

1/6/23 Friday

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'Their Problem to Fix': Dems Refuse to Help McCarthy, GOP After AOC Floats 'Coalition Government'
By - Wyatt Reed

The hullabaloo in the House is set to continue Thursday with Republicans unable to secure the necessary votes to nominate Rep. Kevin McCarthy – and Democrats unwilling to help them out. Prominent US Democrats are declining to help the Republican Party overcome dissent within its ranks and help Rep. Kevin McCarthy get the 218 votes he needs in order to become the next speaker of the House of Representatives.

The race to secure the speaker's gavel was suspended Wednesday night after six failed votes, with officials later voting to postpone their session until noon Thursday.

Twenty Republican members of the House continue to stand in open revolt against McCarthy after casting their ballots for Florida's Rep. Byron Donalds in the fourth, fifth, and sixth rounds of voting.

In light of the impasse, a number of Democrats have offered the Republicans an alternative way out.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez speculated a continuing GOP failure to establish a consensus could "result in a potential coalition government." However, the incoming chair of the House Democratic Caucus, Rep. Pete Aguilar, threw cold water on the idea Wednesday.

"This is on them," Aguilar insisted during a press briefing in the Capitol.

"If there was something that was real, we would look at that," Aguilar said. "But I haven't seen any proof that Republicans are willing to engage."

"At the end of the day, this is a Republican mess," Rep. Ro Khanna claimed Tuesday night, adding that "this is their problem to fix."

The California Democrat couldn't resist getting in a jab at his Republican colleagues.

In a reference to Democrats' preferred choice for House speaker, Khanna joked "Democrats stand ready if they want to vote for Hakeem Jeffries."

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Virginia Police: Six-Year-Old Student Allegedly Shot Teacher in Newport News
By - Ian DeMartino

According to the school's website, there are 558 students enrolled at Richneck Elementary school, including 100 first-grade students.

A six-year-old boy has been taken into custody after he allegedly shot a Richneck Elementary School teacher in Newport News on Friday.

Police Chief Steve Drew told reporters during a news conference Friday evening that the victim was a female in her 30s and suffered potentially “life threatening” injuries. Police say her condition improved slightly later Friday, but did not provide a full update.

The chief said a handgun was used in the incident, but it is not known how the child came into possession of the firearm. He also said the incident was not a protracted shooting, but was isolated to the classroom.

Dr. George Parker, the superintendent of Newport News Public Schools, has stated the shooting occurred in a first-grade classroom but did not provide any details about the student.

“This was not a situation where we had a student, or any other individuals, going up and down the halls actively firing in a long shooting incident,” Drew stated.

Richneck Elementary has canceled classes for Monday. The status of classes after that date is not clear.

The police chief, who described the child as a “young man,” said the incident “was not an accidental shooting.” However, he did not explain how he came to that determination.

After the incident, students were moved to the school’s gymnasium where they were reunited with their families. Counselors were reportedly at the school, ready to talk with students who were affected by the incident. Parker said they would also be made available to school teachers and staff as well as parents of students.

Reporters asked Drew if the parents of the child were informed he had been involved and taken into custody, but he was unable to answer saying other officers were handling the matter and he’d “get a brief” on that situation after the conference. While answering that same question he stated: “I want to know where that firearm came from.”

“It hurts my heart,” newly-elected Newport News Mayor Phillip Jones said at the conference. “It is a dark day for Newport News, but we are going to learn from this and we are going to come back stronger.” Jones stated after the conference that he would head to the hospital to check on the victim and her family, promising to sleep there tonight.

Both Jones and Drew praised law enforcement’s response to the incident. Jones promised he, the school board, and the city council will take steps to make sure a similar event never happens again.

Parker said the community needs to work together to keep guns out of the hands of the youth. “Today, our students got a lesson in gun violence and what guns can do to disrupt not only an educational environment but also a family [and] a community,” Parker said. “We need community’s support – continued support – to make sure guns are not available to youth. I’m sounding like a broken record today, because I continue to reiterate that: we need to keep guns out of the hands of our young people.”

Parker noted the school does not require all students to walk through metal detectors but does have the capabilities to use metal detectors, adding they “randomly” screen students.

“We need to educate our children and keep them safe,” Parker said. “Today was really a breakdown of what our values are as a community, what our values are as a city, and what our values are as a school division.”

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Grab Your Shovels: Map Pointing Towards Nazi Treasure in the Netherlands Has Been Revealed
By - Ian DeMartino

The Dutch city of Arnhem was bombed by allied forces in the lead up to Operation Market Garden, which was intended to secure bridges that cross the Rhine and would have allowed an infantry invasion of northern Germany.

The National Archives of the Netherlands declassified a World War II-era file that contained a hand-drawn Nazi treasure map earlier this month, causing groups of amateur treasure hunters to descend on a small Dutch town in search of the long-lost valuables.

The map includes a cliché red X marking the spot where the treasure was supposedly buried. Officials declassified the findings after it had been in storage for more than 75 years, the maximum amount of time something can remain classified under Dutch law.

The archive believes the treasure came from an August 1944 allied bombing, which damaged the then-Rotterdamsche Bank in Arnhem, which is about 25 miles away from Ommeren where the cache is supposedly buried.

The contents from the bank's safes spilled out into the street during the bombing and German soldiers were said to have filled their pockets with watches, jewelry, and precious stones. According to the declassified documents, the treasure was then stored in ammunition boxes and hidden on a train. It was then buried somewhere in Ommeren in the weeks before allied forces liberated the area.

The documents state German soldiers Sergeant Major Kastel, Sergeant Bräuer, and Private Biebert were seen with the haul. Another German soldier identified as "Helmut" said he kept watch as the other three buried the treasure.

After the war, Dutch authorities followed rumors of the treasure and after being convinced it may exist, got into contact with Helmut, who had possession of the map. Two of the three other soldiers died in the war and officials were unable to locate the remaining soldier.

Armed with the map and with Helmut's assistance, authorities searched the area multiple times but never found the alleged treasure.

At the time, authorities came up with three possibilities for what happened to the treasure: Helmut made the whole thing up for some reason, a Dutch farmer in the area discovered the stash and dug it up, or someone from the Dutch institute investigated the rumors and "took advantage of their position" and dug it up before an official search began.

The institute says it is not sure whether the treasure exists but says they looked into it and found the story to be reliable.

However, Historian Joost Rosendaal from Radboud University [told](#) El País that while he thinks the story is worth investigating, he had doubts about the sequence of events. He notes that while there were bombardments in the area at the time, there are no records of banks in Arnhem being hit, adding that the bombing and looting of banks in the area were

well-documented. He also states that the Witzig battalion the soldiers belonged to were fighting on the eastern front of Latvia and Lithuania at the time.

“They only arrived in the Dutch region we are talking about in February 1945,” Rosendaal said. Despite the story’s inconsistencies and the previous searches that have come up empty, a yellowed map with a big red X indicating where treasure could be found has proven too tempting for treasure hunters to ignore.

“Like a lot of people, the news about the treasure made me go look for myself. The chance of the treasure still being here after 70 years is very small I think, but I want to give it a try,” 57-year-old Jan Henzen [told](#) Reuters while he searched for the Nazi treasure.

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Prominent CPAC Leader Matt Schlapp Accused of ‘Pummeling’ Male Staffer’s Genitals
By - Ian DeMartino

Matt Schlapp is the chairman of the American Conservative Union, which hosts the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC). He is also a close ally to former President Donald Trump and leads the Cove Strategies lobbying firm. Schlapp is married to former Trump White House aide Mercedes Schlapp.

A former male aide for the Hersh Walker campaign is accusing Matt Schlapp, the chairman of the American Conservative Union and a prominent leader in conservative politics, of groping him.

“He reached between my legs and fondled me. To my shame I didn’t say anything [to make him stop,]” the aide told NBC News, who is withholding the aide’s name because he fears it will negatively affect his GOP political career.

Schlapp and his lawyer did not respond to NBC News about the allegations, but his lawyer did tell The Daily Beast that Schlapp denies the allegations.

A Walker campaign senior official did confirm to NBC that the aide told him about the allegations when they occurred in October.

On October 19, Schlapp was at an event for the Walker campaign in Perry, Georgia, about 100 miles south of Atlanta. The Walker aide, who was assigned to chauffeur Schlapp, says he was invited by Schlapp for drinks at the Capital Grille in Atlanta and thought the face-to-face could advance his career.

After leaving the bar because it was “dead,” the two went to Manuel’s Tavern, a popular spot for Georgian politicians, particularly Democrats. It was at the new bar where the aide says things got uncomfortable, with Schlapp “intruding” his personal space. The aide notes Schlapp bumped into his gun when their legs were touching and asked him what he was carrying.

The aide told him his firearm was a Sig Sauer, a firearm company that makes multiple types of guns but is best known for its P365 handgun. However, the aide recalled he was surprised Schlapp, a prominent proponent of the Second Amendment, was unfamiliar with the gun.

After the two left the bar, they headed to the Hilton Garden Inn near the Atlanta airport. The aide recorded a video a few hours after the ride, describing what he says happened that night.

“From Manuel’s Tavern to the Hilton Garden Inn there at the Atlanta airport, he literally had his hands on me. Matt Schlapp of the CPAC grabbed my junk and pummeled it at length.”

The aide did not post the video publicly but did share it with NBC News.

“To my shame, I did not say ‘no’ or ‘stop,’” the staffer continues in the video according to NBC. “God knows it was not a wanted advance.”

The aide then says Schlapp invited him up to his hotel room but he refused. The next day the aide sent text messages to Schlapp, saying he was uncomfortable with the events of the previous day, and that “the campaign does have a driver who is available to get you to Macon and back to the airport.” The aide reportedly shared screenshots of the conversation with NBC news.

According to a screenshot of the staffer’s call log, Schlapp attempted to call the staffer at least three times after the text messages, but the staffer did not answer.

A Walker senior campaign official confirmed Schlapp did not show up to the event the following day and did not communicate with the Walker campaign about arranging a ride for him.

Both a campaign official and the staffer confirmed the Walker campaign made legal resources available to the staffer who ultimately chose to not pursue legal action. Instead, he says he is speaking to the media to bring light to Schlapp’s behavior, which the aide described as predatory.

“The whole thing makes me physically ill,” the senior Walker campaign official told NBC News.

