its stockpile instead of relocating one that is already deployed, the report added.

On Wednesday, the Biden administration announced a new \$1.85 billion security package for Ukraine that includes one Patriot air defense system.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Historic Winter Storm Sweeping Across US Puts 200M In Under Alerts - Weather Service

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - A record winter storm with perilously cold temperatures and strong winds moved across the western and central US and has about 60 percent of the population under weather alerts ahead of the Christmas weekend, the National Weather Service (NWS) said in an advisory.

"As of Thursday afternoon, over 200 million people in the US are under some form of winter weather warning or advisory. This includes nearly 177 million for wind chill warnings or advisories, 11 million for blizzard warning, 65 million for winter storm warnings, and 500 thousand for ice storm warnings," the NWS said.

The NWS said the current situation represents "one of the greatest extents of winter weather warnings and advisories ever."

According to several media reports, the arctic blasts are sparking the formation of a "bomb cyclone" in and around the Midwest and Great Lakes.

The temperature has dropped to -30 degrees Fahrenheit in some areas of Montana, with the wind chill bringing it down to as low as -46F, according to reports from residents.

The historic winter storm will produce widespread disruptions to large portions of the US, the release said, with the powerful arctic front expected to sweep across the eastern third of the nation next.

NWS Boulder said the temperature drop from of 37F - from 42 degrees Fahrenheit to 5 degrees - might be the biggest one hour drop recorded by the area's Automated Surface Observing Systems (ASOS).

"Widespread record low maximum temperature are possible Friday from the Lower Mississippi Valley, northeastward into the Tennessee and Ohio Valleys and stretching across large sections of the east from the Southeast, through the Southern to Central Appalachians and into the Mid-Atlantic on Friday," the release added.

The storm has caused havoc on the holiday travel front. Over 2,200 flights have been canceled ahead of the Christmas holiday weekend within, into, or out of the United States, according to FlightAware.com, with 7,600 total delays.

School districts across the country – including in Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Colorado, Nebraska, Virginia and Maryland – announced closings made to prepare for unsafe winter conditions.

Earlier in the day, President Joe Biden implored those who would face the threat posed by "dangerous, threatening" weather to pay attention to warnings from local weather forecasters, first responders and elected officials. In remarks shortly before a briefing with officials from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the National Weather Service, he cautioned Americans.

"I encourage everyone, everyone to please heed the local warnings. We've tried to contact 26 governors so far in affected regions. Go to weather.gov for more information," said Biden before briefing in the Oval Office. "This is not like a snow day when you were a kid. This is serious stuff."

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Raytheon Wins Order to Sell 290 More AIM Missiles to US Military - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Raytheon Missile and Defense has won a more than \$317 million US Navy contract extension to produce 290 more AIM-9X tactical missiles, the Defense Department announced.

"Raytheon Missile and Defense [of] Tucson, Arizona is awarded a \$317,415,034 modification ...contract ...for the production and delivery of AIM-9X production Lot 23," the Defense Department said in a press release on Thursday.

The contract extension procures 290 AIM-9X Block II All Up Round Tactical Missiles, including 160 for the US Air Force, 12 for the Army and 118 for foreign military sales, the release added. The contract will also include 146 Block II Captive Air Training Missiles; 178 All Up Round Containers; and 13 spare Advanced Optical Target Detectors and other equipment, according to the release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Florida Supreme Court Approves Governor's Petition to Probe COVID-19 Vaccines - Order

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The Florida Supreme Court has approved a request to impanel a grand jury to investigate criminal and wrongful activity related to the development and distribution of messenger-RNA (mRNA) COVID-19 vaccines, according to an order published by the court.

"A statewide grand jury shall be promptly impaneled for a term of twelve calendar months, to run from the date of impanelment, with jurisdiction throughout the State of Florida, to investigate crime, return indictments, make presentments, and otherwise perform all functions of a grand jury with regard to the offenses stated herein," the order said on Thursday.

