

1/4/23 Wednesday

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Cristiano Ronaldo Banned From Making Debut for Saudi Arabia's Al-Nassr
By - Mary Manley

The Portuguese football legend is reportedly being punished for smashing an Everton fan's phone while he was playing for Manchester United. The 37-year-old was found guilty of improper and violent conduct and ordered to cough up a \$60,282 fine and was suspended for two games by the England Football Association (FA).

Newly surfaced reports have indicated football superstar Cristiano Ronaldo will be unavailable to make his official debut for Saudi Arabia's Al-Nassr club on Thursday as he's expected to serve out a two-match ban.

The ban was handed down by the FA after Ronaldo smacked a cellphone out of the hand of an Everton fan at a match in April between Everton and Manchester United, his former club. The 14-year-old fan's mother said his hand had been left "bruised," and that he was "in complete shock" due to Ronaldo's outburst. The boy was also reportedly autistic.

Ronaldo had apologized for his reaction and attempted to make reparations with the boy and his mother. The FA instead moved ahead and handed down their punishment with a \$60,282 fine and a two-game suspension.

Ronaldo failed to earlier serve out the game suspensions on account of him abruptly leaving the English club. According to the Daily Mail, the athlete will now have to serve that ban under Al-Nassr in coordination with Article 12.1 of FIFA's Regulations on the Status of Players.

During an independent FA panel chaired by Christopher Quinlan KC, which found Ronaldo guilty of a "deliberate and forceful slap down," Ronaldo explained he was injured by a heavy tackle late into the match but remained on the field, and when Manchester United players were leaving the field and walking through a tunnel they were met by an aggressive fanbase.

Ronaldo said he noticed an arm pointing out towards his injured leg and saw that the arm was "holding an object" but that he didn't see it was a cellphone. Without realizing who the arm belonged to, he slapped the "object away" adding it was "an instinctively proactive reaction." When he found out the arm belonged to a teenage boy he reached out to the mother to apologize.

"It is clear to us that the spectator posed no actual or perceived threat to the player. The player could simply have walked around him or ignored him. He was walking slowly and calmly, as were the other players. Nobody appeared to act as if under threat. It was an atmosphere he would not be unfamiliar with," the FA panel said of Ronaldo in a statement.

"Instead, he moved his shin guard from his left to right hand and slapped down hard upon the spectator's hand. We have little doubt this was an act born of frustration and annoyance rather than fear or concern for his well-being."

Though Ronaldo's first game for Al-Nassr won't be until the [21st of January](#), Al-Nassr won't hold back from parading their new star player's image over their next two games.

More than 5,000 shirts with Ronaldo's name and number sold in just 24 hours from Al-Nassr's store. His image has also been plastered on billboards across Riyadh as he has been outfitted with an around-the-clock security detail, perhaps not only becoming Al-Nassr's biggest celebrity, but the city's as well.

While currently banned from playing, he did change into his new club's uniform and demonstrate his talents for 28,000 fans on Monday night, with the money from ticket sales reportedly going to charity.

Ronaldo was unveiled as Al Nassr's new player after rumors of the acquisition circled the media for weeks. Ronaldo and Al Nassr officially announced their partnership last [Friday](#), with the team reportedly paying the star over \$200 million a year. His fanfare sold out all 28,000 seats for the match against Al Ta'ee for Thursday.

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Prince Harry Says His Brother Physically Attacked Him in Upcoming Book 'Spare'
By - Mary Manley

Buckingham Palace isn't going to want to hear about this.

A new excerpt of Prince Harry's upcoming book Spare has detailed an incident where Prince William, next in line for the British throne, became physically violent with his younger brother following a dispute over the Duchess of Sussex.

The Duke of Sussex alleged in his memoir that his brother Prince William (now Prince of Wales) "grabbed" him by his collar and "knocked him to the floor." The fight broke out at Harry's home in London in 2019 during which Harry says William labeled Meghan as "difficult," "rude" and "abrasive." Harry then accused his brother of falling in line with the press's biased narrative about his American wife, and the fight escalated.

"It all happened so fast. So very fast," Harry writes in the book. "He grabbed me by the collar, ripping my necklace, and he knocked me to the floor."

"I landed on the dog's bowl, which cracked under my back, the pieces cutting into me."

Prince Harry, Duke of Sussex has been setting Windsor's teeth on edge as he promotes his upcoming book Spare in TV interviews. The latest teasers of the book come after the Sussex's rather successful, even if poorly rated, Netflix docuseries "Harry & Meghan."

As the Windsors have refrained from speaking out against the bold accusations made by their relatives across the pond, Prince Harry is the first royal family member to be candid with interviewers since his late mother Princess Diana. She, of course, separated from King Charles in 1992 before her explosive interview with BBC's Martin Bashir in 1995, which the People's Princess was lured into under [false pretenses](#).

Prince Harry deeply criticized the British media in his Netflix docuseries as a necessary evil which was used by Buckingham Palace to control certain family member's narratives. He hinted some of his family members chose to leak negative stories about him and Meghan as a distraction from other negative attention royal family members would have faced.

However, the Duke is still using the media as a way to promote himself and his wife, perhaps as a way to regain control of the narrative, or as a way to bankroll the couple's [luxurious lifestyle](#). And, to pile irony on top of hypocrisy, the excerpt from Harry's book which was published by [The Guardian](#) was somehow unknowingly obtained, despite the fact the book has security which rivals that of JK Rowling's Harry Potter series.

The book, which is 416 pages, is already number two on Amazon's best-seller list in pre-sales across North America and the United Kingdom. The book reportedly delves into his childhood, schooling, his career as a royal and as a British soldier, his relationship with his family, and of course, his relationship with Meghan Markle, as well as his split from royal duties.

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Man Experiencing Homelessness Beaten to Death With Metal Pipe Near White House
By - Mary Manley

Local authorities said a jogger flagged down a US Secret Service officer believing the man was in need of medical attention; however, when the officer approached the body, authorities realized the person was deceased.

A criminal investigation was launched Wednesday by police in Washington, DC, after authorities were alerted to a man experiencing homelessness who was later determined to have been beaten to death by a metal pipe near the White House.

Officials have indicated that one suspect has been taken into custody and that a weapon had been recovered from the scene. It was specified that the attack appeared to have occurred at the Ellipse Park, just south of the White House.

Officers have since reviewed surveillance footage showing the man was beaten to death at about 6:30 a.m., according to DC Assistant Police Chief Morgan Kane. The victim's body was left in the park for about two hours after he had been murdered.

"A lot of people walking through here at 6:30 in the morning," said one man near the scene later on Wednesday. "Why nobody else ain't seen it?"

The man was murdered in the 200 block of 15th Street in Northwest DC, just steps from Freedom Plaza.

"Whatever that location is, whether it's next to the White House, whether it's east of the Anacostia, wherever that looks like, it's still tragic," Kane said. "There's still someone who lost their life. There's still a family that's going to be devastated in those circumstances. Equally devastating."

The investigation into the incident is ongoing.

According to the [Central Union Mission](#), more than 16% of residents in Washington, DC, are living in poverty as homelessness in the nation's capital is two times greater than the national average. The causes of homelessness are low wages, higher costs of living, and a lack of affordable housing.

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The Never-Ending Vote - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall

The US House of Representatives has been thrown into disarray as the GOP has been unable to elect a House speaker. Rep. Kevin McCarthy, a former firefighter who serves California's 23rd district in the US House of Representatives, lost the sixth round of voting on Wednesday. After two days of voting, opponents of McCarthy have held fast.

At least 20 Republicans have voted for [Byron Donalds](#) of Florida as an alternative to McCarthy. Donalds is just one of two Black Republicans currently in Congress and is a second-term congressman. The 44-year-old is a former businessman and a steadfast conservative who is against abortion and for gun rights.