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Bolsonaro Supporters Storm Presidential Palace and Congress Building

By - Mary Manley

Supporters of Brazil’s former president have been protesting the results of the October 30 presidential elections which saw Lula defeat Bolsonaro by a thin margin. Supporters of the former president have been protesting since then, by blocking roads, setting vehicles on fire, and camping outside of military buildings.

On [Sunday](#) supporters of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro stormed the National Congress building in Brazil. Lusa News, a Portuguese National News Agency, reported that hundreds of people invaded the building and called for a military intervention to overthrow [President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva](#), a left-wing veteran, who was inaugurated last week.

Bolsonaro’s supporters pushed through police barricades and stormed the Congress building—where Brazil’s Senate and Chamber of Deputies conducts its legislative business. On social media the rioters were seen climbing on top of the building’s roof, causing damage to the building, including breaking its windows. Protestors were met with tear gas and noise grenades. Planalto Palace was also stormed, according to some social media posts.

The scene in Brazil mimics that of the [January 6 United States Capitol attack](#), during which supporters of former President Donald Trump stormed the Capitol in an effort to keep Trump in power, despite his loss in the 2020 election to President Joe Biden.

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Biden Makes First Public Comment About Pro-Bolsonaro Rioters, 400 Reportedly Arrested So Far

By - Mary Manley

On Sunday supporters of former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro stormed the National Congress building in Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. The rioters, who are seeking to keep Bolsonaro in power despite President Lula da Silva's election win in October, rushed past police and caused damage to government buildings.

US President Joe Biden called the pro-Bolsonaro attack on government buildings "outrageous". It was Biden's first comment about the riot in Brasilia, during which supporters of Brazil's former president broke into the country's congressional building, Supreme Court, and presidential palace. Across social media some have called the riot an "attack on democracy".

[Biden](#) also addressed the riot on Twitter, writing: "I condemn the assault on democracy and on the peaceful transfer of power in Brazil. Brazil's democratic institutions have our full support and the will of the Brazilian people must not be undermined. I look forward to continuing to work with @LulaOficial."

The riot took place about a week following the inauguration of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, a veteran leftist and former president of Brazil who defeated Bolsonaro, a right-wing politician, in late October during Brazil's presidential election. The attack comes after about two months of protesting from Bolsonaro supporters who set vehicles on fire, blocked roads and camped outside of military buildings.

The attack, which comes just two days after the second anniversary of the January 6 attack on Capitol Hill, is undoubtedly a reminder of when supporters of former President Donald Trump stormed the US Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. in an attempt to prevent a joint session of Congress from formalizing the victory of President-elect Joe Biden.

Since the attack Brazil's Congress, supreme court and presidential palace have all been secured by officials, and thus far at least 400 rioters who took part in storming Brazil's government buildings have been arrested, said the governor of Brasilia, Ibaneis Rocha, on Twitter.

"I come to inform you that more than 400 people have already been arrested and will pay for the crimes committed. We continue working to identify all the others who participated in these terrorist acts this afternoon in the Federal District. We continue to work to restore order," wrote Rocha on Twitter.

One Twitter user was quick to point out the government of Brazil's short response time to the attack, writing: "At least 400 Bolsonaro supporters arrested already. The response to this has put the U.S. response to 1/6 to shame," referring to the January 6 attack on the US Capitol. [Lula](#) condemned the attack calling it "barbarism" while promising to "find and punish" those involved. He also was quick to criticize the police shortly after the incident, saying: "The police didn't do anything at all. They just let the protestors in," during a televised address. The

president also labeled the protestors as "fanatic fascists" who represent "everything that's abominable" in politics.

Bolsonaro, a polarizing figure with right-wing policies was first elected in 2018. During the election he questioned the security of Brazil's electronic voting system without any credible evidence and railed against mainstream media as dishonest. The former president--an acolyte of Trump's who is believed to be in Miami, Florida--has condemned the actions of his supporters but has denied responsibility for Sunday's attack.

"Peaceful demonstrations, in the form of the law, are part of democracy. However, depredations and invasions of public buildings as occurred today, as well as those practiced by the left in 2013 and 2017, escape the rule," Bolsonaro wrote on Twitter.

[Political leaders](#) across the globe have publicly condemned the attack on Brazil's government buildings, including: Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, the European Union, Chilean President Gabriel Boric, Colombian President Gustavo Petro, Argentine President Alberto Fernandez, French President Emmanuel Macron, and the far-right leader of Italy, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni.

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Biden in Mexico for North American Summit, Talk Will Focus on Immigration and Drug Trafficking
By - Mary Manley

The summit, which is being referred to as the "three amigos" summit, started off with a politically charged bang when Biden made his first trip to the US-Mexico border since taking office. He is expected to meet with Trudeau and AMLO to discuss immigration issues, drug trafficking, climate change, trade, the economy and energy.

US President Joe Biden and Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will gather in Mexico City this week to meet with Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador (AMLO) for their first summit since late 2021. It also marks the first time a US leader has visited Mexico in nearly a decade.

Climate change, drug trafficking, and immigration issues will most likely be the focus of the North American Summit as Biden, who is now entering his third year as president, has been heavily criticized on immigration issues by both Democrats and Republicans. US Customs and Border Protection reported a record-breaking number of nearly 2.4 million border encounters just last year.

The "[three amigos](#)" will have to discuss more than immigration, though, as an array of other difficult issues will also be on the table, including the heavy flow of fentanyl across the US border which killed more than 100,000 people in 2021 alone.

Climate change, drug trafficking, and immigration issues will "dominate" the North American Leader's Summit, said John Kirby, the White House National Security Council spokesman. He added in Friday's press briefing that "economic security, prosperity, democratic stability, and of course, migration management" depends on strong relationships with Canada and Mexico.

"A meeting like this is so that we keep moving forward on economic integration," AMLO said this week.

However, the US and Mexico remain in a tight [energy dispute](#) as the two struggle for control of the market. Both the US and Canada believe AMLO's actions have breached a trade deal made by the three countries. Their dispute with Mexico on energy will likely overshadow any discussion of jobs.

Just before the visit, Biden announced a major [policy](#) change for the US-Mexico border to address dissatisfaction from both Democrats and Republicans regarding his border policy. With permission from Mexico, the US will begin to admit up to 30,000 migrants a month from Nicaragua, Cuba, Haiti, and Venezuela under a humanitarian parole program, while those outside of the program will subject to expulsion.

From the viewpoint of activists Biden's policy change is seen as a rebuff of his campaign promise to protect asylum seekers, but may cool the Republican backlash he has been faced with for months.

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Prince Harry Believes Return to UK Impossible After Family Rift

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) – British Prince Harry ruled out the possibility of his family returning to the United Kingdom, saying that a "third party" would make it unsurvivable even if such an arrangement was done between him and the other Royals.

"I do not think it is going to be possible. Even if there was an agreement or an arrangement between me and my family, there is that third party that is going to do everything they can to make sure that that isn't possible. They are making it unsurvivable," Prince Harry told ABC News, presenting his memoir "Spare."

He also doubted that "we can ever have peace with my family unless the truth is out there." Prince Harry, however, agreed he is also responsible for the breakdown of the relationship with the Royal Family. "Without question, I am sure," he said.

Speaking of late Queen Elizabeth II, Harry said they had a very good relationship. She never said to him she was "angry" about him and his wife Meghan stepping back from royal duties, he said, expressing belief she was "sad that it got to that point."

Prince Harry and US actress Meghan Markle got married in 2018. They left the UK in 2020. In March 2021, the couple gave a scandalous interview to Oprah Winfrey, in which they accused their royal relatives of indifference, pressure and racism. Since then, the couple's relationship with the royal family has remained strained.

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UPDATE - Biden Declares State of Emergency for California Due to Winter Storms – White House

(Updates death toll in para 5, adds details in para 6)

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden has declared a state of emergency for California, ordering federal assistance to supplement local, tribal, and state responses to successive winter storms, flooding and mudslides, the White House said on Monday.

"The President's action authorizes the Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), to coordinate all disaster relief efforts which have the purpose of alleviating the hardship and suffering caused by the emergency on the local population, and to provide appropriate assistance for required emergency measures, authorized under Title V of the Stafford Act, to save lives and to protect property and public health and safety, and to lessen or avert the threat of a catastrophe in the counties of El Dorado, Los Angeles, Mariposa, Mendocino, Merced, Monterey, Napa, Placer, Riverside, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Sonoma, Stanislaus, and Ventura," the release stated.

Category B emergency protective measures will be 75% federally funded.

FEMA has appointed Andrew F. Grant as the federal coordinating officer for federal recovery operations in the affected areas.

Twelve people have died in California as a result of severe floods, Governor Gavin Newsom said on Sunday.

He urged California residents to stay home, warning that storms this week could pose even greater danger.

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US Lawmakers Say No Refuge for Bolsonaro in US After Supporters Storm Brazil Congress

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) - The United States should no longer provide refuge to former Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who has been in Florida since late December, after the Brazil Congress storming, US Democratic lawmakers said.

"He basically used the Trump playbook to inspire domestic terrorists to try to take over the government. He's actually very close to Donald Trump. He should be extradited to Brazil. In fact, it was reported that he was under investigation for corruption and fled Brazil to the United States," Rep. Joaquin Castro told CNN on Sunday.

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez echoed the call for the US to "cease granting refuge to Bolsonaro in Florida."

"Nearly 2 years to the day the US Capitol was attacked by fascists, we see fascist movements abroad attempt to do the same in Brazil. We must stand in solidarity with @LulaOficial's democratically elected government," she tweeted.

On Sunday, supporters of Bolsonaro stormed the National Congress building, Palacio do Planalto, one of the official palaces of the Presidency, and the Supreme Court building in the

Brazilian capital in protest of the 2022 presidential election results. Police regained control of the buildings in the evening of the same day.

Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who was sworn in on January 1, called the attack on the government buildings barbaric and ordered the use of federal forces to restore order in the capital.

Many countries and international organizations in the Americas have come out in support of the Brazilian president, calling the protesters' actions an anti-democratic coup attempt.

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Over 7,000 Hospital Nurses Strike in New York – Union

WASHINGTON, January 9 (Sputnik) – More than 7,000 nurses in New York City are striking Monday, according to a union release.

"After bargaining late into the night at Montefiore and Mount Sinai Hospital yesterday, no tentative agreements were reached," the release stated. "Today, more than 7,000 nurses at two hospitals are on strike for fair contracts that improve patient care."