On December 13, Florida Governor Robert DeSantis submitted a petition saying there are good and sufficient reasons to deem it to be in the public interest to impanel a statewide grand jury to investigate criminal or wrongful activity in Florida relating to the development, promotion and distribution of vaccines purported to prevent COVID-19 infection, symptoms and transmission. DeSantis also said it is impossible that so many influential individuals, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, came to the same view that mRNA vaccines can prevent the spread of the COVID-19 disease without any incentive to create such perceptions without a financial gain.

The jury will be drawn from five judicial circuits and Honorable Ronald Ficarrotta will be presiding over it, according to the order.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Biden Makes Christmas Plea for Unity, 'Fresh Start' Between US Political Parties

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden delivered a Christmas speech urging Americans to unite behind shared national identity this holiday season in an effort to ease political tensions between Democrats and Republicans.

"My hope this Christmas season is that we take a few moments of quiet reflection... and really look at each other, not as Democrats and Republicans, not as members of team red or team blue, but as who we really are: fellow Americans," Biden said on Thursday. "I hope this Christmas season marks a fresh start for our nation, because there is much that unites us as Americans, so much more that unites us than divides us."

Biden said the story of Christmas and the message of hope it delivers are particularly important in tough times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic of the last few years. The US president called on Americans to look out "for" one another instead of "at" one another.

Following the holiday season, the new session of the US Congress will begin, marking the beginning of the second half of Biden's term as president. Although Biden assumed office with Democrats in control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate, Republicans took control of the lower chamber of Congress during midterm elections in November.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Blinken Thanks Cavusoglu for Turkey's Efforts to Extend Grain Exports Deal - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a phone call with his Turkish counterpart, Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, expressed appreciation for Ankara's efforts to extend the Black Sea grain deal, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a statement.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu. Secretary Blinken thanked the Foreign Minister for his government's efforts to ensure the continuation of the UN-brokered Black Sea Grain Initiative," the statement said on Thursday.

Blinken also expressed his concern over the situation in Syria and underscored the importance of NATO unity amid Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the statement added.

On July 22, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and the United Nations reached a deal to provide a humanitarian maritime corridor for food and fertilizer exports via the Black Sea. However, Russian President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly said that most vessels carrying Ukrainian grain do not reach the world's poorest countries and have ended up in Europe. Putin has also voiced concerns that Russian grain and fertilizer products are not entering the global markets as stipulated by the agreement.

The grain deal, originally scheduled to expire on November 18, has been extended for another 120 days.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

FTX Founder Bankman-Fried to Be Released on \$250Mln Recognizance Bond - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US federal judge Gabriel Gorenstein released FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried on a \$250 million bond while he awaits his next court hearing on fraud charges in early January, CNBC reported.

The report said on Thursday that Gorenstein ordered Bankman-Fried to be placed under strict supervision at his parents' home in California.

Last week, the US Justice Department announced charges against the 30-year-old Bankman-Fried.

Bankman-Fried is accused of conspiring to defraud crypto investors of billions of dollars in a scheme that is said to have led to FTX's downfall last month.

The US Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York's Securities and Commodities Fraud Task Force is handling the case. The charges against Bankman-Fried could land him in prison for up to 115 years. He has denied any wrongdoing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) -

SITUATION IN UKRAINE

- * Russia will strive to end the conflict in Ukraine - the sooner the better, President Vladimir Putin said on Friday.
- * Russia would be able to crack the US-supplied Patriot air-defense missile system, Putin said.
- * Not all mechanisms of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) operate after the COVID-19 restrictions and sanctions on any military contacts also complicate the situation, Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Valery Gerasimov said.
- * Kiev is blocking the resumption of supplies of Russian ammonia, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

ENERGY MARKETS

- * Gas in Europe ended trading on Thursday down 5.8% to \$1,009.4 per thousand cubic meters, declining for fifth day of decline in a row, according to the ICE exchange.
- * The European Union finally adopted a mechanism for correcting the gas market with a floating price limit, the EU Council said.
- * The introduction of a gas price cap is an attempt at administrative regulation, and if it violates Gazprom's contracts, Russia reserves the right to retaliate, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

US SPENDING BILL

- * The US Senate passed a \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill on Thursday to fund the government in fiscal year 2023 and avoid a shutdown before Congress breaks for the winter holidays.