Despite support from former President Donald Trump, who praised McCarthy as someone who would "do a good job, and maybe even a GREAT JOB," that level of support wasn't enough to win over McCarthy's defectors. In fact, the congressman, who needed 218 votes to secure his seat as House speaker, lost another three votes Wednesday when he garnered only 201 votes. House Republicans' struggles to unite behind a candidate is the first time since 1923 that such a phenomenon has occurred.

As Congress continues down a path of stalemating, they will be unable to perform any of their legislative duties. Meanwhile, Democrats have been able to get behind Rep. Hakeem Jeffries of New York who secured 212 votes from all blue seats.

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Never Gonna Give You Up: US to Continue Backing Venezuela's Guaido After Opposition Abandons Him

By - Wyatt Reed

Even as the opposition throws in the towel and Venezuelan oil flows back into American pumps, the US continues to insist the elected government in Caracas is illegitimate and the unelected Juan Guaido is the real president of Venezuela.

The US will continue to recognize the so-called 'interim presidency' of Juan Guaido even after Venezuelan opposition parties recently voted to abandon their claim to the office, the White House said Wednesday.

"Our approach to [Venezuelan President] Nicolas Maduro is not changing," State Department spokesperson Ned Price stated in comments to reporters. The head of state recognized by the country's military and civic institutions, Price [insisted](#), "is not the legitimate leader of Venezuela." Instead, the US will "continue to recognise" what Price called "the only remaining democratically elected institution in Venezuela today... the 2015 National Assembly."

But it appears the US is refusing to recognize the decision of that body, which voted to dissolve their simulated government last week.

On Friday, Guaido's claim to the presidency was terminated by the 2015 National Assembly – which continues to proclaim itself the country's legitimate legislature even though its mandate expired in 2020 following the conclusion of its members' 5-year terms.

But the sincerity of the US government's public refusal to recognize Maduro as president is not entirely clear. Just a week after Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine in late February, senior US officials traveled to Caracas in a bid to convince their longtime target to provide them with access to Venezuelan oil supplies.

In November, the Treasury Department granted Chevron a six-month license to restore its operations in the Caribbean country in a move the US presented as a way to pressure the Venezuelan government to return to negotiations with the country's notoriously obstinate political opposition.

Discussions between the Maduro administration and the US-backed opposition groups were suspended in 2020 after the US successfully pressured authorities in Cape Verde to extradite Alex Saab, a Venezuelan diplomat who was arrested on dubious charges while en route to Iran on a diplomatic mission.

A massive oil tanker [arrived](#) in Caracas on Tuesday to make its first collection as part of a 500,000-barrel quota of heavy crude expected to be shipped to Chevron's refinery in Pascagoula, Mississippi, this month.

The US abandoned diplomatic relations with Venezuela in 2019 after the Trump administration claimed without evidence that the country's presidential elections were fraudulent, with a number of European nations immediately following Washington's lead. Western states rallied around Guaido – a largely-unknown disciple of disgraced opposition figure Leopoldo Lopez – who they insisted was Venezuela's legitimate president despite him never having run for the office.

The US government was also directly implicated in the attempted 2002 coup d'etat which nearly overthrew revolutionary firebrand Hugo Chavez, Maduro's direct predecessor.

"The failed coup in Venezuela was closely tied to senior officials in the US government," the Observer [noted](#) in 2002. "The crucial figure," they wrote, was Elliott Abrams – "who gave a nod to the attempted Venezuelan coup."

The top Reagan administration official was heavily implicated in the Iran-Contra affair and closely linked to some of the US government's most violent and scandalous regime change operations in Latin America in living memory.

Abrams was appointed the US special envoy to Venezuela in 2019. In that capacity, Abrams helped impose a deadly sanctions regime on Caracas which former UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Alfred de Zayas [estimated](#) had killed over a hundred thousand Venezuelans by 2020.

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Israeli Opposition Condemns 'Unilateral Coup' Amid Politicized Push to Weaken Judiciary

By - Wyatt Reed

As Netanyahu's new ruling coalition looks to minimize judicial independence, the head of the opposition says the attempted overhaul threatens to "destroy the entire constitutional structure of the State of Israel."

Israeli opposition leader Yair Lapid has [condemned](#) an attempted overhaul of the court system by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ruling coalition as a "unilateral coup."

In comments published by Israeli media, Lapid noted the apparent push to erode the judiciary's independence came just one day before justices were set to debate a controversial new law that would allow a politician to circumvent a ban on convicted criminals serving as ministers.

"Like a gang of criminals, the day before the High Court hearing on the Deri Law, the government put a loaded gun on the table," the opposition head protested.

Under the recently-passed legislation, the authority of the High Court of Justice would be severely curtailed and the Knesset would gain significant control over the judicial selection committee, which oversees the appointment of justices to the Supreme Court.

Netanyahu's allies have expressed hopes of reversing Supreme Court rulings banning Israeli outposts on Palestinian land in the occupied West Bank and the extended detention of asylum-seekers from Africa, and are likely to direct the new court to let the ultra-Orthodox minority dodge the Israeli draft.

"What Yariv Levin presented today is not a legal reform, it is a threat," Lapid said. "They threaten to destroy the entire constitutional structure of the State of Israel."

Vowing to fight the proposed legislation "in every possible way," Lapid insisted "those who carry out a unilateral coup in Israel need to know that we are not obligated to it in any way whatsoever."

The new Israeli administration has defended the move as an effort to strengthen democracy, rather than undermine it. "We go to the polls and vote, choose, but time after time, people who we didn't elect decide for us," said Justice Minister Yariv Levin, a longtime critic of Israel's supreme court. "That's not democracy."

"The time has come to act," Levin insisted.

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Report: Private US Firm Feeding Illegal Spy Tech to British Intelligence to Target Russian Troops

By - Wyatt Reed

Explosive documents leaked to an independent American media outlet show how Western powers are using privately-owned intelligence contractors to circumvent laws protecting their citizens from being spied on by their own governments.

A private American spy firm is using illegal technology to track over a billion people across the globe and using a British intelligence cutout extensively linked to NATO's proxy war against Russia in Ukraine to funnel the data to the UK military, new documents show.

According to independent American investigative outlet The Grayzone, leaked files indicate that surveillance technology used by the company in question, Anomaly 6, has “enabled the planning of military offensives and artillery attacks, assassinations, asset recruitment, and other measures” via “aggressive harvesting of data.”

Anomaly 6 carries out its illicit surveillance by scraping the data of smartphone users across the globe and matching it to their online profiles. The spy firm, which was reportedly founded by a pair of intelligence-linked US military veterans and is headquartered just a 20-minute drive from CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, [claims](#) it can track around 3 billion devices in real time. Because their “spying services are absolutely illegal under many national and international data protection regimes,” Anomaly 6’s findings are laundered through Prevail Partners, a “private military company which The Grayzone has exposed as Whitehall’s arm’s-length cutout for prosecuting its proxy war in Ukraine,” journalist Kit Klarenberg explained.

Prevail Partners has previously been implicated in the assembly of a secret Ukrainian terror army and the infamous terror attack on the Kerch bridge in Crimea.

Observers have long suspected London has been heavily involved in the Kiev regime’s more destructive anti-Russian attacks. In October, the Russian Ministry of Defense said the British Royal Navy [directly participated](#) in the terrorist attack on the Nord Stream pipelines when it “took part in planning, supporting and implementing” the plot.

Exactly what information they were passing along remains unclear, but the new revelations paint an alarming picture.

Leaked files reportedly reviewed by The Grayzone include case studies showing how the company’s technology was used “to gain a real time/near real time understanding of the disposition” of Russian “troops, equipment, and lethal materials,” both before and after Russian military operations in Ukraine began in February.