The New York State Nurses Association (NYSNA) said the picketing would take place at four hospitals: Montefiore Moses, Montefiore Weiler, and Montefiore Hutch in the Bronx, and Mount Sinai in Manhattan.

On Sunday, New York Governor Kathy Hochul released a statement asking for binding arbitration and calling on the Department of Health to enforce nurse staffing requirements under the law.

NYSNA is the state's largest union for registered nurses, representing more than 42,000 members.

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Biden Declares State of Emergency for California Due to Winter Storms – White House

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Mendocino, Merced, Monterey, Napa, Placer, Riverside, Sacramento, San Bernardino, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Sonoma, Stanislaus, and Ventura," the release stated. Category B emergency protective measures will be 75% federally funded. FEMA has appointed Andrew F. Grant as the federal coordinating officer for federal recovery operations in the affected areas. At least six people were reported dead due to the ongoing winter storms in California.

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ICRC Cautious When Using Social Media Amid Threat of Manipulation - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 9 (Sputnik) - The International Committee of the Red Cross is cautious when using social media platforms for its humanitarian mandate due to the possibility of misinformation, the ICRC Spokesperson in Ukraine Achille Despres told Sputnik. "The issue with social media is that it can be subject to manipulation, and to malicious use. So we are very cautious in a way in our use of these new platforms," Despres told Sputnik. Social media platforms can be an incredible tool when looking for missing persons but they have to be careful about misinformation, he added. ICRC has a big role in looking for missing people and loved ones during a conflict. The organization has also established a special bureau of its tracking agency to focus on the Ukrainian conflict. The ICRC role is the same as in the First World War and in the Second World War - it's the same system of filling in cards and sending it to the Red Cross except that it is digitalized. The ICRC has been working in Ukraine since 2014. It has been providing humanitarian assistance, including food, water and other essential items, to the civilian population suffering from attacks on critical infrastructure. The organization has significantly intensified its activities after Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24.

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ICRC Offices in Kiev, Moscow Boost Cooperation to Give Aid in Impartial Manner - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, January 9 (Sputnik) - The offices of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Kiev and Moscow have increased cooperation in order to better provide much needed humanitarian assistance in an impartial manner, ICRC Kiev office spokesperson Achille Despres told Sputnik. "I would say that our collaboration with our colleagues based in Moscow has actually increased because we have to come to coordinate our work. We are working together on a number of issues and we're all part of the same organization. Our job is to provide humanitarian assistance and do that in a neutral, impartial manner," Despres said.

The ICRC is the only humanitarian organization based in both Ukraine and Russia, and this is why its functioning is critical to providing assistance, Despres said.

In the beginning of January, ICRC President Mirjana Spoljaric announced her intention to visit Russia and meet with the country's authorities. During the previous month, Spoljaric arrived in Ukraine on a four-day visit to meet with civilians from the Mykolaiv and Kherson regions.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that Moscow demanded that international organizations condemn the execution of Russian prisoners of war by the Ukrainian forces and conduct a thorough investigation. All those involved in the execution of Russian prisoners in Ukraine would be identified and no one will escape retribution, she added.

The ICRC has been working in Ukraine since 2014 and has provided humanitarian assistance, including food, water and other essential items, to the civilian population. The organization has significantly intensified its activities after Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24.

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ICRC Creating Digital Emblem to Shield Health Facilities From Cyber Attacks - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 9 (Sputnik) - The International Committee of the Red Cross is at an early stage of creating a digital emblem to protect humanitarian facilities from cyber attacks, ICRC Spokesperson in Ukraine, Achille Despres, told Sputnik.

"It's [the emblem] at a very early stage. It's something that we have proposed in a way to open a debate about this because, of course, for us, it's quite clear that international humanitarian law applies in cyberspace just as much as it applies in physical space," Despres told Sputnik.

The idea is that cyber belligerents should recognize that protection should be awarded to some special categories of institutions such as humanitarian organizations or health facilities, he added.

The process will take some time but the ICRC is welcoming states to take their positions and encouraging them to propose ideas, he said.

The ICRC has proposed a digital emblem in the beginning of November last year and it is hoping to gain the states' support.

ICRC wants to avoid any major cyber attack which could threaten all of the data and confidential information of individuals ICRC is storing, he added.

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ICRC in Regular Contact at Military Level With Russia, Ukraine - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 9 (Sputnik) - The International Committee of the Red Cross is in constant dialogue with Russian and Ukrainian authorities at the military and political levels, ICRC Spokesperson in Kiev, Achille Despres, told Sputnik.

"This is a very, very important part of our work, because as in any international armed conflict, it is our job to talk to the parties to the conflict - so in this case, the Russian Federation and Ukraine," Despres told Sputnik. "So, we are in our organization in contact on a very regular basis with authorities from these countries with authorities at the political level but also at the military level."

The organization, he added, is in constant dialogue with the parties to the conflict, he added. The line of contact is essential to be able to carry out activities of the organization, but also to remind Russia and Ukraine about their obligations under the rules of war, international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions.

In the beginning of January, the President of the ICRC Mirjana Spoljaric signaled her intention to visit Russia, where she is supposed to meet with the Russian authorities. Spoljaric arrived in Ukraine for a four-day visit to meet with civilians from the Mykolaiv and Kherson regions.

The work of the International Committee of the Red Cross has also become more complicated due to the increase in basic needs linked to the onset of winter and damaged infrastructure.

The ICRC has been working in Ukraine since 2014. It has been providing humanitarian assistance, including food, water and other essential items, to the civilian population suffering from attacks on critical infrastructure. The organization has significantly intensified its coordination among its offices in Kiev and Moscow after Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24.

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ICRC Looking at Facial Recognition Systems for Identifying Missing Persons - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 9 (Sputnik) - The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) seeks to use the latest technology to be more efficient at fulfilling its humanitarian mandate and is currently working on facial recognition projects, ICRC Spokesperson in Ukraine Achille Despres told Sputnik.

"We are always trying to use new technology and new developments in technology to better our humanitarian services to make it in a way that we can assist people in a more efficient manner," Despres said.

The ICRC is working on facial recognition technology projects, he added, which would allow the team to look into its database to find matches for missing persons.

Looking for missing people is one of the biggest mandates of the ICRC. In March, the organization established a special bureau of its tracking agency to focus on the Ukrainian conflict.

The ICRC has been working in Ukraine since 2014. It has been providing humanitarian assistance, including food, water and other essential items, to the civilian population suffering

from attacks on critical infrastructure. The organization has significantly intensified its activities after Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24.

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ICRC Visit to Prisoners on Both Sides of Ukraine Conflict 'Positive Step' - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 9 (Sputnik) - The International Committee of the Red Cross recent visit to prisoners of war on both sides of the Ukrainian conflict is a positive direction but access to all prisoners has to be granted, ICRC Spokesperson in Kiev Achille Despres told Sputnik.

"Recently, we have been able to make some new visits of Ukrainian prisoners of war and Russian prisoners of war. This is a very positive step. We think this is a step in the right direction," Despres said. "And we hope that this will lead in the future to regular unimpeded and full access to these prisoners of war because this is a legal obligation from both parties to the conflict to give us that access and it's also a humanitarian imperative for us to be able to check on their conditions and inform their family."

The ICRC cannot comment publicly on the conditions of the prisoners as that is something that is passed bilaterally only to Moscow and Kiev, he added.

The organization has also been actively asking the Russian and Ukrainian authorities to give full access because it is their legal obligation.

"We have been able to access several hundreds of them [prisoners of war] on both sides, but we know that there are 1000s more that we need to have access to," Despres said.

In November last year, the spokeswoman for the ICRC Moscow delegation, Galina Balzamova, told Sputnik that the organization is monitoring all cases of human rights violations and inhumane treatment in Ukraine prohibited by international law.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said that Moscow demanded that international organizations condemn the execution of Russian prisoners of war by Kiev forces and conduct a thorough investigation. All those involved in the execution of Russian prisoners in Ukraine would be identified, no one will escape retribution, she added.

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ICRC Sets Up Bureau to Trace Those Missing in Ukraine Conflict, 1st Time Since WWII

UNITED NATIONS, January 9 (Sputnik) - The International Committee of the Red Cross has set up a special bureau in charge of locating people missing in the Ukraine conflict in a step not seen since World War II, ICRC spokesperson in Kiev Achille Despres told Sputnik.

"Keeping families connected in times of war is one of the main missions of the ICRC since our founding," Despres told Sputnik. "And we have for this particular international conflict established a bureau of our central tracing agency, that's the first time that we have done that since the Second World War."

Like during World War I and II, it is the system of filling in cards and sending it to the Red Cross except that it is digitalized, he added.

People who have relatives or loved ones gone missing can contact the ICRC bureau and file a request. Then, the ICRC will check its systems based on the information that it gets from the parties to the conflict. The organization cannot verify information from social media, as it can be subject to manipulation or misinformation.

The special bureau was established in March of 2022 and has so far received around 50,000 inquiries. The ICRC has a team in Geneva that operates a call center where people can call about their loved ones, and that gets around 800 calls a day.

"It's just incredibly painful. And sometimes the fact of not knowing is even worse. People need answers and this is what we tell the parties to the conflict," Despres said.

The ICRC spokesperson said the organization has so far contacted people 4,000 times via email or by phone, saying they know where their loved ones are.

On January 1, ICRC President Mirjana Spoljaric announced she will visit Russia and meet with Russian authorities. The visit comes after her four-day trip to Ukraine, where she met with civilians from the Mykolaiv and Kherson regions.

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RPT: PREVIEW - Biden Visiting Southern Border in First Trip as President Amid Record Migration in Region

WASHINGTON, January 8 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden will visit the US southern border on Sunday to assess federal immigration enforcement efforts to manage the record-breaking surge of migrants arriving in the United States under his watch.

Biden's political opponents have repeatedly slammed the president for failing to visit the border amid the crisis. Former President Trump last week unveiled his own plan to secure the border, which included strikes on cartels.

The United States has seen two consecutive record breaking years of illegal crossings into its territory 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.

400,000 migrants have come to the southern border since October (which is start of fiscal year 2023). During Trump's last year in office that was how many migrants came all year in his last year in 2020.

Biden in remarks last week said his visit to El Paso, Texas is to assess border enforcement operations, meet with the local officials and community leaders, possibly also migrants. The US president added that he will listen about what US immigration enforcement officials and communities need in order to appropriately manage the influx of migrants arriving on the southern border.

