

2/9/23 Thursday

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Photos: 14th-Century Synagogue That Survived Spanish Inquisition Uncovered Near Seville
By - Fantine Gardinier

Over the years the small brick building in Utrera had served as a hospital, a church, an orphanage, and a bar. Now, archaeologists believe it was something else before all of that: a synagogue.

The building is believed to date to the 14th century, built a little over 100 years before the Spanish monarchy, having seized all the Muslim lands in Iberia in the Reconquista, would expel all Muslims and Jews from the kingdom.

During the centuries of Muslim rule in Spain, an era of economic and cultural prosperity was accompanied by a rare religious pluralism as Christian, Jewish and Muslim communities existed side-by-side and engaged with each others' beliefs in creative ways.

The Spanish Jews, known today by the Hebrew name for Spaniards - Sephardi - would be scattered to the Mediterranean winds after the Christian kingdoms of Aragon and Castile drove the Muslim armies from the Iberian peninsula in 1492 - the same year Christopher Columbus made first contact with the Americas while in the united crown's employ.

With Spain's Jewish community either exiled or sent underground to practice their faith in secret as so-called "crypto-Jews," their cultural institutions were taken over and repurposed and the memory of their original use was largely erased. To ensure the Jewish memory was erased, the crown [sent the Inquisition](#) to hound out the crypto-Jews, targeting any converso who clung to their old faith.

"Now we're certain, scientifically speaking, that this is a medieval synagogue," said Utrera Mayor Jose Maria Villalobus at a press conference announcing the discovery. He called the find "extraordinary."

"Until now, there were only four such buildings in all of Spain – two in Toledo, one in Segovia and one in Córdoba," the mayor said. "This is an exceptional building that's been part of Utrera and part of its inhabitants' lives for 700 years. This building was born in the 1300s and has made it all the way to the 21st century."

"Apart from the heritage value – this is a building with an important history that was once a synagogue – the thing that makes me happiest is knowing that we can get back a very, very important part of not just Utrera's history, but also the history of the Iberian peninsula," he said.

"The story of the Sephardic Jews was practically erased or hidden for a long time."

"The important components of a synagogue, like the entrance hall and the remains of the benches, confirm that it's a prayer site," archeologist Miguel Angel De Dios told reporters, explaining that his crew had studied the building's walls and floors for several years.

The archeologists knew to study the site after finding a reference to a repurposed synagogue in a 1604 document written by a local priest and historian.

“In that place, there were only foreign and Jewish people ... who had their synagogue where the Hospital de la Misericordia now stands,” the text said.

The historians now hope to find Jewish artifacts in the area, such as a menorah or evidence of a bimah, the raised platform from which the Torah is read. They will also look around the synagogue to see if they can find evidence of other Jewish structures associated with it, such as a rabbinical school or a mikveh ritual washing bath.

In recent years, Spain has undertaken efforts to uncover that history and right some of the wrongs, including allowing descendants of the Sephardi Jews expelled in 1492 to gain Spanish citizenship. Most Sephardi Jews today [live in Israel](#), having relocated there in the years after Israel was established from the Muslim-majority countries where they had lived for centuries. More than 130,000 people applied for Spanish citizenship before the program ended in 2019.

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US to 'Explore' Retaliation for Balloon Flyover as White House Alleges Vast Chinese Spy Operation

By - Fantine Gardinier

Although the US Air Force already shot down the Chinese high-altitude balloon that flew over much of the US last week, the Biden administration is reportedly still considering further punitive actions in response to the flight. The Pentagon has claimed the balloon carried sensitive equipment for monitoring signals.

Speaking to reporters on Thursday, an unnamed senior US State Department official said the US “will also look at broader efforts to expose and address [China’s] larger surveillance activities that pose a threat to our national security, and to our allies and partners.”

According to the official, the balloon was just one part of a larger, globe-spanning intelligence program that the Pentagon says has covered 40 nations on five continents. The program is allegedly run out of the southern Chinese island of Hainan, and according to the official, is made by a company with close ties to the People’s Liberation Army (PLA). No reports have named the company in question.