According to one leaked document, Anomaly 6 was contracted by Prevail Partners to provide for six months “a data feed of country specific data containing harvested first party commercial telemetry data and delivered to client directed cloud-based infrastructure” to the UK’s Defence Intelligence Agency at a price tag of \$708,750.

“We will continue to provide access to location-based commercial telemetry data (CTDF) for the countries of Russia, Belarus and Ukraine without a break in delivery, in line with your requirements,” an email from Prevail to the UK spy agency revealed.

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Canadian Exports Fell to \$47.5Bln in November 2022 as Energy Sales Decreased - StatCan

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Canadian exports fell by 2.3% to C\$64.4 billion (US\$47.5 billion) in November 2022, as the country sold less energy products for a fifth consecutive month, Statistics Canada (StatCan) said on Thursday.

"Total exports fell 2.3% in November to \$64.4 billion. Declines were observed in eight of the 11 product sections, with exports of energy products leading the decreases. Excluding energy

products, exports were down 1.5%. In real (or volume) terms, total exports declined 1.4% in November," Statistics Canada said in a press release.

November marked the fifth consecutive month that marked declining exports of Canadian energy products, the release said. Coal, natural gas, crude oil and petroleum products fell by 24.3%, 13.1%, 1.8% and 7.9%, respectively.

While the coal decrease in coal exports was mainly due to lower demand in Asian countries, gas and crude oil exports fell due to lower market prices and milder temperatures across Canada and the United States, which in turn increased production, the release said.

Statistics Canada also said in the release that the country's imports decreased by 2.1%.

Canada's trade balance with its global partners went from a \$95.9 million surplus to a \$30.3 deficit, the release added.

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US Private Payrolls 'Strong But Fragmented' After 85% Jump in December Hirings - ADP

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US private employers added 85% more jobs in December but hiring was not uniform as some small businesses outperformed bigger ones, while salaries grew at their slowest pace since March, private payrolls surveyor ADP said on Thursday.

"The labor market is strong but fragmented, with hiring varying sharply by industry and establishment size," Nela Richardson, chief economist at ADP, said in a statement announcing 235,000 new positions last month in mostly consumer-facing service industries, after November's addition of 127,000 jobs. "Hiring was strong across small and medium establishments while large establishments saw a drop in employment of 151,000 jobs."

Richardson also said December had the lowest pay growth since March, with job changers seeing the lowest salary improvement in 10 months.

"December ushered in the largest decline in pay growth for job stayers in the three-year series history," she said. "Leisure and hospitality; trade, transportation and utilities; and information sectors had the sharpest declines in pay gains. Business segments that hired aggressively in the first half of 2022 have slowed hiring and in some cases cut jobs in the last month of the year."

The private payrolls report came ahead of the more important non-farm payrolls data for December, due on Friday, that would include both government and private sector jobs.

Economists have said they expect non-farm payrolls to have increased by 200,000 in December - a number lower than the 263,000 seen in November but higher than the 200,000 seen prior to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020.

The labor market has been the juggernaut of the US economy over the past two years, spearheading its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic measures. Joblessness among Americans reached an all-time high of 14.8% in April 2020, with the loss of some 20 million jobs after the COVID-19 breakout. Since June 2020, however, the US Labor Department's non-farm payrolls report has reported hundreds of thousands of job additions every month, with earnings growth keeping up a steady upbeat momentum too.

The surge in monthly jobs numbers and wages has been a dilemma for the Federal Reserve, which is mandated with ensuring a robust labor market and keeping inflation manageable for most Americans. The Fed has identified employment and salary growth as among the key contributors of inflation.

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 rate hikes last year by the Fed, which added 425 basis points to rates between March and December. 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 the monetary tightening, inflation remains more than three times higher than the 2% per year level preferred by the Fed, which has vowed to bring price pressures back to its target.

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US House Adjourns Again With No Speaker, McCarthy Says Progress Being Made in Talks

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The US House adjourned for the second day in a row without a speaker after Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy told reporters progress is being made in talks but a vote tonight would not be productive.

The House voted 216 to 214 on the motion to adjourn until noon on Thursday, which came after another three rounds of failed attempts to elect a speaker. On Tuesday, the House failed to elect a speaker after three rounds. A seventh round would likely be held tomorrow.

"I don't think a vote tonight does any difference but I think a vote in the future will... I don't think voting tonight is productive, I think let people work a little more," McCarthy said Wednesday night.

McCarthy added that there has been a lot of progress made in negotiations with the small number of Republican colleagues opposing his nomination for House speaker, but no deal has been reached yet.

The situation marks the first time in a century the House has failed to select a speaker on the first ballot. House lawmakers cannot be formally sworn into office until a speaker is elected. Ballots to elect a speaker began on Tuesday during the House's first session of the new Congress. The House held three failed ballots on Tuesday and three more on Wednesday before adjourning for a break.

Republicans hold a 222-212 majority in the House, with 218 votes needed to elect a speaker. However, 20 Republican members are casting votes for Congressman Byron Donalds instead of McCarthy, whom the majority of the party backs.

The Republicans opposed to McCarthy have criticized the former minority leader's ability to reform House rules and push for the party's priorities.

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Mastermind of US College Admissions Bribe Scam Sentenced to 3.5 Years - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - William Singer, the man who concocted a college admission plan that allowed wealthy parents to buy their children's way into some of America's most prestigious institutions of higher learning, was sentenced to three and a half years in prison, The New York Times reported.

Federal prosecutors said Singer, as the ringleader of a \$25 million criminal enterprise, "massively corrupted the integrity of the college admissions process," according to the report after the sentencing in a Boston court on Wednesday.

The judge also ordered Singer to pay more than \$10 million in restitution to the Internal Revenue Service, the report added.

The federal government began an investigation beginning in 2018-19 which snagged dozens of parents, coaches and exam administrators in a vast college admissions ruse that implicated athletic programs at the University of Stanford, Southern California, Yale and other colleges and universities.

Singer, a former basketball coach and college counselor, was able to get students admitted by bribing coaches and test monitors, falsifying exam scores, fabricating student biographies and embellishing athletic credentials.

More than 50 people were charged, including actresses Lori Loughlin and Felicity Huffman, a former casino executive, a private equity financier and other wealthy and prominent individuals. Singer became a government informant after pleading guilty in 2019 to several racketeering and money laundering-related charges.

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Amazon Layoffs to Impact More Than 17,000 Employees - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Layoffs by e-commerce giant Amazon will impact more than 17,000 employees, The Wall Street Journal reported, citing people familiar with the matter. In November, Amazon announced layoffs among its corporate staff, with approximately 10,000 jobs expected to be cut. Thousands of those jobs were cut last year, with more layoffs in the coming weeks expected to bring the total number of jobs lost to over 17,000, the report said on Wednesday.

Amazon doubled its logistics network and added hundreds of thousands of employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, of which the online retailer was a beneficiary, according to the report. However, with demand beginning to decline as customers return to in-person stores, Amazon is looking to cut costs, the report said.

Amazon also issues a company-wide hiring freeze prior to deciding to let employees go, the report added.

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US Navy Orders \$389Mln Upgrades to Modernize Littoral Combat Ships - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Nine US shipbuilding and marine engineering companies have won a combined \$389 million in US Navy modification contracts to provide maintenance, modernization and repair services for littoral combat ships (LCS) homeported in San Diego, California, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"[The companies included] BAE Systems – San Diego Ship Repair [of] San Diego, California; Vigor Marine [of] Portland, Oregon; General Dynamics – National Steel and Shipbuilding Company (NASSCO) [of] San Diego, California; Marine Group Boat Works [of] Chula Vista, California [and] Pacific Ship Repair and Fabrication [of] San Diego, California," the release stated on Wednesday.

The other companies receiving the modification contracts were East Coast Repair and Fabrication [of] Norfolk, Virginia; Austal USA of Mobile, Alabama; Epsilon Systems Solutions of Portsmouth, Virginia and Continental Marine of San Diego in San Diego, California, the Defense Department said.