Biden said he intends to convince Republicans in Congress to cooperate with him to help provide more tools that will help alleviate pressure on US federal agencies and border communities feeling the pressure of dealing with the border crisis.

In the previous week, prior to Biden's visit to the southern border, his administration rolled out new measures designed to help deter the high migration levels on the border.

Biden's plan includes admitting up to 30,000 migrants from Venezuela, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Cuba each month; admitting up to 20,000 migrant refugees from other countries in Latin America and the Caribbean; providing nearly \$23 million to Mexico and countries in Central America to help manage migration in the region; increasing funding to US border cities impacted by the border crisis; and surging immigration judges to the US southern border to help process migrants.

Moreover, Biden's new policy includes a five-year reentry ban for migrants caught making a second unlawful entry into the United States and who are not eligible to be expelled under the Title 42 public health rule that has been used since the Trump era to deter the flow of migrants.

ON THE FRONT LINE: BIDEN BORDER POLICIES INEFFECTIVE SO FAR

In December, National Border Patrol Council vice president Chris Cabrera told Sputnik that morale among US Border Patrol agents is extremely low as they brace for the border crisis to intensify once Title 42 is lifted, with a final decision expected to be made by the Supreme Court this summer.

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

In late December, a Sputnik correspondent reported that the Biden administration erected a sprawling tent camp in El Paso that will be used to house an anticipated surge of migrants arriving on the US border with Mexico.

The correspondent, in November and December, witnessed tens of thousands of migrants arriving to the US-Mexico border in the Mexican border city of Juarez, more than a thousand migrants lined up each day for more than a week to wait their turn to enter the United States. According to media reports, the Biden administration expects some 14,000 asylum-seeking migrants to cross the US southern border into the United States if Title 42 is rescinded.

Cabrera, who works in one of the busiest sectors for illegal migration on the southern border known as the Rio Grande Valley, emphasized that the only way to address the crisis on the southern border is through legislative action, but Democrats and Republicans for the most part have failed to make any substantial progress on the issue.

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

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PREVIEW - Biden Visiting Southern Border in First Trip as President Amid Record Migration in Region

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Wisconsin to Ban Tiktok on State Devices - Governor

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The Governor of Wisconsin Tony Evers said in an interview that he will issue an executive order next week banning TikTok in state government issued electronic devices.

"I'll be issuing an executive order early next week to ban that," Evers said on Friday when asked if he will ban TikTok on state government issued electronic devices.

Evers noted that less than 30 state employees used the TikTok social media app on state-issued devices.

TikTok has been the subject of US federal government scrutiny for alleged ties between their parent company, ByteDance, and the Chinese government.

The US states of Pennsylvania, Kansas, Louisiana, West Virginia, Montana, Virginia, Georgia, New Hampshire, Idaho, North Dakota, Iowa, Alabama, Utah, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Texas, South Carolina, South Dakota, Nebraska, and Florida have banned TikTok from state owned electronic devices due to national security concerns.

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US, Japan Sign Pact to Boost Operational Collaboration on Cybersecurity - DHS

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas and Japan's Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry Yasutoshi Nishimura signed an agreement to enhance cooperation on cybersecurity issues of mutual concern, the US Department of Homeland Security said in a press release.

"Secretary Mayorkas and Minister Nishimura also signed an updated memorandum of cooperation on cybersecurity that will allow their agencies to strengthen operational collaboration, enhance the security of critical infrastructure, foster more opportunities for partnership, and continue sharing best practices with our Indo-Pacific partners," Homeland Security said in the release on Friday.

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Fast Food Giant McDonalds to Make Job Cuts - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - Fast food titan McDonald's is planning to cut some of its corporate staff, CNN reported citing a company memorandum.

"We will evaluate roles and staffing levels in parts of the organization and there will be difficult discussions and decisions ahead," CEO Chris Kempczinski said in a memo to employees obtained by the network on Friday. "Certain initiatives will be de-prioritized or stopped altogether. This will help us move faster as an organization, while reducing our global costs and freeing up resources to invest in our growth."

McDonald's says it plans to communicate its future staffing plans by April 3rd. The company does not have a set dollar amount to cut or a number of employees he's planning to let go, the report added.

McDonald's currently had upwards of 200,000 corporate employees and workers at company-owned restaurants at the end of 2021, the report noted, and more than 75% of those jobs were based outside of the United States.

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Austin Discusses New Military Aid for Kiev With Ukrainian Counterpart - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in a phone call with his Ukrainian counterpart, Minister of Defense Oleksii Reznikov, discussed the new package of military assistance of more than \$3 billion, Pentagon Spokesman Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder said in a press release.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke with Ukrainian Minister of Defence Oleksii Reznikov to discuss today's commitment of more than \$3 billion in additional security assistance, including Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, additional armored vehicles, artillery systems and ammunition, and other key capabilities," the release said on Friday.

The Pentagon Chief reiterated the US commitment to encourage Allies and partners to make additional donations of air defense systems, combat vehicles, and other critical capabilities to support Ukraine, according to the release.

Earlier in the day, the Biden administration announced its largest to-date package of military assistance to Ukraine worth \$3.75 billion that includes \$225 million for Ukrainian military modernization and \$682 million for US allies and partners on NATO's eastern flank in Europe. The new funding will buy Ukraine a long list of military equipment and ammunition, including 50 Bradley fighting vehicles with 500 TOW anti-tank missiles and 250,000 rounds of 25mm ammunition, 100 M113 Armored Personnel Carriers, Sea Sparrow RIM-7 missiles for air defense, additional ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS), and 100 M113 Armored Personnel Carriers.

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Biden Says on 2nd Anniversary of Capitol Riot US Not Land of Autocrats, Extremists

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said during a ceremony at the White House on the second anniversary of the Capitol riot that the United States should not be a land for extremists and violence.

"America is a land of laws and not chaos, a nation of peace and not violence," Biden said on Friday. "We're not a land of kings and dictators, autocrats and extremists. As we see today's honorees, we're a nation of 'we the people.'"

Biden awarded the Presidential Citizens Medal to several US Capitol police officers who helped defend the building against demonstrators who aimed to block Congress from certifying then-Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election. Two years ago, demonstrators entered the US Capitol to protest Congress for certifying the results of the 2020 presidential election from several US states that then-President Donald Trump said are fraudulent.

The incident prompted the launching of a congressional panel probe and federal investigations that have seen over 950 people charged for their involvement in the riot.

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Trump Sued Over Death of Capitol Police Officer Who Died During Insurrection - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump and two other individuals who participated in the Capitol insurrection two years ago are being sued over the death of Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick in January 2021, court documents revealed.

"The peaceful transfer of power is a sacrament of American democracy . Defendant Donald Trump, together with other co-conspirators , defiled that orderly transition through a campaign of lies and incendiary rhetoric which led to the ransacking of the United States Capitol as part of an

insurrectionist effort on January 6, 2021 by Defendants Julian Khater and George Tanios ,and many others. That attack on the United States Capitol cost US Capitol Officer Brian Sicknick, who was bravely defending the cradle of American Democracy, his life," the lawsuit said on Friday.

The lawsuit is filed by Sicknick's longtime partner, Sandra Garza, who is seeking \$10 million from Trump, Khater, and Tanios.

Garza is responsible for Sicknick's estate following his death, according to media reports.

Garza argues that Trump played a key role in her partner's death.

Two years ago Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol to prevent Congress from certifying the 2020 presidential election. The incident launched congressional panel probes and federal investigations that have seen over 950 charged for their involvement.

Former President Donald Trump and his supporters launched numerous probes claiming voter fraud in the 2020 election but none was found.

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US Stocks Have Best Week Since November as Smaller Jobs Growth Signals Smaller Rate Hikes

NEW YORK, January 7 (Sputnik) - Wall Street posted its biggest weekly gain since November as moderating US jobs growth signaled that the Federal Reserve would further slow the pace of its interest rate hikes.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which serves as Wall Street's broadest equities indicator with stocks of 30 large US corporations, closed Friday's trade up 701 points, or 2.1%, at 33,630. The Dow finished the week up 1,5% for its largest weekly advance since November 18.

The S&P 500 Index, which represents the top 500 US stocks, finished the day up 87 points, or 2.3%, at 3,895. For the week, the S&P rose 1.4%, its most since the week ended November 18.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee names in technology such as Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google, settled the session up 264 points, or 2.6%, at 10,569 The Nasdaq gained 1% on the week for its strongest weekly advance since the week to November 25.

Friday's rally in stocks came after the US Labor Department reported that nonfarm payrolls in the United States grew by 223,000 last month, some 40,000 below November's level and by the smallest number since the 199,000 positions added in December 2021.

Last month's payroll growth was still well above the 202,000 forecast by economists, proving the tough job the Fed has in cooling a runaway jobs market that was feeding inflation.

However, market punters still bet on the central bank doing a rate hike as small as 25 basis points at its next policy decision in February, after a 50-basis point hike in December and four back-to-back hikes of 75 basis points between June and November.

"Stocks are getting a boost here as Fed rate hike bets get slashed, but earnings risks should keep the gains somewhat limited," Ed Moya, analyst at online trading platform OANDA, said.

"The focus will shift to next week's inflation report and traders should not be surprised if inflation falls even further than expected."

Meanwhile, the markets are awaiting the December reading for the Consumer Price Index (CPI) next week.

The CPI expanded by 7.1% during the year to November, after hitting a four-decade high of 9.1% during the 12 months to June. The drop in inflation 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 year level preferred by the Fed, which has vowed to bring price pressures back to its target.

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US Says Concerned Moscow Will Use Any Potential Ceasefire in Ukraine to Re-Group Forces

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United State is concerned that Russia will use any potential ceasefire in Ukraine to re-group its forces, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said.

On Thursday, Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed the defense ministry to introduce a 36-hour ceasefire along the line of contact between the warring sides in Ukraine from January 6-7 to allow Orthodox Christians in the areas of hostilities to attend church on Orthodox Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

"It is our concern that Moscow would seek to use any potential pause in fighting to re-group and ultimately to re-attack with more brutality. It is not our goal to see Moscow be able to re-group and to re-position its forces just to re-engage in an even more brutal fashion against the people of Ukraine," Price said during a press briefing.

The spokesperson accused Russia of the practice of conflict freezing to achieve its strategic goals.