WESTERN SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- * The United States will impose new sanctions on Russian private military company Wagner Group in the coming weeks, NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.
- * The United States has imposed sanctions on another 10 Russian entities, including technology companies and research institutes, the Office of Foreign Assets Control said.
- * The finance ministers of G7 countries issued a joint statement, saying that Western sanctions are not targeting Russia's food exports.

RUSSIA-ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN TALKS

- * A meeting of Russian, Armenian and Azerbaijani foreign ministers on the preparation of a peace treaty was planned for December 23, but Yerevan refused to partake in the talks, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Thursday.
- * Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has discussed the situation in blocked the Lachin corridor with his Azerbaijani counterpart, Jeyhun Bayramov, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- * Russian peacekeepers are carrying out their mission to control the Lachin corridor, work is underway to resolve the escalation, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Senate Passes \$1.7 Trillion Spending Bill With \$45 Billion in New Ukraine Military Aid

(Updates with more details, background in paras 5-9)

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US Senate passed a \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill on Thursday to fund the work of the government in fiscal year 2023 and avoid a shutdown before Congress breaks for the winter holidays.

Senators passed the 4,155-page bill in a vote of 68-29, sending the bill to the House of Representatives for consideration. It was the Senate's final vote of the 117th Congress.

The omnibus authorizes approximately \$1.7 trillion in spending for 2023, including \$858 billion in defense funding, as well as \$45 billion in Ukrainian military aid. Senators also included a measure allowing seized Russian funds to be transferred for use by Ukraine.

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

However, some House Republicans, including leader Kevin McCarthy, have expressed opposition to the omnibus. The lawmakers contend that Congress should instead pass another short-term continuing resolution to fund the government so that the new Congress, during which Republicans will hold the House, can draft a comprehensive budget.

The House Republicans standing in opposition to the bill have threatened to impede the legislative efforts of any member of Congress who votes for it when the party takes control of the lower chamber next year.

The bill also received pushback from Republicans in the Senate, including Rand Paul, who expressed concerns about the legislation's impact on the US national debt, as well as about how quickly lawmakers were compelled to pass it.

However, the omnibus was backed by Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, who considered the bill's defense funding a priority.

On Wednesday evening, Congress heard from Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who spoke in favor of further US security assistance for Ukraine and thanked the lawmakers for the tens of billions of dollars that the United States had already provided.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Senate Passes \$1.7 Trillion Spending Bill With \$45 Billion in New Ukraine Military Aid

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US Senate passed a \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill on Thursday to fund the government in fiscal year 2023 and avoid a shutdown before Congress breaks for the winter holidays.

Senators passed the 4,155-page bill in a vote of 68-29, sending the bill to the House of Representatives for consideration. It was the Senate's final vote of the 117th Congress.

The omnibus authorizes approximately \$1.7 trillion in spending for 2023, including \$858 billion in defense funding, as well as \$45 billion in Ukrainian military aid. Senators also included a measure allowing seized Russian funds to be transferred for use by Ukraine.

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

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

UN Regularly in Touch With Russian Officials on Ukraine, Focuses on Grain Deal - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United Nations confirms that it remains in contact with high-ranking Russian officials regarding the conflict in Ukraine, but focuses mainly on the issue of grain and fertilizer, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"The short answer is yes - on the broader issues - notably on the grain, the initiative on the fertilizer," Dujarric said during a press briefing when asked if the United Nations is in touch with Russian representatives regarding Ukraine.

Dujarric said senior UN officials, especially Rebecca Grynspan and Martin Griffiths, are in touch regularly with relevant Russian government representatives, while UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres often calls Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia as well as Russian officials in Moscow.