“We know these balloons are all part of a PRC [People's Republic of China] fleet of balloons developed to conduct surveillance operations,” the official said.

“The company also advertises balloon products on its website and hosts videos from past flights, which appear to have overflowed at least US airspace and airspace of other countries,” the State Department official said. “These advertised balloon videos seemingly have similar flight patterns as the balloons we have been discussing this week.”

China has denied the balloon has military value, saying it was a civilian research balloon that scientists lost control over. They have [protested the downing](#) of the balloon and requested it be returned to them.

Balloon Saga

The balloon was first detected passing the Aleutian Islands late last month and tracked by the Defense Department as it passed over mainland Alaska and central Canada, only becoming a

new story once the balloon arrived over a USAF nuclear missile base in Montana. At the time, the US decided to observe the balloon instead of shooting it down, but eventually did so off the South Carolina coast.

According to Pentagon officials, close observation of the balloon helped them identify several past unexplained incidents as having been balloon flights, too. U-2 spy planes that flew close to the balloon last week allegedly captured photos showing antennae on the balloon that officials said could be used to intercept communications signals and other emissions from US military facilities.

On Monday, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman reportedly briefed 150 officials from 40 embassies about their intelligence on the Chinese balloon.

Antony Blinken, the US' foreign minister, also [postponed his trip](#) to China amid the balloon fiasco. However, he spoke by phone with Wang Yi, his former counterpart who is now the Communist Party of China's seniormost diplomatic expert, and called the overflight "an irresponsible act and a clear violation of US sovereignty and international law."

Parallel US Program

The US has also explored using high-altitude balloons to gather intelligence or to even launch offensive weapons, [dedicating \\$27 million](#) toward the effort in the 2023 budget. Historically, the US [also used spy balloons](#) disguised as weather balloons to fly over China and the Soviet Union in the 1950s, when Washington did not recognize the socialist government in Beijing as a legitimate government. Spy plane flights over China were also conducted and at least five U-2s were shot down, but reportedly ended when they normalized relations in the 1970s.

At [a Senate hearing](#) about the balloon incident on Thursday, US Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) said she thought that if a US spy balloon were caught "violating their airspace," the PLA "would not hesitate" to shoot it down. However, Lt. Gen. Douglas Sims, the director of operations for the Joint Staff and a witness at the hearing, said he wasn't so sure.

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US Spy Balloon Program Goes Back 70 Years, Included Flights Over China, Documents Reveal
By - Fantine Gardinier

Although the US has protested China's alleged disguising of a spy balloon as a weather balloon, for decades the Pentagon did just that as part of a program dating to the 1950s that included flights over the People's Republic of China (PRC).

US officials have claimed the Chinese high-altitude balloon shot down off the US Atlantic coast last weekend carried communications-monitoring equipment and was [part of a globe-spanning program](#) to spy on other nations. Beijing has rejected the accusations, saying it was a civilian scientific balloon that researchers lost control over.

The truth about the issue remains to be seen, since the Americans have provided no evidence to support their claims as of yet. However, there is a considerable volume of evidence showing that the Pentagon ran an identical program during the Cold War and has poured billions in recent years into new balloon projects.

Project Genetrix

One program begun in the 1950s was called Project Genetrix, the details of which became public knowledge after the National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) [published a book](#) about the Pentagon's aerial spycraft in 2012.

The program was officially part of a global meteorological survey project called the International Geophysical Year, but in reality it aimed to collect a variety of information about communist countries, including nuclear weapons tests, as well as detailed photographs of millions of square miles of China and the Soviet Union.