The United States wants to see a durable peace agreement that recognizes Ukraine's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, Price said.

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Venezuelan Embassy in US Ceases Operations After Guaido's 'Interim Government' Dissolved (Updates with more details, background in paras 4-10)

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The Venezuelan embassy in the United States, which had been under control of Juan Guaido since 2019, said it has ended its operations after the opposition leader's interim government was dissolved.

"We inform the Venezuelan community in the United States, and the public in general, that the Venezuelan Embassy in the United States and all its officials formally ceased functions on Thursday, January 5, 2023," the statement read on Friday.

Guaido associates seized control of the embassy in 2019 after the opposition-controlled National Assembly rejected the 2018 presidential election results and established an "interim government" led by Guaido. The United States then recognized Guaido as interim president. The statement expressed a deep regret about the decision's possible impact on Venezuelan citizens in the United States.

"In the coming days, we will present due accountability," the statement said. "We thank all the support provided by the representatives of the executive, legislative and judicial branches of the US, as well as the local authorities and officials, for all the support given to the noble and just cause for the restitution of freedom and democracy for the Venezuelan people."

On Monday, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro said the government is prepared to advance the process of normalizing political and diplomatic relations with the United States.

Venezuela broke off diplomatic relations with the United States in 2019 after the latter recognized Guaido as the country's interim president instead of the re-elected President Nicolas Maduro. The United States imposed comprehensive sanctions on Caracas, especially targeting the country's oil and financial industries as well as freezing its reserves.

Contacts between the two countries resumed to some extent in March 2022, when President Joe Biden sent a delegation to Caracas to negotiate with the Maduro government on the issue of oil supplies amid the energy crisis amplified by Western sanctions against Russia.

Talks about a possible thaw in US-Venezuela relations started following reports that the Venezuelan opposition was ready to oust Guaido, and the United States indicated it would not interfere in the process.

On Friday, the Venezuelan opposition supported, in a second hearing, the elimination of the self-proclaimed "interim government" that Guaido had led since 2019.

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UPDATE - McCarthy Says Confident Can Win House Speakership Tonight Despite Republican Division

(Updates with more details in para 7, modifies headline, lede, quote and attribution)

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - Congressman-elect Kevin McCarthy said he is confident in his ability to win the US House speakership in an election on Friday night despite continued opposition by several Republicans to his leadership bid.

"I think you saw we've made some very good progress. We'll come back tonight. I believe at that time we'll have the votes to finish this once and for all," McCarthy told reporters on Friday. The House adjourned until 10:00 p.m. on Friday after a thirteenth failed speaker ballot. In earlier ballots, a total of 21 Republican congressmen-elect cast votes in opposition to McCarthy. By the thirteenth ballot Friday afternoon, six Republicans remained dissenting.

Republicans hold a 222-212 majority in the House, with a majority of votes needed to elect a speaker. On the thirteenth ballot, McCarthy received 214 votes, Democratic Congressman-elect

Hakeem Jeffries received 212 and Republican dissenters cast six votes for Congressman-elect Jim Jordan, who himself voted for McCarthy.

With a total of 432 votes cast due to absent members, 216 votes are needed to constitute a majority.

The situation marks the first time in a century the House has failed to elect a speaker on the first ballot, and the first time since 1859 the process has taken more than ten ballots.

House Republicans will come out of the situation more effective and efficient, McCarthy told reporters. The party "learned how to govern" through the course of the lengthy speaker selection process, he said.

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Canada 'Closely Following' Events in Venezuela as Interim Government Dissolved After Vote

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) – Canada is “closely following” the events in Venezuela as the National Assembly voted to dissolve the interim government, Global Affairs Canada said on Friday.

“Canada is closely following the events in Venezuela, including the recent vote by its National Assembly to dissolve the interim government,” the ministry said in a statement.

Global Affairs said Canada respects the National Assembly decision to dissolve Juan Guaido interim government, in line with its recognition of it being the “last remaining” democratically elected institution in Venezuela.

Ottawa remains committed to a peaceful return to democracy, the statement said, adding that it will only be achieved after “free and fair elections” are held in the country.

Canada supports the ongoing negotiations process between the Venezuelan government and the Western recognized National Assembly, in Mexico City, the statement continued.

The Canadian government also said it would maintain its work to release what it deems as “unjustly” detained political prisoner, and said it remains committed to freedom of expression and denouncing right abuses.

Guaido established an "interim government" after the opposition-controlled National Assembly rejected 2018 election results. The US, Canada and their allies quickly recognized Guaido as interim president.

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US Providing Ukraine 4,000 Zuni Aircraft Rockets - Pentagon

(Updates with more information in para 5, changes date, fixes grammar in para 4)

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is providing Ukraine with 4,000 Zuni rockets for use by its air assets, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia Laura Cooper said on Friday.

"We are also committing 4,000 Zuni aircraft rockets, which can be mounted on Ukraine's existing aircraft to engage air or ground targets," Cooper said during a press briefing. Cooper noted that Zuni rockets can be used with either fixed- or rotary-wing aircraft. The rockets are a short-range, not a long-range, capability, Cooper also said. Zuni rockets are most often unguided, although modern laser-guided variants do exist. The rocket, first produced in 1957, is named after the Zuni tribe, which is native to an area of the southwestern United States. The rocket was developed for air-to-air and air-to-ground operations and can be used to carry various types of warheads, including chaff for countermeasures, according to reports.

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State Dept. Says Ambassador Tracy to Work With Russia to Potentially Resume Visa Issuance

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) – New US ambassador to Russia Lynne Tracy will be tasked with working with the host country to improve the mission's staffing, including to potentially resume visa issuance in Moscow, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said. "Her focus will be to provide leadership to the embassy to maintain this bilateral relationship in a period of extraordinarily heightened tensions and to work with the Russian government to improve staffing at the US Embassy platform so that our embassy can perform basic functions, like potentially even visa issuance," Price said during a Foreign Press Center briefing on Friday. Price attributed the mission's "inability" to provide visa services in Russia to Moscow making it illegal for the US embassy in April 2021 to employ both Russian and third-country nationals — many of whom worked in the mission's consular section. On Tuesday, Price said that Ambassador Tracy would begin her work in Moscow in the coming days. During her career in the Foreign Service, Tracy has served in a number of US foreign missions, including in Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Afghanistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Between 2014 and 2017, Tracy served as Deputy Chief of Mission at the US Embassy in Moscow and received a Distinguished Honor Award for her contribution while in this role.

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Venezuelan Embassy in US Ceases Operations After Guaido's 'Interim Government' Dissolved

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"We inform the Venezuelan community in the United States, and the public in general, that the Venezuelan Embassy in the United States and all its officials formally ceased functions on Thursday, January 5, 2023," the statement read.

Guaido associates seized control of the embassy in 2019 after the opposition-controlled National Assembly rejected the 2018 presidential election results and established an "interim government" led by Guaido. The US quickly recognized Guaido as interim president.

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Canadian Trade Minister Launches Public Consultations on Trade Negotiations with Ecuador

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) – Canada's Minister of Trade Mary Ng has launched public consultations on the negotiations of a free-trade agreement with Ecuador, Global Affairs Canada said on Friday.

"The Honourable Mary Ng, Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development, today announced the launch of public consultations on a potential free trade agreement between Canada and Ecuador," the ministry said in a statement.

These public consultations are in line with Canada's commitment to diversify its trade partners, investments, and the promotion of a "rules-based" international trade, the statement added. With this process, Canada seeks to identify opportunities that would allow for business and market access to Canadian goods and services.

Global Affairs added that all Canadians and companies interested in business opportunities in Ecuador, will be able join the consultations on the potential free-trade agreement, until February 21.

According to the statement, Ng said public discussions are essential for economic resilience in the region, adding that she looks forward deepening bilateral relations with Ecuador.

Trade between Canada and Ecuador was valued at \$709 million, in 2021, mostly made up of agricultural products.

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McCarthy Confident in Ability to Win House Speakership Amid Republican Division - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Congressman-elect Kevin McCarthy is confident in his ability to win the US House speaker election despite continued opposition by several Republicans to his leadership bid, CNN reported on Friday.

"I'll have the votes," McCarthy is quoted as saying in the report, when asked about his confidence in winning the speakership.

The House adjourned until 10 p.m. Friday after a thirteenth failed speaker ballot. In earlier ballots, a total of 21 Republican members-elect cast votes in opposition to McCarthy. By the thirteenth ballot Friday afternoon, only six Republicans remained dissenting.

Republicans hold a 222-212 majority in the House, with a majority of votes needed to elect a speaker. On the thirteenth ballot, McCarthy received 214 votes, Democratic Congressman-elect Hakeem Jeffries received 212, and Republican dissenters cast six votes for Congressman-elect Jim Jordan, who himself voted for McCarthy.

With a total of 432 votes cast due to absent members, 216 votes are needed to constitute a majority.

The situation marks the first time in a century the House has failed to elect a speaker on the first ballot, and the first time since 1859 the process has taken more than ten ballots.

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US Moves Forward With Blinken's China Visit, Monitoring COVID-19 Outbreak - State Dept.
(Updates with context, background in paras 3)

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is proceeding with its plans for Secretary of State Antony Blinken to visit China and is taking a close look at the current COVID-19 outbreak in the country, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday. "We are moving forward with the planning for the Secretary to visit Beijing in the coming weeks," Price told a briefing. "We, of course, are paying attention to the course of the COVID-19 outbreak in the PRC, but we still are planning for the Secretary to travel to the PRC early this year as was announced late last year."

Earlier in December, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced his visit to China in early 2023 to discuss a wide range of bilateral and global issues with high-ranking Chinese officials. Blinken said on Sunday that he spoke by telephone with incoming Chinese Foreign Minister Qin Gang and discussed bilateral ties and the need to keep communication lines open.

On December 30, Chinese state media reported that Beijing appointed Qin, incumbent Chinese Ambassador to the United States, as the new Chinese foreign minister to replace Wang Yi, who served as the head of the Chinese Foreign Ministry since 2013.

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

Australia, the United Kingdom, France, Japan, India, and the United States are among the countries that have introduced COVID-19 testing requirements for travelers from China starting in January, while Morocco banned outright all travelers coming from China.