However, Dujarric said there will likely not be any meetings before the end of the year.

On Tuesday, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Vershinin said talks on the grain exports deal with United Nations representatives will be held in-person in January.

The grain exports deal, originally scheduled to expire on November 19, was renewed for another 120 days. It is part of a United Nations- and Turkey-brokered agreement that enables exports of Ukrainian and Russian grain and fertilizer via the Black Sea.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Military Losing Personnel With Advanced Cyber Skills, Training Inadequate - Report

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US armed forces are losing too many personnel trained to operate with cyber systems and its programs to prepare the number of experts it needs are inaccurate and patchy, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report on Thursday.

"Military personnel who complete advanced cyber training - which may take a year or more and costs [the Department of Defense] hundreds of thousands of dollars - may not remain in the military for a significant time after training," the report said.

GAO investigators discovered that two of the four US military services were not positioned to ensure any adequate return on their investment in advanced cyber training, the report said.

"While the Navy and Air Force require three years of active duty, the Marine Corps has no guidance for this area and Army guidance does not clearly define active duty service obligations," the report added.

Army officials told the investigators that they lacked the information needed to calculate and implement service obligations for the necessary cyber training because it was not specifically listed in Army guidance, according to the report.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Senate Approves Omnibus Amendment Allowing Transfer of Seized Russian Funds to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday approved an amendment from Sen. Lindsey Graham to the \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill that would allow seized Russian assets to be transferred to Ukraine.

The Senate adopted the measure by voice vote as part of consideration of a series of amendments to the omnibus, which lawmakers are seeking to pass by the end of the week. Congress must fund the government by Friday or risk a shutdown.

The \$1.7 trillion omnibus bill authorizes \$858 billion in defense funding, as well as \$45 billion for Ukrainian security.

Graham and other colleagues initially intended to include approval for the transfer of seized Russian assets as part of the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, passed by Congress earlier this month.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Senate Rejects 2 Bids to Keep Border Expulsion Policy in Place Amid Crisis

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday rejected two measures that would keep in place Title 42 border expulsion policy, which is somewhat limiting the surge of illegal migrants arriving on the US southern border with Mexico.

The US Senate voted 47-50 to defeat Republican Senator Mike Lee's amendment to the \$1.7 trillion spending package that would withhold funds from the Department of Homeland Security until the Title 42 pandemic-era border policy is reinstated.

The US Senate also rejected a second bid to keep Title 42 in place, this time from Independent Senator Kyrsten Sinema and Democrat Senator Jon Tester.

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 their 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.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

IS Has Capability to Conduct Attacks in Iraq, Syria Despite Significant Losses - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States and its counterterror coalition partners have significantly degraded the Islamic State (banned in Russia), but the terror group still has capabilities to undertake attacks in the Middle East, US Central Command (CENTCOM) chief Gen. Michael Kurilla said on Thursday.

"While ISIS [Islamic State] is significantly degraded in Iraq and Syria, the group does maintain the capability to conduct operations in the region," Kurilla said during a telephonic press briefing. The CENTCOM chief acknowledged that the Islamic State has been able to maintain its propaganda and spread its violent ideology.

"The violent ideology remains uncontained and unconstrained," Kurilla said.

Kurilla announced that CENTCOM will release next week the full report of its actions against the Islamic State, which includes the full tally of operations, raids and detentions of terrorists.

"This will cover all of the operations," he added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Soyuz MS-22 Leak Caused by Untraceable Debris, Too Small to be Detected - Roscosmos

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The debris that caused the leak on the Soyuz MS-22 spacecraft was too small to be tracked, the Executive Director of Human Space Flight Programs for Roscosmos, Sergei Krikalev, said on Thursday.

"Too small", Krikalev said when asked if the debris that caused the damages on the Soyuz MS-22 spacecraft trackable.

His answer was seconded by the International Space Station (ISS) program manager, Joel Montalbano.