The nine companies were "awarded a combined \$389 million in ...modifications to the previously awarded multiple award contract for maintenance, modernization and repair requirements for littoral combat ships homeported in San Diego, California," the release explained.

Almost all the work on the contracts will be performed on the West Coast of the continental United States (95%) over the next 10 months to be completed by October 2023, the Defense Department said.

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US Grocery Giant Trader Joe's Sued over Lead, Cadmium Levels in Dark Chocolate - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Specialty retail grocer Trader Joe's was sued in the Eastern District of New York by a consumer who accused the company of endangering shoppers by selling bars of dark chocolate that contain harmful levels of lead and cadmium, Reuters reported citing court documents.

"High levels of lead and cadmium in food products is material to reasonable consumers because these chemicals pose serious health risks, even in small dosages," plaintiff Thomas Ferrante said in the lawsuit as quoted in the report on Wednesday.

The suit follows findings by Consumer Reports that said 23 of the 28 dark chocolate bars it tested contained potentially harmful levels of lead, cadmium, or both heavy metals for people who eat more than one ounce of chocolate a day, the report added.

Consumer Reports found Trader Joe's Dark Chocolate 72% Cacao high in lead, and Trader Joe's The Dark Chocolate Lover's Chocolate 85% Cacao high in lead and cadmium.

Ferrante said he read both products' labels before purchasing them, and would not have done so or would have paid less had he known their contents, the report said.

The lawsuit seeks at least \$5 million in damages, including at least \$500 per transaction under New York law, according to the report.

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US Rates Must Stay High to Achieve Inflation Target - Fed December Meeting Minutes

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Policymakers at the Federal Reserve intend to keep US interest rates fairly high over an extended period of time to achieve their desired target for inflation, according to published minutes from the central bank's rate-setting meeting held in December.

"Participants generally observed that a restrictive policy stance would need to be maintained until the incoming data provided confidence that inflation was on a sustained downward path to 2 percent, which was likely to take some time," the summary of the minutes, released on Wednesday, said. "In view of the persistent and unacceptably high level of inflation, several participants commented that historical experience cautioned against prematurely loosening monetary policy."

The Fed's published minutes from the December meeting of its Federal Open Market Committee were in line with the call made by Neel Kashkari, the central bank's head for the Minneapolis region, who said on Wednesday that US interest rates need to rise about 1% more to achieve its target for fighting inflation.

"While I believe it is too soon to definitively declare that inflation has peaked, we are seeing increasing evidence that it may have," Kashkari wrote in an essay that appeared in the Wall Street Journal.

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

The drop came after relentless rate hikes last year by the Fed, which added 425 basis points to rates between March and December. 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 its aggressive monetary tightening, inflation remains more than three times higher than the 2% per annum level preferred by the Fed, which has vowed to bring price pressures back to its target.

"It is appropriate to continue interest rate hikes at least at the next few meetings until we are confident that inflation has peaked," Kashkari said, referring to the Federal Open Market

Committee (FOMC) meetings of the Fed that decide on rates. "The Fed must avoid cutting rates prematurely and causing inflation to spike again, as this would be a costly mistake."

If inflation has indeed peaked, economists say the Fed might raise rates by just 25 basis points at its next FOMC meeting in February - as opposed to the four jumbo-sized increases of 75 basis points carried out between June and November.

Still, if the central bank were to achieve the 5.4% rate level suggested by Kashkari, it may need to do as many as four 25-basis point hikes this year, as rates currently hover between 4.25% and 4.5%.

Kashkari cautioned as well that rates could ultimately go higher than 5.4%, depending on how the battle against inflation went. "In this stage, any indication of slow progress in lowering inflation will necessitate raising policy rates potentially significantly."

Only when inflation is well on its way to its 2% target can the Fed consider cutting rates, he added.

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Michigan Attorney General Says Domestic Terror Poses One of Biggest Threats to US

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - Domestic terror is one of the biggest existential threats to the United States and it must be confronted and beaten, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel said in an interview.

"We've been told over and over again by the FBI and Homeland Security that domestic terror is one of the biggest existential threats that we face in America and we have to be prepared to meet it head on and take it very seriously," Nessel told ABC News on Wednesday.

Nessel said she was not only talking about the recent attempted kidnapping of Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer, but the fact that the implicated individuals plotted to kill members of law enforcement and the state legislature.

The Michigan attorney general also said she does not see any difference between the group of Americans behind the Whitmer kidnapping plot and a foreign terrorist organization.

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Palestinian Envoy to UN Confirms Security Council Meeting Thursday on Al-Aqsa Mosque

UNITED NATIONS, January 5 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will hold an emergency meeting on Thursday to discuss the controversial visit of Israeli National Security Minister Ben Gvir to Al-Aqsa Mosque at the Temple Mount, Palestinian Ambassador to the UN Riyad Mansour said during a press conference.

"There will be an emergency Security Council meeting tomorrow at 3 o'clock [Eastern]," Mansour said on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, Gvir visited Temple Mount, where the Al-Aqsa mosque – one of Islam’s most revered sites – is located. The visit sparked condemnation from much of the Muslim world, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is committed to protecting the status quo of the Temple Mount, a member of his office reportedly said on Tuesday. The Temple Mount is revered as a holy site by all of the Abrahamic faiths.

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Biden Says ‘Worried’ About How China Handles COVID-19 at Present

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said he is "worried" about how the Chinese authorities are handling the increase of COVID-19 infections and reiterated his administration's new policy that all passengers coming from China to the United States must be tested.

"Well, yes, I am," Biden said during a press conference on Wednesday when asked whether he is worried about how the Chinese authorities have approached the increase in COVID-19 infections. "But I think we just got to make the protocol we set out: that if you're flying from China, you got to be tested, and so on."

Biden also said he is aware that the Chinese authorities are very sensitive when the US government suggests they have not been very forthcoming.

In December, China announced that it was abandoning its zero-COVID policy and preparing to reopen its borders in January.

The United Kingdom, France and the United States are among the countries that have introduced COVID-19 testing requirements for travelers from China starting in January.

On Tuesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that Beijing opposes the newly announced restrictions by the United States and will take countermeasures based on the principle of reciprocity.

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US House Adjourns for Break After Sixth Failed Ballot to Elect Speaker

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives adjourned until later this evening after a sixth failed ballot to select a speaker for the 118th Congress, as Republican division continues to block the chamber from moving forward.

The situation marks the first time in a century the House, which will reconvene at 8:00 p.m. EST (1:00 a.m. GMT on Thursday), has failed to select a speaker on the first ballot. House lawmakers cannot be formally sworn into office until a speaker is elected.

Ballots to elect a speaker began on Tuesday during the House's first session of the new Congress. The House held three failed ballots on Tuesday and three more on Wednesday before adjourning for a break.

Republicans hold a 222-212 majority in the House, with 218 votes needed to elect a speaker. However, 20 Republican members are casting votes for Congressman Byron Donalds instead of Kevin McCarthy, whom the majority of the party backs.

The Republicans opposed to McCarthy have criticized the former minority leader's ability to reform House rules and push for the party's priorities.

US President Joe Biden called the situation embarrassing, noting that the rest of the world is watching what is happening in the House, but that it is not his problem.

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US Remains Part of Middle East Quartet, Engages With Israel, Palestine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) - The United States has not made any formal statements announcing its withdrawal from the Middle Eastern Quartet and continues engagements with both parties of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

"I'm not aware that we have made a formal decision regarding the Quartet or any formal statement regarding the Quartet," Price said during a press briefing on Wednesday. "Our focus, therefore, has been on doing what we can in the interim to help set the conditions for re-engaging with Palestinian Authority, re-engaging with the Palestinian people continuing to maintain our ironclad commitment to Israel security, continuing to advance and deepen our partnership with Israel."