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. On Wednesday, Mao called for a "science-based, proportionate" approach to the pandemic and warned that anti-virus measures should not be politicized or discriminate against other countries.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, January 7 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA'S INITIATIVE ON CHRISTMAS CEASEFIRE IN UKRAINE

* The United Nations welcomes the ceasefire announced by Russia in Ukraine to mark Orthodox Christmas as an opportunity to send humanitarian assistance to people in conflict areas, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths said on Friday.

* Ukrainian troops continued the shelling in Donbas despite the Orthodox Christmas ceasefire declared unilaterally by Russia and observed by Russian forces, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

SPUTNIK LITHUANIA EDITOR DETENTION IN LATVIA

* The Russian ombudswoman on Friday urged UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Volker Tuerk to weigh in on the arbitrary arrest in Latvia of Sputnik Lithuania editor Marat Kasem, who is accused of violating EU sanctions.

* The Russian presidential council for human rights called the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe for help in freeing Kasem.

ARMENIA-TURKEY RELATIONS

* Turkey has informed Armenia about its decision to lift the ban on cargo shipments by air, effective immediately, Armenian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Vahan Hunanyan told Sputnik on Friday.

* Turkey and Armenia have removed hurdles obstructing cargo shipments by air after ironing out remaining issues during a series of normalization talks, media reported.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The new US weapons package for Ukraine to be announced on Friday will include Sea Sparrow anti-aircraft missiles, Politico reported.

* The Russian Embassy in Germany on Friday condemned Berlin's decision to send tanks and other military hardware to Ukraine, saying the move was conducive to escalation and appeared "cynical" amid Russia's unilateral declaration of ceasefire for Orthodox Christmas.

* The United States will provide an additional \$3 billion in military assistance to Ukraine, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said.

* The new US military assistance package worth more than \$3 billion to Ukraine includes \$682 million for regional partners and allies on NATO's eastern flank and \$225 million for Ukraine's military modernization, Jean-Pierre said.

* US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said that the new package of military and related assistance to Ukraine totals \$3.75 billion.

US LABOR MARKET

* The United States added 223,000 jobs in December, the Labor Department said Friday, reporting the smallest monthly employment growth in a year but still above forecast levels that proved the tough job the country had in cooling a runaway jobs market that was feeding inflation.

* President Joe Biden said that the moderation in US jobs growth is "appropriate" as he appeared to find middle ground with the Federal Reserve, which he disagreed with last year when the central bank suggested that weakening the labor market would be the surest way to curb inflation.

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US Providing Ukraine With 4,000 Zuni Aircraft Rockets - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is providing Ukraine with 4,000 Zuni rockets for use by its air assets, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia Laura Cooper said on Friday.

"We are also committing 4,000 Zuni aircraft rockets, which can be mounted on Ukraine's existing aircraft to engage air or ground targets," Cooper said during a press briefing.

Cooper noted that Zuni rockets can be used with either fixed- or rotary-wing aircraft and a short-range, not a long-range, capability.

The rocket was first produced in 1957, are most often unguided, although modern laser-guided variants do exist. The rocket is named after the Zuni Native American tribe in the southwestern part of the United States.

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US Moves Forward With Blinken's China Visit, Monitoring COVID-19 Outbreak - State Dept.

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"We are moving forward with the planning for the Secretary to visit Beijing in the coming weeks," Price told a briefing. "We, of course, are paying attention to the course of the COVID-19 outbreak in the PRC, but we still are planning for the Secretary to travel to the PRC early this year as was announced late last year."

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Pentagon Says 'Hard' to Attribute Recent Battlefield Dynamics in Ukraine to Surovikin

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) – There have been a lot of battlefield dynamics in Ukraine since Sergei Surovikin was appointed to be in charge of Russia's military operation, but it is hard

to attribute them to the appointment itself, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasian Affairs Laura Cooper said on Friday.

"There's been a lot of dynamics on the battlefield and it might be hard to attribute them to Surovikin himself," Cooper said during a press briefing.

Cooper illustrated her point about the changed dynamics on the battlefield in Ukraine by citing the Wagner group, which has been advancing faster than any other unit in the Russian army. When speaking about the near future developments on the battlefield in Ukraine, the deputy assistant secretary assessed that Russian forces will continue to advance while Ukrainians will do everything possible to push back.

Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, following calls for help from the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk. In response, Western countries and their allies have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow and ramped up their financial and military support of Kiev.

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India May Play Role in Facilitating Dialogue Between Russia, Ukraine - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that countries like India which have relations with both Russia and Ukraine may help the two sides come to a dialogue, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"We do believe that countries like India, countries that have a relationship with Russia and with Ukraine may be in a position to help bring about dialogue and diplomacy that could one day put an end to this war," Price said.

In November, India's second most senior diplomat, Foreign Secretary Vinay Mohan Kwatra, said that his country contributed significantly to bridging the divide between G20 leaders over the conflict in Ukraine, promoting a "very constructive, cooperative" approach and aiming at consensus building across a whole range of issues.

Moscow has consistently confirmed its readiness to engage in dialogue with Kiev without preconditions, while Volodymyr Zelenskyy has either refused or put forward various conditions for resuming the talks, including rejecting negotiations as long as Russian President Vladimir Putin is in power.

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US Giving Self-Propelled Howitzers to Ukraine for First Time, Boosting Mobility - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States is providing Ukraine with self-propelled Howitzer artillery systems for the first time to boost their battlefield mobility, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia Laura Cooper said on Friday.

“The package includes significant artillery commitments. These include 18 self-propelled 155mm Howitzers, known as the Paladin system,” Cooper said during a press briefing. “This is the first US commitment of these self-propelled howitzers, which will provide greater protection and maneuverability than the towed howitzers previously provided.”

The systems will compliment other self-propelled Howitzers already provided to Ukraine by other countries, Cooper added.

The US is also providing an additional 36 105mm towed howitzers to strengthen Ukraine’s layered fire approach, Cooper said.

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Oil Posts Biggest Weekly Loss in a Month

NEW YORK, January 6 (Sputnik) - Oil prices posted their biggest weekly loss in a month after a smaller-but-still-healthy U.S. jobs growth for December could not help crude markets sustain a rally on Friday.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, crude settled up just 10 cents, or 0.1%, at \$73.77 per barrel on the day, after rallying to as high as \$75.45 earlier in the session.

For the week, the US crude benchmark was down almost 9%, posting its largest weekly drop since the week ended Dec. 2. The dismal weekly showing came after WTI’s drop of 10% between Tuesday and Wednesday — the worst for any first two days of a trading year in oil since 1991.

London-traded Brent crude settled down 12 cents, or 0.2%, at \$78.57 per barrel. The global crude benchmark reached as high as \$80.56 earlier on Friday. For the week, Brent was down almost 9%.

The crude price collapse in the first two days of this year came on the back of fresh warnings about a global recession and on fears of China falling into a coronavirus crisis similar to the one it experienced three years ago.

Friday’s initial advance in oil, which followed Thursday’s rebound, came as moderating US jobs growth signaled more slowing of rate hikes by the Federal Reserve.

US nonfarm payrolls grew by 223,000 last month, some 40,000 below November’s level and by the smallest number since the 199,000 positions added in December 2021, the Labor Department reported.

Last month’s payroll growth was still well above the 202,000 forecast by economists, proving the tough job the Fed has in cooling a runaway jobs market that was feeding inflation.

But market punters still bet on the central bank doing a rate hike as small as 25 basis points at its next policy decision in February, after a 50-basis point hike in December and four back-to-back hikes of 75 basis points between June and November.

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RIM-7 Missiles Sent by US to Ukraine to Be Integrated Into Soviet Buk System – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) – The RIM-7 Sea Sparrow air defense missiles committed to Ukraine as part of the latest military assistance package worth more than \$3 billion will be integrated into the Soviet Buk surface-to-air missile system, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasian Affairs Laura Cooper said on Friday.

"The RIM-7 will integrate with the Buk system. So, this is a Soviet-type system. The S-300, that's a strategic range, whereas the Buk is a shorter-range system," Cooper said during a press briefing. "It is a creative solution that did require some engineering finesse."

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Pentagon Says Fielding Bradley Fighting Vehicles in Ukraine to Take Couple of Months

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon believes it will take a couple of months to field Bradley fighting vehicles in Ukraine, deputy assistant secretary of defense for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia said on Friday.

"It'll take a couple of months," Laura Cooper told a briefing.

Earlier in the day, the US announced a new \$3.75 billion military assistance package for Ukraine. It includes 50 Bradley fighting vehicles, among other items.

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VP Harris on January 6 Anniversary Praises Officers for Blunting 'Assault on Democracy'

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - On the second anniversary of the Capitol Riot, US Vice President Kamala Harris praised law enforcement officers, saying because of them, the assault on democracy failed.

"On January 6th, 2021, American democracy endured a violent assault. Armed with deadly weapons and animated by lies and hate, insurrectionists invaded the United States Capitol in an attempt to overturn a lawful election and silence the voice of the people," Harris said in a statement on Friday. "Because of the bravery of our law enforcement officers and the resolve of the people's representatives, this assault on our democracy failed."

Harris said as President of the Senate and as a former US senator, she "has seen firsthand the incredible heroism of the law enforcement officers who defend our nation's capital."

Two years ago Trump supporters stormed the US Capitol to prevent Congress from certifying the 2020 presidential election. The incident launched congressional panel probes and federal investigations that have seen over 950 charged for their involvement.

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US to Provide Ukraine With RIM-7 'Sea Sparrow' Anti-Air Missiles - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide Ukraine with RIM-7 Sea Sparrow air defense missile systems as part of its latest military aid package, the Pentagon said on Friday.

The US is committing the Sea Sparrow anti-aircraft, anti-missile weapon systems to Ukraine as part of the Biden administration's latest \$3.75 billion security assistance package.

The package also commits equipment including Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles and other armored vehicles, guided artillery rounds and additional ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems, the statement said.

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Ukraine Aid Package Includes 50 Bradley Vehicles With 500 Tow Anti-Tank Missiles -Pentagon

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The new military assistance package for Ukraine includes 50 Bradley fighting vehicles with 500 TOW anti-tank missiles and 250,000 rounds of 25mm ammunition, among other items, the US Defense Department said on Friday.

According to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, the new package totals \$3.75 billion and includes \$225 million for Ukrainian military modernization and \$682 million for US allies and partners on NATO's eastern flank in Europe.