"Too small. Yes, I agree," he said.

NASA and Roscosmos are in constant communications, Montalbano added.

"The teams are going back and forth. We're constantly exchanging data," Montalbano said.

Initial suspicion that the leak might have been caused by debris from a nearby meteor shower were set aside once Houston and Moscow came to the conclusion it was not a possible cause, considering their trajectory, Montalbano continued.

On December 15, a depressurization of the cooling system of the Soyuz MS-22 spacecraft docked to the station was discovered. The cosmonauts were ordered to postpone the spacewalk for the second time in the last 30 days.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Condemns Russian Military Group Wagner for Using N. Korean Weapons in Ukraine - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns the Russian mercenary group Wagner for using weapons from North Korea (DPRK) in Ukraine, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield said on Thursday.

"It is despicable that Russia, a permanent member of the UN Security Council, is now using weapons procured from the DPRK and Iran - in violation of UN Security Council resolutions - to pursue its war of aggression against Ukraine," Thomas-Greenfield has said in a statement. The US ambassador said North Korea has completed arms deliveries to the Russian private military group Wagner, which has its fighters deployed on the front lines in Ukraine. Earlier on Thursday, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby confirmed the United States' knowledge about weapons deliveries from North Korea. 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.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Roscosmos to Move Soyuz MS-23 Mission From March to Late February Amid Leak - NASA

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - Roscosmos decided it will send its Soyuz MS-23 mission to the International Space Station (ISS) about three weeks earlier than scheduled International Space Station Program Manager Joel Montalbano said on Thursday.

On December 15, a leak from the spacecraft's cooling system occurred due to damage to the outer skin of the ship's instrument and assembly compartment.

"Right now we're scheduled for the rotation that occur in the March timeframe, Roscosmos is looking to move that up to two weeks, three weeks, they're looking at late February," Montalbano said during a conference call.

It hasn't been decided if the Soyuz MS-23 mission will be sent to the ISS without a crew, Montalbano said.

Roscosmos Human Space Flight Programs Executive Director Sergey Krikalev said they are still conducting an analysis to see if the damaged Soyuz MS-22 vehicle can be used for reentry. Moreover, Krikalev said the force from the leak is too small to cause any control issues. He added that the debris that caused the damage to the spacecraft was too small to track.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US House Expecting to Pass Omnibus Spending Bill on Friday Morning - Pelosi

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The House of Representatives is expecting to complete all the formal procedures to sign the omnibus spending or appropriations bill to fund all US government activities through the coming fiscal year into law on Friday morning, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said on Thursday.

"I think it is tomorrow [Friday - when the bill will be finally passed], but it could be tomorrow morning," Pelosi said during a press conference on Capitol Hill.

US senators have already reached a deal to ensure the passage of the \$1.75 trillion funding bill ahead of a Friday deadline to avert a partial shutdown of the federal government, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said earlier on Thursday. But Pelosi cautioned there were still a number of lengthy procedures that the House had to perform to complete all the necessary constitutional procedures.

"It takes a number of hours until we have the bill. We cannot signal a rules committee meeting [until receiving formal confirmation from the Senate]. It requires an hour's notice. They're still waiting for it to come from the Senate. [Then] It's a question of the amendments. There are 15 or so amendments and probably five or six have a chance to be passed," she said.

The bill includes \$858 billion in defense funding as well as \$45 billion for Ukrainian military aid. and President Joe Biden must sign the bill by Friday at midnight to avoid a partial government shutdown.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Has No Plans to Speak With Putin in Near Future - Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States does not envision speaking to the Russian President Vladimir Putin in the near future, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.

"There are no plans to speak with President Putin about this in the near future," Kirby said during a press conference.

The United States would be only willing to meet if there is a very serious offer and only after consulting with Ukraine, Kirby added.

On Wednesday, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited Washington for a meeting with US President Joe Biden and his national security team to discuss a range of pressing issues, including battlefield strategy, energy needs and sanctions. Later on Wednesday, Zelenskyy also delivered an address to a joint session of Congress.