Earlier on Wednesday, Russian Foreign Ministry special representative for the Middle East Vladimir Safronkov told Sputnik that the United States has withdrawn itself from the work with the Quartet, but Moscow stands ready to continue working within this format.

The Middle East Quartet was established in 2002 in order to consolidate efforts to peacefully resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and includes Russia, the United States, the European Union, and the United Nations.

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Oil Prices Down Almost 10% Since Start of 2023 From Global Recession

NEW YORK, January 4 (Sputnik) - Crude prices are down almost 10% since trading began for 2023, amid fears about a global recession and the worsening coronavirus situation in top oil importer China.

"Oil prices have tumbled ... [on] the uncertainty [in] near-term economic prospects for China amid surging COVID cases," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said. "While reliable data is seemingly hard to come by, the view appears to be that there'll be significant disruption in the coming months."

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate crude (WTI) settled Wednesday's trade down \$4.09, or 5.3%, at \$72.84 per barrel, after dropping to a three-week low of \$72.77 during the session. The US crude benchmark is down almost 10% in just two days of trading since the start of the year, after finishing 2022 up nearly 7%.

London-traded Brent crude settled down \$4.26, or 5.2%, at \$77.84 per barrel after hitting a three-week low of \$77.74 earlier on Wednesday. Brent, which acts as the global crude benchmark, is down 9.4% from just two days of trading this year, after finishing 2022 up 10.5%. Worries about a global recession have intensified since the new year began, pummeling crude prices as top oil importer China faced increased challenges in containing its COVID-19 contagion.

Growth worries are not exactly new since the world began recovering from the worst of the coronavirus pandemic, with each country's progress determined by its relative immunity from the virus and inherent economic strength.

In the case of China, hundreds of millions of people are potentially estimated to be at risk from coronavirus infections before herd immunity is achieved in the world's number two economy. Thus, China's zeal to go from a zero-COVID policy to one where officials are now exhorting its people to declare a "final victory" over the virus has raised an alarm across markets.

Concerns over Beijing's actions have been accentuated after the International Monetary Fund began 2023 with a tough warning that China and the world's two other growth engines - the United States and Europe - were all in slowdown mode. Data on Tuesday showed that Chinese manufacturing activity shrank for a fifth straight month in December, as the country grappled with an unprecedented spike in coronavirus cases.

China has also increased export quotas for refined oil products in the first batch for 2023, signaling expectations of poor domestic demand.

Adding to the market's bearishness were signs that top oil exporter Saudi Arabia could further cut prices to Asia for its flagship Arab Light crude grade in February, after the pricing for that hit a 10-month low this month, reflecting concerns of oversupply, media reports said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 5 (Sputnik) -

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Five people died and 15 others have been injured on Wednesday in a shelling by Ukrainian troops of the Vasylivka city in the Zaporizhzhia Region, the acting regional governor said.

* The spokeswoman for the Russian Foreign Ministry rejected the offer of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to mediate between Russia and Ukraine, noting Italy's continued assistance to what she called a bloody regime in Kiev.

* Kyrylo Budanov, chief of the main intelligence directorate at the Ukrainian defense ministry, has said Ukrainian armed forces plan to attack Russian territories in a major push come spring.

US HOUSE SPEAKER ELECTION

* The US House of Representatives on Wednesday again failed to elect a speaker during the second ballot on Wednesday and fifth overall, as Republicans continue to be divided on who to elect to the leadership role.

* The US House of Representatives' failure to elect a speaker on the first day of the 118th Congress is embarrassing for the United States, but is not his problem, President Joe Biden said, according to the White House.

* The US House of Representatives ought to elect a leader who will change the rules to allow for more debate on aid to Ukraine, Republican Congressman Chip Roy said during a speech nominating colleague Byron Donalds as speaker.

TENSIONS IN MIDDLE EAST

* The UN Security Council will meet on Thursday to discuss the situation regarding the Al-Aqsa mosque compound, a source told Sputnik on Wednesday.

GLOBAL ENERGY MARKETS

* Russian energy giant Gazprom has exceeded its contracted daily level of gas supply to China on January 1 and January 3, setting a new record, the company said on Wednesday.

* The European Union's gas storage was filled to more than 80% of its capacity at the start of 2023 due to higher than expected temperatures, a European Commission spokesman said.

* Chinese President Xi Jinping told his Philippine counterpart, Ferdinand Marcos, that Beijing was ready to restart talks with the archipelago nation on the joint exploration of offshore oil and gas.

POLAND-GERMANY DISPUTE

* The president and the Office of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) have not received a request by Poland to help it receive wartime reparations from Germany, according to UNGA representatives.

* Germany's refusal to discuss the issue of wartime reparations indicates the weakness of German diplomacy, Polish Deputy Foreign Minister Arkadiusz Mularczyk said.

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Russian Oil Supply Risk Likely to Ease With End of Ukraine War - Chevron CEO

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The supply risk to Russian oil is expected to ease when the Ukraine war ends, although market tightness due to production limitations might prevail, Mike Wirth, chief executive of oil major Chevron, said Wednesday.

"The market was already in a pretty tight situation before this war began," Wirth said in an interview with Bloomberg. "I do think when eventually it's resolved, and all the conflicts eventually are resolved, uncertainty in the risk to supply from one of the world's largest suppliers [of oil] will be reduced."

Russian President Vladimir Putin on December 27 signed a decree banning supplies of Russian oil and petroleum products to countries subscribing to a G7 price cap of \$60 per barrel.

The cap is part of efforts by Western countries to limit Russia's income from oil and gas exports since Moscow launched a military operation in Ukraine on February 24. Under the cap imposed on December 5, G7 nations, along with the European Union and Australia, will leverage their influence in maritime transport to keep at \$60 per barrel the maximum amount that Russia can charge countries that still rely on its oil exports. Russian oil purchased above the price ceiling cannot be shipped or insured by EU and G7 operators, while transactions involving such oil also cannot be financed.

Wirth said if the Russia-Ukraine supply risk to oil eased, demand will likely be dynamic again.

"The war, and their associated actions, have definitely had an impact on energy markets. If you step back and look at the broader context, in 2020, we saw demand collapse with the pandemic, when the world really locked down," Wirth said. "In fact, companies in our industry had to shut in wells and stop producing because there's no place to store the oil that wasn't needed by the market. So investment levels came down and nobody knew how long this would last. The economy recovered post-pandemic, we got [the] vaccines, demand returned, [and] the industry's been struggling to keep up with the rate of growth once again."

Oil prices, measured by global crude benchmark Brent, hit 14-year highs of almost \$140 a barrel in the first week of March, shortly after the start of the Ukraine war, due to sanctions and other Western initiatives against Russian supply. Reduced tensions around the war have almost halved prices since, with Brent settling on Wednesday at under \$78 per barrel.

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US Seeks Reciprocity With Russia on Number of Diplomats - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States seeks reciprocity with Russia on the number of diplomats staffed by their respective embassies, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"All we seek is reciprocity. We seek to have in Moscow what the Russians have in the United States. That's the principle that we seek to exercise the world over with our diplomatic relationships and our reciprocal missions and we continue to work on these questions with Moscow and we hope to see progress," Price said at a press conference when asked if the Russian and US embassies would return to normal staffing.

In November, Russian Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov in response to a Sputnik question said the United States itself is not taking the steps necessary to improve the work of the embassy in Moscow, and the situation in the Russian diplomatic mission in Washington is not getting better.

Antonov said that Russia proposed to determine the categories of employees in the diplomatic missions that would be exempted from sanctions, for example, embassy doctors and teachers, but the lack of contacts with the United States impedes any resolution.

The US State Department has said earlier that Washington and Moscow were in contact regarding lifting some of the restrictions that made it difficult for embassies to operate.