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Canadian Officials Meet With Flight 752 Victims' Relatives Ahead of Tragedy's Anniversary

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and other government officials have met with the relatives of the victims of Ukrainian International Airlines Flight 752 that was downed outside Tehran, Iran, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement on Friday.

The meeting took place ahead of the third year anniversary of the tragedy in which 85 Canadian citizens and permanent residents lost their lives.

"Today, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau; the Honorable Melanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs; the Honorable Omar Alghabra, Minister of Transport; and Ralph Goodale, High Commissioner in the United Kingdom, met with family members of victims of the downing of Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752," the statement said. "They reaffirmed the commitment of Canada and the

International Coordination and Response Group to hold Iran to account for the senseless deaths of those aboard the flight."

Canada would continue the joint work with Sweden, Ukraine and the United Kingdom in the Coordination Group format to ensure that Iran pays full compensation to the victims' relatives and is held fully accountable for the incident.

On January 8, 2020, Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 crashed upon takeoff from Tehran after being hit with missiles. All 176 people aboard the aircraft were killed, including nationals of Ukraine, Iran, Afghanistan, Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom as well as Canada.

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Blinken Holds Call With Joly on Haiti, North American Leaders' Summit – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed continued support for Haiti and the upcoming North American Leaders' Summit in a call with Canadian Foreign Minister Melanie Joly, the State Department said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke yesterday with Canadian Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly. Secretary Blinken and Foreign Minister Joly discussed continued support for Haiti and the upcoming North American Leaders' Summit in Mexico City later this month," spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

Blinken expressed appreciation for Canada's "leadership" and its close cooperation with the US on sanctions and increased security assistance for Haiti, and stressed the importance of strengthening the Caribbean country's National Police.

The secretary also reaffirmed Washington's commitment to delivering humanitarian assistance to Haiti and supporting a Haitian-led solution to the ongoing political crisis.

Other topics of discussion included shared priorities and interests, the release pursued.

Both leaders expressed their eagerness to meet at the North American Leaders Summit in Mexico City on January 10.

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UN on Flow of New Weapons Into Ukraine Calls for Ending Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United Nations would like to see an end to the conflict in Ukraine amid a new US weapons package expected announced on Friday, the UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

Earlier, the US unveiled a new Ukraine military aid package valued at \$3 billion that includes Bradley fighting vehicles, surface-to-air missiles, howitzer artillery guns, mine-resistant ambush protected (MRAPS) light vehicles, among other weaponry.

"Again, we are asked regularly about weapons coming in one way or another. We would like to see an end to this conflict in line with the [UN] Charter, in line with international law," Dujarric told a briefing.

Earlier on Friday, the Politico news agency reported that a new US weapons package for Ukraine to be announced will include Sea Sparrow anti-aircraft missiles.

The Sea Sparrow is guided by radar and can be launched from the sea or land to defend against aircraft or cruise missiles. The Ukrainian military has managed to adapt its Soviet-era BUK launchers to use the Sea Sparrow, Politico reported on Thursday, citing two sources familiar with the matter.

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Canadian Foreign Affairs, Trade Ministers to Attend North American Leaders' Summit

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will attend the North American Leaders Summit in Mexico City next week accompanied by Foreign Affairs Minister Melanie Joly and Trade Minister Mary Ng, Global Affairs Canada announced in a statement on Friday.

"The Honorable Melanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs; and the Honorable Mary Ng, Minister of International Trade, Export Promotion, Small Business and Economic Development, today announced that they will accompany Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to the North American Leaders' Summit in Mexico City, Mexico, on January 10, 2023," the statement said.

Joly will hold a trilateral meeting with US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken and Mexican Secretary of Foreign Affairs Marcelo Ebrard to discuss issues such as the situation in Ukraine, Haiti and Venezuela as well as democracy in the Americas, the statement said.

Ng is scheduled to meet with Mexican Secretary of Economy Raquel Buenrostro, the statement said, adding that she will address ongoing bilateral trade issues.

Ng is also expected to hold meetings with women entrepreneurs and Canadian businesses operating in Mexico in order to seek ways to enhance cooperation throughout North America, the statement added.

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Blinken Says New US Military Aid Package to Ukraine Totals \$3.75Bln

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday that the new package of military and related assistance to Ukraine totals \$3.75 billion.

"More Than \$3.75 billion in US military assistance to Ukraine and countries impacted by Russia's brutal war. In this first week of 2023, the United States continues to stand strongly

behind Ukraine and our European allies and partners by announcing more than \$3.75 billion in new military assistance," Blinken said in a statement.

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UPDATE - US House Starts Fourth Day With 12th Failed Ballot to Elect Speaker as Dissent Dissolves

(Adds details, quote in paras 3-6)

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Friday started its fourth session of the 118th Congress with a twelfth failed ballot to elect a speaker, as Republican opposition continues to block Congressman-elect Kevin McCarthy's bid despite waning dissent.

The House held its twelfth ballot to elect a speaker on Friday morning, with McCarthy again failing to secure the 218 necessary votes. Republicans hold a 222-212 majority in the House, but a total of 21 Republicans have voted in opposition to McCarthy over the course of the selection process.

However, on the twelfth ballot, more than a dozen Republicans who previously opposed McCarthy's leadership switched their votes in favor of the congressman. The change in votes came following a party conference meeting earlier on Friday, during which members-elect reportedly negotiated a potential agreement to elect McCarthy.

McCarthy received 214 votes on the twelfth ballot, putting him in the lead for the first time over Congressman-elect Hakeem Jeffries, whom all Democratic members-elect have voted for in previous ballots.

"My vote today was to show support for significant Rule changes to transform the House from being dysfunctional to functional," Congressman-elect Keith Self, who switched his vote to McCarthy, said in a statement. "It has become clear to me that a couple of individuals are simply obstructionists, more interested in self-promotion than restoring the Republic."

Defecting dissenters include House Freedom Caucus Chair Scott Perry and Congressman-elect Byron Donalds, who was previously nominated as an opposition candidate. There are still seven dissenting Republicans, leaving three to flip to secure the speakership for McCarthy.

Republicans are considering a \$75 billion cut to US defense spending as part of the effort to rally support behind McCarthy, although some defense hawks who have so far voted for McCarthy expressed concerns about the proposal, US media reported on Friday.

The situation marks the first time in a century the House has failed to elect a speaker on the first ballot, and the first time since 1859 it has taken more than ten ballots.

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White House Says Has Vehicles to Communicate With Congress, Sees No Risks to US Security

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has "vehicles" to continue communicating with Congress and does not see any significant security risks facing the United States, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Friday.

"We have vehicles to continue to communicate with both chambers of Congress and that communication will continue throughout the foreseeable future. There is no particular worry or concern that national security will be put at significant risk because we do have ability to continue some level of communication," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Kirby made the comment in response to a question about the security situation regarding the United States given that a speaker of the US House of Representatives has not yet been elected.

Kirby acknowledged that the division in the US House regarding the inability to elect a speaker has "some impact" on security because the newly elected congressmen are waiting to obtain security clearance. However, Kirby also said the situation will not impact the coordination between the Biden administration and Congress.

"That work will continue," Kirby added.

The US House of Representatives on Friday started its fourth session of the 118th Congress with a twelfth failed ballot to elect a speaker, as Republican opposition continues to block Congressman Kevin McCarthy's bid despite waning dissent. The situation marks the first time in a century the House has failed to elect a speaker on the first ballot, and the first time since 1859 it has taken more than ten ballots.

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UN Has Not Observed Major Fighting Since Putin Ceasefire Order - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has not seen big military clashes in Ukraine since Russian President Vladimir Putin's order to cease fighting over the Orthodox Christmas period, UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"What our colleagues on the ground are telling us is that they have not seen reports of intense or major fighting," Dujarric told a briefing.

That is with a caveat that the UN is not monitoring the front lines, he added.

On January 5, the Russian Defense Ministry said that the Russian troops have been ordered to impose a 36-hour ceasefire along the entire line of contact with Ukraine starting January 6.

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US Says No Date Yet on When Bradleys to Arrive in Ukraine, But Training Won't Take Long

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - There is no date yet on when Bradley infantry fighting vehicles will arrive in Ukraine, but it will not take much time for the Ukrainians to learn how to use them, US National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Friday.

"It will be some time before they can actually get into country. I couldn't give you a date certain on the calendar, but I can tell you we are going to do that as fast as we can," Kirby told a briefing. "This is not a system that will require an exorbitant amount of training for the Ukrainians ... It's not so sophisticated that it will take them very long to learn it not only to operate it but to maintain it."

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New Aid to Ukraine Includes \$682Mln for US Allies on NATO's Eastern Flank - White House

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The new US military assistance package worth more than \$3 billion to Ukraine includes \$682 million for regional partners and allies on NATO's eastern flank and \$225 million for Ukraine's military modernization, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday.

"[T]he package is expected to include... \$225 million in foreign military financing for Ukraine to build the long-term capacity and modernization of Ukraine's military," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing. "Today's assistance also includes \$682 million for regional partners and allies on NATO's eastern flank to incentivize and backfill donations of military equipment."

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US House Starts Fourth Day With 12th Failed Ballot to Elect Speaker as Dissent Dissolves

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However, on the twelfth ballot, a number of Republicans who previously opposed McCarthy's leadership switched their votes in favor of the congressman. The change in votes came following a party conference meeting earlier on Friday, during which members-elect reportedly negotiated a potential agreement to elect McCarthy.

Voting continues, although enough Republicans have still cast dissenting votes to block McCarthy's election.

Republicans are considering a \$75 billion cut to US defense spending as part of the effort to rally support behind McCarthy, although some defense hawks who have so far voted for McCarthy expressed concerns about the proposal, US media reported on Friday.

The situation marks the first time in a century the House has failed to elect a speaker on the first ballot, and the first time since 1859 it has taken more than ten ballots.

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White House Says US to Provide Additional \$3Bln in Military Aid to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide an additional \$3 billion in military assistance to Ukraine, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Friday. "Today, the United States will demonstrate our continued enduring commitment to Ukraine's ability to defend itself with the announcement of over \$3 billion in new military assistance to Ukraine," Jean-Pierre said during a press conference.

The package is expected to include Bradley infantry fighting vehicles, self-propelled howitzer artillery guns, mine-resistant ambush protected (MRAPS) light vehicles and other armed personnel carriers as well as surface-to-air missiles, Jean-Pierre said.