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 and other aid to Ukraine worth tens of billions of dollars.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

White House's Kirby Says Russia Does Not Get Veto on US Arms Deliveries to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday that no country, including Russia, gets a veto over what military equipment the United States provides Ukraine.

"We have been mindful of escalation concerns in the past and we will be going forward, but nobody gets a veto on what we provide Ukraine, and that includes Russia," Kirby said during a press briefing.

The statement comes following the announcement of a new \$1.85 billion security assistance package for Ukraine, which includes advanced Patriot surface-to-air missiles for the first time – a weapons system Russia has warned against delivering.

On Wednesday, US President Joe Biden claimed that the systems serve a defensive purpose and should not be considered escalatory.

The US will train Ukrainian forces on the Patriot system in a third-party country, which is expected to take several months, according to a senior defense official.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US to Announce New Sanctions Against Russia's Wagner Group in Coming Weeks - Kirby (Edits dateline and lede, adds background and details in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States will impose further sanctions on Russia's private military company Wagner Group in the coming weeks due to their involvement in the special military operation in Ukraine, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.

"In the coming weeks, we are going to announce further sanctions against Wagner and its support networks around the world," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has increasingly turned to Wagner Group for operations in Ukraine, particularly in the battle for Bakhmut, according to Kirby. The US estimates approximately 50,000 Wagner Group personnel are operating in Ukraine, Kirby said.

Moreover, the influence of Wagner Group founder Yevgeny Prigozhin is expanding, emerging as a rival power center to the Russian military and other ministries, Kirby said.

Wagner Group is searching around the world for arms suppliers, Kirby also said. North Korea recently completed an arms delivery to Wagner Group, with more expected in the future, Kirby said.

Wagner Group and Prigozhin have been the targets of previous US government actions, including a Commerce Department designation for the company as a Russian military end-user and a \$10 million offer from the State Department for information on alleged interference by Prigozhin in US elections.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

New US Sanctions Will Target 10 Russian Naval Entities - State Dept.

(Updates with more details in paras 1-6, changes attribution, lede)

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on ten Russian naval entities participating in the country's defence and economic marine sectors, the US Department of State said in a statement on Thursday.

"The Department of State is designating ten Russian naval entities. This action imposes severe costs on Russia's defense establishment in response to [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's unprovoked war of choice in Ukraine," the statement said.

The State Department has consequently imposed sanctions on six entities from Russia's defense marine sector, the statement said.

The companies include the battery manufacturer Rigel, Central Institute for Scientific Research Elektropribor, Aurora Scientific and Production Association, Morinformsystem Agat, Central Research Institute of Structural Materials Prometey and the Central Research Institute of Marine Engineering, the statement said.

Four other entities have been sanctioned for operating in Russia's marine economic sector, the statement also said.

Those are the P.P. Shirshov Institute of Oceanology of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Technopole, Obukhovskoye, and the Marine Bridge and Navigation Systems LTD, the statement added.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US to Announce New Sanctions Against Russia's Wagner Group in Coming Weeks - Kirby

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States will impose new sanctions on Russian private military company Wagner Group in the coming weeks, NSC Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Thursday.

"In the coming weeks, we are going to announce further sanctions actions against Wagner and its support networks around the world," Kirby told a briefing.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

State Department Inspector General Says US Oversight of Ukraine Aid Limited, Risks Fraud

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States' oversight of military aid to Ukraine is limited by the operational environment, risking fraud and mismanagement of assistance, the State Department Office of Inspector General (OIG) said on Thursday.

"Without the military support embassies in conflict settings have frequently relied upon for logistical and security assistance, Mission Ukraine experiences these restrictions in a particularly acute manner," the OIG report said. "In addition, typical approaches to required end-use monitoring of defense and law enforcement materials were reportedly limited, as kinetic military activity and active combat create an environment in which standard verification is difficult or impossible."