The US Mission in Russia said it no longer offers non-diplomatic visa services due to Moscow's April 23 notification banning the US embassy from employing foreign nationals. According to the State Department, Russian nationals may continue applying for non-immigrant visas at any US embassy or consulate where they can obtain an appointment.

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Biden Says Intends to Visit US Southern Border - White House Press Pool

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Wednesday that he intends to visit the US southern border, according to the White House press pool. Earlier in the day, media reported that the White House is strongly considering scheduling a visit to the US-Mexico border before Biden heads to Mexico City next week for the North American Leaders' Summit.

"That's my intention," Biden said when asked if he will visit the US southern border.

It is still unclear what part of the US southern border Biden may possibly visit.

The White House has continuously dodged questions about why Biden has not visited the southern border amid record-breaking migration numbers that are overwhelming federal and state resources. Republicans have also previously urged Biden to visit the border to get a first-hand look at the crisis.

Last week, the US Supreme Court blocked the Biden administration's request to end the COVID-era Title 42 immigration policy that allowed the authorities to deny migrants entry in the United States based on their health status. Several Republican states had urged the court to leave it in place in order to avert a worsening of the current border crisis.

White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said the Biden administration will comply with the US Supreme Court's order and in the meantime will continue to advance preparations to manage the migration on the US-Mexico border.

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Influx of Migrants Encountered on US Southern Border Straining Immigration System - DHS

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The record-breaking influx of migrants arriving on the US southern border is straining the immigration system, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said on Wednesday.

"There's no question that the number of encounters that we are experiencing at the border is straining our system," Mayorkas said during an event hosted by The Washington Post.

The Biden administration, according to Mayorkas, is managing the number of encounters and prepared to address another surge of migrants at the US-Mexico border when the border expulsion policy known as Title 42 eventually ends.

Last week, the US Supreme Court blocked the Biden administration's request to end the COVID-era Title 42 immigration policy that allowed the authorities to deny migrants entry in the United States based on their health status. Several Republican states had urged the court to leave it in place in order to avert a worsening of the current border crisis.

The United States has seen two consecutive record breaking years of illegal crossings into the United States since Biden assumed office in January 2021. Well over two million illegal crossings into the United States were recorded in fiscal year 2022, according to Customs and Border Protection data.

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Biden Confirms Bradley Fighting Vehicles on Table for Ukraine - White House Reporter

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden on Wednesday confirmed that Bradley Fighting Vehicles are on the table for delivery to Ukraine, according to a Bloomberg White House reporter.

"Yes," Biden is quoted as saying when asked if Bradleys are on the table for Ukraine. The statement confirms earlier US media reports about the Biden administration considering the lightly armored vehicles for use by Ukrainian forces.

The infantry transport vehicles are armed with a 25mm autocannon and anti-tank missiles. Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov has said that the West's provision of arms for Ukraine undermines prospects for a future peace process.

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US Embassy in Havana Will Start Processing All Immigrant Visa Categories - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US Embassy in Havana will begin processing all categories of immigrant visas in a major step to restore consular services, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price said on Wednesday.

"Starting today, the US embassy in Havana is processing all immigrant visa categories. In addition to current services provided in Cuba... which include American Citizen Services as well as official diplomatic and emergency non immigrant visas. This is a significant step in the restoration of consular services in Havana," Price said during a press conference. This will facilitate Cuban immigration visa applications, as the islanders will be required anymore to travel to Georgetown, Guyana, Price added. The State Department is studying the possibility to increase Havana's embassy staff to facilitate diplomatic, consular, and civil society engagement, Price said, adding the safety of the diplomatic staff and their families are top priorities.

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US May Include More HIMARS Systems in Future Aid to Ukraine - Kirby

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to provide military assistance to Ukraine and it may include more High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"We are and will continue to provide them the kinds of systems and assistance that they need, to defend themselves. And yes, that has included HIMARS in the past, and it could very well include more HIMARS going forward," Kirby said during a virtual press gaggle.

The HIMARS systems give the Ukrainian military "long range fires" and allow them to engage Russian troops from a standoff distance, Kirby said.

Considering the flat, open landscape of the frontline, HIMARS have been "very effective," Kirby added.

Kirby made the comment in relation to a January 2 strike targeting Russian troops in Makiivka, which killed at least 63 servicemen and is attributed to a Ukrainian attack with six HIMARS rockets.

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US House Fails to Select Speaker on Fifth Ballot as Republican Division Remains

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Wednesday again failed to elect a speaker during the second ballot on Wednesday and fifth overall, as Republicans continue to be divided on who to elect to the leadership role.

On Tuesday, Republicans held three votes to elect a speaker during their first session of the 118th Congress, all of which failed to produce a conclusive result. Twenty of the 222 House Republicans voted against Congressman Kevin McCarthy, placing him beneath the 218-vote threshold needed to become speaker.

The situation marks the first time in a century that the House has failed to select a speaker on the first ballot.

Republicans opposed to McCarthy have instead placed their support behind Congressman Byron Donalds, who told US media on Wednesday that the leadership challenges are good for the country and the Republican party.

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Biden May Possibly Visit US Southern Border Prior to Mexico City Trip Next Week - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden may possibly visit the US southern border amid record-breaking migration numbers prior to his visit to Mexico City next week for the North American Leaders' Summit, the Wall Street Journal reported on Wednesday citing people familiar with the matter.

The report said the White House is strongly considering adding a visit to the US southern border, but that no new policy announcement would be expected should Biden make the trip.

The report did not detail which part of the US-Mexico border Biden could possibly visit.

The White House has previously dodged questions about why Biden has not visited the southern border amid record-breaking migration numbers that are overwhelming federal and state resources. Republicans have also previously urged Biden to visit the border to get a first-hand look at the crisis.

Last week, the US Supreme Court blocked the Biden administration's request to end the COVID-era Title 42 immigration policy that allowed the authorities to deny migrants entry in the United States based on their health status. Several Republican states had urged the court to leave it in place in order to avert a worsening of the current border crisis.

White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said the Biden administration will comply with the US Supreme Court's order and in the meantime will continue to advance preparations to manage the migration at the US-Mexico border.

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Decision on Sending Bradley Fighting Vehicles to Ukraine Not Made Yet - White House

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States has not yet decided whether it will send Bradley Fighting Vehicles to Ukraine in future assistance packages, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday.

On December 29, reports suggested that the US was considering the possibility of sending Bradley Fighting Vehicles to Ukraine, in future military assistance packages.

"I'm not going to get ahead of security assistance decisions that haven't been made yet, or what we're going to provide in future packages. We have said consistently that we're going to work in

lockstep with Ukrainians. We're talking to them nearly every day about their needs and the capabilities and requirements, and we're doing the best we can to fill them in as near real time as we can," Kirby said during a background conference.

Kirby also said the US is working with other nations to see what they can do on capabilities the Pentagon cannot provide.

The lightly armored Bradley vehicle is armed with a 25 mm gun and TOW anti-tank missiles. During Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to Washington on December 22, the Biden administration announced a new \$1.85 billion security assistance package for Ukraine that includes the Patriot system.

In April, Moscow sent a note to NATO member states condemning Western military assistance to Kiev. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that any arms shipments on Ukrainian territory would be "legitimate targets" for Russian armed forces.

Kremlin Spokesman Dmitry Peskov has said the West's arms provisions to Ukraine undermine prospects for a future peace process.

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Intense Fighting Around Donetsk to Continue in Foreseeable Future - Senior US Official

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The White House assesses that the intense fighting along the frontline in the Donetsk region in Ukraine will continue in the foreseeable future while the outcome in Bakhmut remains uncertain, a senior Biden administration official said on Wednesday.