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House Republican Deal to Make McCarthy Speaker Could Include \$75Bln Defense Cut - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - A deal being proposed by US House Republicans to rally support behind Congressman Kevin McCarthy as a speaker nominee could include a \$75 billion cut in US defense spending, Bloomberg reported on Friday.

The potential agreement, which House Republicans are negotiating as the lower chamber of Congress heads into its twelfth ballot to elect a speaker, could slash US defense spending by \$75 billion in an effort to persuade dissenting Republicans to support McCarthy, the report said, citing three people familiar with the discussions.

The deal could include a cap on spending across the US government set at 2022 levels, the report said. US defense spending in fiscal year 2022 was approximately \$782 billion, and rose to about \$857 billion in fiscal year 2023 - a \$75 billion increase.

The proposal was raised during a Republican conference meeting on Friday, the report said. Defense hawks within the Republican Party, who have so far supported McCarthy, expressed concern about the matter, the report also said.

Republicans hold a 222-212 majority in the House, with 218 votes needed to elect a speaker. A total of 21 Republican member-elects have voted in opposition to McCarthy over the course of eleven ballots, with a twelfth being held Friday morning. Member-elects are unable to be sworn into office to begin business until a speaker is elected. The situation is the first time in a century that the House has failed to elect a speaker on the first ballot, and the first time since 1859 it has taken more than ten ballots.

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US Gun Death Toll Over New Year Holiday Hits 651, Including 396 Suicides - Report WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - More than 250 people were killed in gun violence across the United States over the New Year's holiday week with almost 400 more using guns to commit suicide, the Gun Violence Archive announced on Friday. The death toll from all recorded murders or homicides and unintentional shootings was 255, the organization announced in its table of casualties, the Gun Violence Archive said in a report. That figure included 12 mass shootings, the report said. Another 396 people used guns to commit suicide, Gun Violence Archive said. Another 550 people were injured by gun use during the same period, the report said. The death toll included seven children aged up to 11 and teenagers from age 12 to age 17, the report added. The Gun Violence Archive collects statistics on gun deaths and injuries across the United States on a daily basis from 7,500 sources.

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US Imposes Sanctions Targeting Iranian UAV, Ballistic Missile Industries - Treasury

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) – The US Treasury designated on Friday six executives of Iranian defense manufacturer Qods Aviation Industries (QAI) and the director of Iran's Aerospace Industries Organization (AIO) for alleged drone deliveries to Russia and the development of the nation's ballistic missile program, according to a release. "We will continue to use every tool at our disposal to deny Putin the weapons that he is using to wage his barbaric and unprovoked war on Ukraine," US Secretary of the Treasury Janet L. Yellen said in the release. "The Kremlin's reliance on suppliers of last resort like Iran shows their desperation in the face of brave Ukrainian resistance and the success of our global coalition in disrupting Russian military supply chains and denying them the inputs they need to replace weapons lost on the battlefield." Overseen by Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL), QAI is a major defense manufacturer responsible for the design and production of unmanned aerial vehicles

(UAVs). AIO is the main organization responsible for overseeing Iran's ballistic missile programs.

The sanctioned individuals include Seyed Hojatollah Ghoreishi, chairman of QAI's board of directors and head of MODAFL's Supply, Research, and Industry Affairs section; deputy minister of defense Ghassem Damavandian, QAI managing director and board member; Hamidreza Sharifi-Tehrani, QAI primary board member; Reza Khaki, QAI board member; Majid Reza Niyazi-Angili, QAI board member; Vali Arlanizadeh, QAI board member; and AIO director Nader Khoon Siavash.

Western countries have repeatedly accused Iran of supplying combat drones to Russia for use in Ukraine. Moscow and Tehran reject the allegations.

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Biden Calls Moderation in US Jobs Growth 'Appropriate,' Strikes Middle Ground With Fed

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Friday that the moderation in US jobs growth is "appropriate" as he appeared to find middle ground with the Federal Reserve, which he disagreed with last year when the central bank suggested that weakening the labor market would be the surest way to curb inflation.

"This moderation in job growth is appropriate, and we should expect it to continue in the months ahead, even as we maintain resilience in our labor market recovery," Biden said in a statement issued by the White House after the US Labor Department reported the smallest employment growth in a year for December.

US nonfarm payrolls grew by 223,000 last month, some 40,000 below November's level and by the smallest number since the 199,000 positions added in December 2021. But last month's payroll growth was still well above the 202,000 forecast by economists, proving the tough job the Fed has in cooling a runaway jobs market that was feeding inflation.

The Fed aims to ensure optimum job opportunities for Americans while keeping inflation at or around 2% per year. While it has done exceedingly well on the first target, the Fed is struggling with the second one, with the key Consumer Price Index growing at 7.1% during the year to November. The Fed has identified the dynamic jobs market and earnings growth of Americans as among reasons for such high inflation and has been trying to curb both with interest rate hikes.

Biden bristled two months ago when the Fed suggested that the US labor market was doing too well for its own good and complicating the central bank's job of balancing employment with inflation.

"Let me [be] clear; we're going to do what it takes to bring inflation down," Biden said in a White House message issued after the release of the October jobs numbers. "But as long as I'm president, I'm not going to accept an argument that the problem is that too many Americans are finding good jobs. Or that too many working Americans finally have more dignity in the workplace."

In an apparent change in tack, the president appeared to strike a middle ground with the Fed on Friday, saying "we are moving in the right direction."

Biden noted that the unemployment rate, standing at 3.5% in December, was the lowest in 50 years, after two of the strongest years of job growth in US history. Curbing prices would be the next priority in order to preserve Americans' quality of living, he said.

"We still have work to do to bring down inflation, and help American families feeling the cost-of-living squeeze," the president added.

US interest rates currently stand at a peak of 4.5% after the Fed added 425 basis points to rates since March. Prior to that, rates peaked at just 0.25% as the central bank slashed them following the global outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2020.

The Fed has started slowing the pace of its interest rate hikes since last month, opting for a 50-basis point increase in December after four jumbo-sized hikes of 75 basis points between June and September. But it said it won't stop its monetary tightening until it gets inflation back to desired levels.

Minneapolis Fed President Neel Kashkari reinforced the central bank's stance on this when he said on Wednesday that rates need to rise about 1% more to around 5.4% to achieve the Fed's target for inflation.

Economists said it would be difficult for consumers, who account for 70% of the economy, to stop spending with jobs growth being this good and with savings still in hand from government-disbursed aid during the pandemic.

"I just can't see the US consumer slowing down this year with employment so strong and [the] consumer still sitting on \$0.9 trillion in excess savings," economist Adam Button said in a post on the ForexLive forum.

The labor market has been the juggernaut of the US economy over the past two years, spearheading its recovery from the coronavirus pandemic.

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 Labor Department's non-farm payrolls report has reported hundreds of thousands of job additions every month. Wages have also grown without stop every month since March 2021.

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Employment in Canada Rose by 0.5% in December, Unemployment Fell by 0.1% - StatCan

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Canada added 104,000 jobs in December 2022, marking a 0.5% increase from the previous month, while unemployment fell by 0.1%, Statistics Canada (StatCan) said on Friday.

"Employment rose by 104,000 (+0.5%) in December, and the unemployment rate declined 0.1 percentage points to 5.0%, just above the record low of 4.9% reached in June and July," Statistics Canada said.

Most of the rise in employment was led by Canada's youth, with individuals between 15-24 years of age accounting for 69,000 new jobs, entirely making up for the losses observed in the July-September period, the agency said.

Employment increased in the provinces of Ontario, Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, Newfoundland and Saskatchewan by 42,000 (0.5%), 25,000 (1%), 17,000 (0.6%), 7,000 (1%), 6,700 (2.9%) and 4,200 (0.7%), respectively, the agency said.

No major changes were observed in Canada's other provinces, the agency added.

The unemployment rate stood at 5% in December after a 0.1% decline from the previous month, the fourth monthly decrease, according to Statistics Canada.

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US House Holds Service to Commemorate Second Anniversary of January 6 Capitol Riot

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik) - Members-elect of the US House of Representatives held a service on Friday to commemorate the second anniversary of the January 6 Capitol riot, during which demonstrators entered the building and delayed the certification of the 2020 election results in favor of President Joe Biden.

House members-elect, including Hakeem Jeffries and Nancy Pelosi, who are waiting to be sworn into office amid a contentious election of a speaker, spoke in front of the US Capitol in remembrance of the event and those who helped address it.

"Today, members of the House of Representatives, in a bipartisan way, pause in solemn recognition of the violent attack on the Capitol that occurred two years ago on January 6, 2021," Jeffries said. "We are joined by the families of several heroic police officers who gave their lives... We are gathered here to honor their memory and acknowledge with deep gratitude the tremendous bravery of the hundreds of officers who defended us at this citadel of democracy that fateful day."

On January 6, 2021, a crowd of demonstrators in Washington entered the US Capitol without authorization and delayed the certification of 2020 presidential election results by Congress in favor of Biden. Five individuals died in connection with the riot, including one police officer, and approximately 140 other members of law enforcement were injured. Several officers have also since committed suicide.

Hundreds of individuals have been charged, and some prosecuted, with criminal offenses linked to the event.

A House committee was also established during the 117th Congress to investigate the riot. The panel alleged that former President Donald Trump was at the center of an effort to overturn the election results and obstruct the peaceful transition of power.

The committee voted to refer the case against Trump to the Justice Department for potential criminal prosecution, although the referral does not carry legal weight.

Biden is expected to participate in a separate ceremony commemorating the second anniversary of the Capitol riot later on Friday.

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Russian Hackers Allegedly Targeted 3 US Nuclear Labs in August-September 2022 - Reports

WASHINGTON, January 6 (Sputnik/Prime) - The Russian hacker group Cold River allegedly targeted three nuclear research laboratories in the United States between August and September 2022, Reuters reported on Friday, citing internet records and cyber security experts. The hackers created fake login pages and emailed nuclear scientists at the Brookhaven, Argonne and Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories to make them share their passwords, the report said.

The cyber attacks coincided with the visit of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) specialists to the Russia-controlled Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Station amid continued shelling of the facility by the Ukrainian military, the report said.

At the same time, it remains unknown whether any of the attacks were successful, the report added.

The report also cited unnamed cybersecurity researchers and Western government officials, who said they believe Cold River surged its hacking activity against Ukraine and its allies in parallel with Russia's special military operation there.