US officials were advised during visits to Ukraine that direct observation of program activities is challenging to arrange, and only possible outside of Kiev in rare instances, the OIG said.

The challenges to monitoring efforts in Ukraine carry significant risks for the State Department, because weak oversight exposes programs to mismanagement and fraud, the OIG said.

Mismanagement and fraud are of particular concern in Ukraine, which ranked in the bottom third in the 2021 global corruption perception index, the OIG added.

The OIG recommended documenting and communicating transparently about current monitoring efforts, including whether and how they differ from standard practices. The government watchdog also recommended considering third-party monitoring contracts to increase visibility into US programs.

The OIG report comes following the release of a new \$1.85 billion security assistance package for Ukraine, and as Congress considers a \$1.7 trillion omnibus spending bill that includes \$45 billion for Ukrainian security.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

New US Sanctions Target 10 Russian Entities - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – The United States has imposed sanctions on another 10 Russian entities, including technology companies and research institutes, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said on Thursday.

The list of the sanctioned entities includes Concern Morinformsystem Agat, Battery Company Rigel, Central Research Institute of Marine Engineering, Concern Avrora Scientific and Production Association, Concern Central Institute for Scientific Research Elektropribor, and Marine Bridge and Navigation Systems among others, OFAC said in a press release.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Over 3,000 US Flights Canceled, Delayed Due to Weather - Tracker

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – Over 3,000 US flights were canceled or delayed on Thursday, just three days before Christmas Day, the FlightAware.com portal reported on Thursday.

"Total cancellations within, into, or out of the United States today: 1,445," the portal said. Another 1,631 flights were delayed, it added.

Most of the changes in the schedule occurred in Chicago. Chicago O'Hare International Airport had to cancel almost 460 and postpone more than 90 flights. More than 200 flights were canceled in Chicago Midway International Airport.

The US National Weather Service issued a warning for most of the United States for the next few days. "Powerful winter storm to produce widespread disruptive and potentially crippling impacts across the central and eastern United States," it said.

The eastern part of the country will face "record-breaking cold and life-threatening wind chills" by Friday, while some areas in Oregon and Washington states should expect freezing rain, the statement added. "Widespread Wind Chill Warnings, Watches and Advisories span across over 30 states from Washington to Florida," the weather service warned.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

US Economy Grew 3.2% in Q3, Likely Keeping Fed on Track With Rate Hikes - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US economy grew at a faster-than-expected pace in the third quarter, with the final reading for gross domestic product (GDP) in the period showing an annualized expansion rate of 3.2% versus the estimated 2.9%, the Commerce Department reported on Thursday.

GDP expanded at an annual rate of just 0.6% in the second quarter after a contraction of 1.6% in the first quarter, making the third quarter growth more significant. For economists, it was a sign that the United States was on solid footing versus the notion that the country was headed for a recession. Conventionally, two straight quarters of negative growth means an economy is in recession.

While the latest GDP reading was welcome news to financial markets, the stronger performance also meant that the Federal Reserve will likely keep up with the pace of rate hikes it has established since the first quarter to rein in inflation that reached 40-year highs in 2022.

"The sense is that higher GDP raises the odds that the Fed will follow through on rate hikes," economist Adam Button said in a post on the ForexLive forum.

The report on the GDP came a day after the Conference Board said the US consumer confidence index gauge jumped to 108.3 in December from a previous 101.4. Consumer activity makes up for about 70% of the US economy.

US inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, expanded by 7.7% during the year to October, growing at its slowest pace of in nine months after hitting a four-decade high of 9.1% during the 12 months to June.

The drop came after relentless interest rate hikes by the Fed, which has added 375 basis points to rates since March. Prior to that, rates peaked at just 25 basis points, as the central bank slashed them to nearly zero after the global COVID-19 outbreak in 2020.

Despite such aggressive rate hikes, inflation remains more than three times higher than levels preferred by the central bank, which has vowed to get it back to its 2% target.