"There will be continued fighting along that line in the Donetsk [region], I think, for the foreseeable future," the official said during a press briefing. "What we're seeing in Bakhmut, we should expect to see elsewhere along the front that there will be continued fighting in the coming months."

The official pointed out that the Russian forces in Bakhmut have made incremental progress and continue to advance.

Earlier on Friday, Andrei Marochko, who is an officer in the Luhansk People's Republic forces, said that Kiev sent additional detachments of foreign fighters to the areas of the cities of Bakhmut, also known as Artemivsk, and Soledar to contain the advance of the Russian forces. Bakhmut is located in the Kiev-controlled part of the Donetsk People's Republic, which was incorporated into Russia this fall after the populace there held a referendum. Bakhmut is an important transport hub for supplying the Ukrainian troops in the Donbas amid the Russia's special military operation.

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US House Republican Leader McCarthy Says He Believes Will Be Elected Speaker

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy told reporters on Wednesday that he believes he will be elected speaker despite a small number of Republican congressmen currently blocking his path.

The Republican-majority House for a fourth time failed to elect a House speaker on Wednesday afternoon.

"We can go through every name in the conference, at the end of the day we'll be able to get there," McCarthy told reporters outside the House chamber.

McCarthy said it doesn't matter if he loses more support from Republican colleagues in the fourth round of votes to elect a House Speaker because he still holds an overwhelming majority of votes.

Republican Congressman Chip Roy nominated Byron Donalds to be speaker and he received at least 20 votes in support of his nomination.

On Tuesday, the House failed to elect a House speaker after three rounds of votes, a situation that marks the first time in a century that the House of Representatives has not selected a speaker on the first ballot.

Earlier on Wednesday, former President Donald Trump called on all Republican Congressmen to elect McCarthy as the next House speaker.

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Congressman Chip Roy Says US House Needs Leader Who Will Allow Debate on Ukraine Aid
WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives ought to elect a leader who will change the rules to allow for more debate on aid to Ukraine, Republican Congressman Chip Roy said on Wednesday during a speech nominating colleague Byron Donalds as speaker. "We should be in here having this kind of a conversation with this many people in the room about Ukraine, and we should debate the merits and we should debate the ups and downs of being involved. We should debate the \$45 billion dollars. We should debate whether it should be more or less... The only way you're going to get that is if you change the rules and have the leadership to advance the rules," Roy said.

On Tuesday, the House failed to select a speaker during its first session of the 118th Congress. Republicans were unable to gather the necessary 218 votes behind Congressman Kevin McCarthy, with 20 of the party's 222 members voting for opposition candidates.

Following Roy's speech, the House proceeded to a fourth speaker vote, which is also poised to fail.

The situation marks the first time in a century that the House has failed to select a speaker on the first ballot. House Democrats held a press conference before the session on Wednesday, warning of the seriousness of not selecting a speaker and preventing lawmakers from being sworn into office.

The longest speaker selection process in US history occurred in 1855-1856, when the House took 133 ballots over the course of two months to select a speaker.

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US to Continue Military Exercises With Japan, S. Korea in Response to N. Korea - Kirby

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to hold bilateral military exercises with Japan and trilateral exercises with Japan and South Korea in response to the tensions over North Korea's missile test launches and other activities, National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"You've seen in just recent weeks some bilateral exercises between the United States and Japan specifically in response to the increased tensions by the Kim regime and Pyongyang. I think you are going to see that continue and you are going to see us continue to look for ways to not only improve our bilateral military cooperation which is already quite extraordinary, but our trilateral military cooperation with Japan, South Korea and the United States together," Kirby said.

On Sunday, media reported that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has said that his country's 600-millimeter multiple-launch rocket systems could carry tactical nuclear weapons and all of South Korea is within their reach. Kim also said there is a need to increase the number of North Korea's nuclear warheads.

On Sunday, North Korea test-fired its first short-range ballistic missile in 2023 by launching it toward the Sea of Japan.

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US House in Fourth Round of Voting Has Apparently Again Failed to Elect Speaker

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The Republican-majority US House of Representatives on Wednesday failed for a fourth time in two days to elect a speaker.

A number of conservative Republican lawmakers are preventing Republican leader Kevin McCarthy from securing the 218 votes needed to become speaker of the House of Representatives.

Republican Congressman Chip Roy nominated Byron Donalds to be speaker and received at least a dozen votes supporting Donalds' nomination.

The situation marks the first time in a century that the House of Representatives has not selected a speaker on the first ballot.

Earlier on Wednesday, former President Donald Trump called on all Republican Congressmen to elect McCarthy as the next House speaker.

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Colorado Funeral Home Owner Gets 20 Years for Illegally Selling Body Parts - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, DC January 4 (Sputnik) - Megan Hess, owner and operator of the Sunset Mesa Funeral Home in Montrose, Colorado, has been sentenced to 20 years in prison for selling body parts or entire bodies without the consent of the families of the deceased, the US Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"Under the auspices of Sunset Mesa Funeral Directors, the defendant would frequently meet with victims seeking cremation services for themselves or their loved ones who had died," the Justice Department said in a press release. "During those meetings, the defendant and others would represent to the victims that Sunset Mesa Funeral Directors would cremate decedents and provide their cremated remains back to the families. Instead, the defendant and others would harvest body parts from, or prepare the entire bodies of, the decedents for sale in body broker services."

Judge Christine Arguello sentenced Hess to 20 years in prison after she pleaded guilty earlier to one count of mail fraud and aiding and abetting, the release said.

The judge also sentenced Hess' associate Shirly Koch to 15 years in prison after pleading guilty to one count of mail fraud and aiding and abetting, the release added.

The two disrespected the wishes of the grieving victims and degraded the bodies of their family members to sell them for profit for years, showing no remorse or contrition even after they were exposed, according to the release.

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US to Stand Up for Women's Rights Worldwide Including in Afghanistan - Blinken

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to stand up for women's rights throughout the world and this strategy includes standing up for women in Afghanistan as well, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in remarks at the First US Strategy on Global Women's Economic Security on Wednesday.

"The strategy that we put in place is focused in supporting women and girls in all of their diversity including the women who most often face the greatest and highest barriers such as those from marginalized backgrounds, religious minorities, those with disabilities, LGBTQI+ persons and we are committed to standing up for women wherever their rights are threatened including in Afghanistan as unfortunately we continue to see deepen and get worse," Blinken said.

The secretary of state explained that US strategy focuses on breaking down some of the barriers that stand in the way of women's full economic participation.

Blinken said the barriers include unequal pay and limited access to credit as well as laws that ban women from energy and manufacturing jobs, among others.

"The strategy that we are putting forward has at its heart a simple vision: creating a world in which all women and girls everywhere can contribute to and benefit from economic growth and global prosperity," Blinken added.

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US Stands by Offer to Send Free COVID-19 Vaccines to China - White House

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to stand by its offer to send China vaccines against COVID-19 free of charge, but it is up to Beijing to accept the offer, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

"We have offered China vaccines and other COVID-19 support. China has indicated publicly that they appreciate the offer and did not need the support," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing. We'll continue to stand by our offer. Clearly cannot speak for China and their decision on that."

In December, China announced that it was abandoning its zero-COVID policy and preparing to reopen its borders in January.

The United Kingdom, France and the United States are among the countries that have introduced COVID-19 testing requirements for travelers from China starting in January.

On Tuesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said that Beijing opposes the newly announced restrictions by the United States and will take countermeasures based on the principle of reciprocity.

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US House Democrats Warn of Seriousness Not to Elect Speaker Amid Republican Division

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US House Democratic Caucus Chair Pete Aguilar and Vice Chair Ted Lieu on Wednesday warned of the seriousness of the lower chamber of Congress' failure to elect a speaker during its first session amid division among Republicans, which stalls the House's ability to begin work.

"Multiple ballots and almost 24 hours later, there is still no clear sign of a speaker. Let's hope that this isn't a re-run of 1855 and 1856, when it took 133 ballots," Aguilar said during a press conference.

On Tuesday, the House met for its first session of the 118th Congress, during which lawmakers typically select a speaker. However, Republicans failed to gather the necessary 218 votes behind a single nominee, with 20 of the party's members opposing the leadership bid of Congressman Kevin McCarthy.

The United States effectively does not have a House of Representatives at the moment, Lieu said, adding that the situation cannot continue.

Members are still considered Representatives-elect, as they have not been sworn into office. If this were to occur during a Congress following a presidential election, lawmakers would be unable to certify results, Lieu noted.

The situation marks the first time in a century that the House has not selected a speaker on the first ballot.

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US Envoy Visits Saudi Arabia to Support Reaching Truce Extension in Yemen - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking has traveled to Saudi Arabia and Jordan to support the sides to the conflict in Yemen reach a ceasefire extension, the US State Department said on Wednesday.

"US Special Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking traveled to Jordan and Saudi Arabia on January 3 to advance UN-led peace efforts and to support the Yemeni parties to reach an agreement on a truce extension and expansion, for the sake of all Yemenis," the State Department said in a press release.

The State Department emphasized that only a durable ceasefire and an inclusive political settlement will end the current conflict in Yemen and reverse the country's humanitarian crisis.

"We urge the Houthis to cooperate with the UN and listen to Yemeni calls for justice, accountability, and peace," the release said. "Yemenis deserve to determine the future of their country, and the United States remains committed to supporting a sustainable end to over eight years of conflict."

Yemen has been engulfed in an armed conflict between government forces and the Houthi rebels since 2014. The situation was exacerbated in March 2015, when a Saudi-led coalition working in cooperation with the internationally-recognized Yemeni government began conducting air, land and sea operations against the Houthis. The latter have retaliated by attacking Saudi forces and firing missiles at Saudi Arabia.

In April 2022, a two-month ceasefire was declared in Yemen under the auspices of the United Nations and the support of the parties to the conflict. In early August, the warring sides agreed to extend the truce until October 2 to negotiate an expanded truce.

UN Special Envoy for Yemen Hans Grundberg announced on October 2 that the Yemeni government and the Houthi rebels had failed to negotiate an extension of the truce.

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US, Taiwan to Hold Trade Talks January 14-17 - American Institute in Taiwan

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The United States and Taiwan will hold trade negotiations in Taipei from January 14-17, the American Institute in Taiwan said in a press release on Wednesday.

"The United States and Taiwan, under the auspices of the American Institute in Taiwan (AIT) and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States (TECRO), will hold an in-person negotiating round for the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade in Taipei, Taiwan, from January 14-17, 2023," the release said.

The AIT serves as the United States' de facto representation in Taiwan.

The US delegation to the trade talks will be led by Assistant Trade Representative for China Affairs Terry McCartin, the release said. The delegation will include representatives from several US government agencies, the release added.

The US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade was launched by the two countries last June to develop concrete ways to deepen their economic and trade relationship.

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Dozens of US, Western Parts Found Inside Iranian Drone Downed in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - Dozens of parts manufactured by US and other Western companies were recovered from an Iranian drone reportedly downed in Ukraine last autumn, CNN reported on Wednesday, citing a Ukrainian intelligence assessment.

The assessment found that 40 of the 52 components removed from an Iranian Shahed-136 drone were manufactured by 13 different US companies, while the remaining 12 parts were made in countries including Canada, Switzerland, Japan and China, the report said.

Ukraine shared the assessment tying Western components to the drone with the United States late last year, the report said.

The assessment shows the extent of the problem the Biden administration is attempting to address in shutting down Iran's access to technologies that could be used in drones, the report said.

Last month, US media reported that the White House created a task force to investigate how US and Western parts, such as semiconductors and GPS units, have ended up in Iranian drones. Iranian companies appear to be obtaining critical components and electronics despite export control restrictions and other US sanctions aimed at preventing their acquisition, the report said. Moscow and Tehran have denied allegations that Iran is supplying combat drones to Russia for the use in Ukraine, with the Iranian Foreign Ministry calling Kiev's rhetoric on the matter "irresponsible."

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UN Says Has Not Received Poland Request to Assist in Getting War Reparations From Germany

UNITED NATIONS, January 4 (Sputnik) - The president and the Office of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) have not received a request by Poland to help it receive wartime reparations from Germany, according to UNGA representatives.

"No info on this meeting. No request made," the spokesperson for the President of the 76th Session of the UNGA Paulina Kubiak told Sputnik.

The Office of the Spokesperson for the UN Secretary-General also said that it has not received any letters from Poland regarding reparations from Germany.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Polish Foreign Ministry said the German government had informed them via a diplomatic note that Berlin does not intend to negotiate with Warsaw regarding wartime reparations.

On Tuesday, Arkadiusz Mularczyk, a senior official spearheading Poland's demands for wartime reparations from Germany, said that Warsaw had asked the United Nations for help receive war reparations. In December, Poland had already made similar appeals to the Council of Europe and the UN cultural agency UNESCO.

Relations between Poland and Germany have been strained by Warsaw's repeated claims of damages during World War II. Warsaw estimates its losses caused by the occupation of Nazi Germany at 6.2 trillion zlotys (US\$1.36 trillion). Germany has said that the Polish government had relinquished all demands for reparations under the agreement of 1953.

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Biden Calls US House's Failure to Elect Speaker 'Embarrassing' - White House

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives' failure to elect a speaker on the first day of the 118th Congress is embarrassing for the United States, but is not his problem, President Joe Biden said on Wednesday, according to the White House.

"That's not my problem," Biden told reporters when asked about the situation, adding that it is "embarrassing" for the process to take so long.

The US president also said that the rest of the world is watching what is happening in the House of Representatives.

On Tuesday, the new class of House lawmakers met for their first session, during which time the chamber typically selects a speaker from the majority party. However, Republicans were unable to gather 218 votes behind a single candidate, with 20 of their 222 members opposing the leadership bid of Congressman Kevin McCarthy.

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Cryptocurrency Exchange Coinbase to Pay \$50Mln for Violating US Anti-Money-Laundering Laws

WASHINGTON, January 4 (Sputnik) - The cryptocurrency exchange platform Coinbase announced on Wednesday that it will pay \$50 million in fines for violating US anti-money-laundering laws and will invest an additional \$50 million to enhance its compliance program.

"Earlier today, the NYDFS announced a consent order that outlines the NYDFS's concerns from that investigation about our 2018-2019 compliance program and the compliance backlogs that grew alongside our company's growth in 2021," Coinbase said in a press release. "Today's consent order includes a \$50 million penalty. Coinbase has also committed to \$50 million in compliance program investments over the next two years."

Coinbase said in the release that its resolution is a critical step in its commitment for continuous improvement, engagement with key regulators and the push for a greater compliance in the cryptocurrency space.

"We took NYDFS's concerns seriously and have taken substantial measures to address these historical shortcomings," the release said.

Earlier on Wednesday, Superintendent of Financial Services Adrienne Harris announced that Coinbase will pay a \$50 million penalty to New York State for significant failures in its compliance program that violated the New York Banking Law and the New York State Department of Financial Services' virtual currency, money transmitter, transaction monitoring and cybersecurity regulations.

Harris said the failures made the Coinbase platform vulnerable to serious criminal conduct, including, among other things, examples of fraud, possible money laundering, suspected child sexual abuse material-related activity and potential narcotics trafficking.

Coinbase went public on the Nasdaq stock exchange via a direct stock listing in April 2021. The platform was briefly valued at \$100 billion in its Nasdaq debut, which was a breakthrough for the cryptocurrency industry.

The platform was set up in 2012 to make it easier to buy and sell digital coins in a bid to open up the global financial system and currently serves 108 million users.