The balloons were roughly 200 feet tall when fully inflated and they floated at between 60,000 and 100,000 feet up - roughly the same characteristics of the Chinese balloon [downed on Saturday](#). At the time, this was far above the reach of interceptor aircraft, and surface-to-air missiles had not yet been developed, meaning the balloons were fairly safe from enemy harassment. However, Soviet pilots reportedly learned to engage them at dawn, when they floated to a lower altitude due to cooling air, leading to many of the balloons being shot down. Between January 10 and February 6, 1956, Genetrix launched 516 high-altitude balloons from five launch sites in NATO countries: Gardermoen, Norway; Evanton, Scotland; Oberpfaffenhofen and Giebelstadt in the Federal Republic of Germany; and Incirlik, Turkiye. However, just 54 balloons were recovered and only 31 provided usable photographs. Many of the balloons were recovered by China and the USSR, and the special film they used, which was hardened against the high radiation and low temperatures encountered in the upper atmosphere, [was later used](#) in the Soviet space program to photograph the far side of the moon for the first time.

'Ownership of the Upper Air is a Disputable Question'

However, the Soviets, with whom the US had relations at the time (the US did not recognize the PRC as the legitimate government of China until 1979), did not sit silently. They launched a public protest, which [the media grilled](#) US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles about on February 7, 1956.

Dulles attempted to deflect, insisting the balloons were "weather balloons" that were "gathering an extraordinary amount of useful and new information about those jet stream air currents" and that they weren't bothering anybody.

"The question of the ownership of the upper air is a disputable question and also of the ether above the air," Dulles said. "The legal position is quite obscure ... what the legal position is, I wouldn't feel in a position to answer, because I do not believe that the legal position has been codified, you might say."

He went on to argue that no nation had the right to complain about such flights if they didn't interfere with the nation's use of the air, which such high-altitude balloons would not do. While he admitted the balloons carried photographic equipment, he claimed the cameras were for photographing "cloud formations which are usually under the balloons."

Whether this was simple deflection after getting caught red-handed, or whether the US actually believed its spy balloon flights were not violating international law, is unclear.

Replaced With U-2s

The day of the spy balloon was coming to an end, however, as the Cold War arms race produced higher-flying bombers and higher-flying fighter jets to intercept them. The U-2 Dragon Lady spy plane effectively displaced the balloons and began their own flights over other nations.

Surface-to-air missiles improved, too, and by the early 1960s were able to reach high enough to shoot down U-2s over the Soviet Union, Cuba, and China, the latter of which [downed five U-2s](#) before 1973, when the flights stopped as part of the talks that led to Washington and Beijing normalizing relations.

Ironically, when the Soviets shot down U-2 pilot Francis Gary Powers in 1960, US President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who didn't know Powers had survived the crash, [initially claimed](#) in the press that a weather plane had gone missing over Turkiye. However, Powers survived, and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev used the situation to thoroughly embarrass the Americans. The quest to find a newer, faster, higher-flying spy plane that could survive such missions led to Project OXCART and ultimately the [SR-71 Blackbird](#), which could blast across the frontier at nearly 100,000 feet up and at three times the speed of sound.

21st Century Spy Blimps

However, the US wasn't done with using high-altitude balloons for surveillance. Stratospheric balloons have retained their utility into the 21st century, being able to hover over a location for longer than a satellite and with the benefit of being able to take more measurements than a satellite can.

During the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US Army [used large aerostats](#) tethered to the ground to conduct reconnaissance and for early warning near bases. However, those balloons rarely ventured above several thousand feet of altitude.

The US Army also poured nearly \$2.7 billion into the Joint Land Attack Cruise Missile Defense Elevated Netted Sensor ([JLENS](#)) program, which also used tethered aerostats carrying radars and other equipment up to 10,000 feet up. The program was canceled in 2017 after one of the aerostats broke loose from its tether at a US military base and drifted across several US states, its tether dragging behind it tearing down electrical wires.

More recently, the Covert Long-Dwell Stratospheric Architecture ([COLD STAR](#)) program has gotten roughly \$30 million pumped into it in recent years, including \$27 million set aside for the 2023 fiscal year. That program, which would see balloons hovering at between 60,000 to 90,000 feet, is intended to serve as early warning against Chinese and Russian hypersonic missiles, but could also do a whole lot more.

“High or very high-altitude platforms have a lot of benefit for their endurance on station, maneuverability and also flexibility for multiple payloads,” said Tom Karako, senior fellow for the International Security Program and Missile Defense Project director at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), told US media in July 2022.

Noting that the Pentagon was looking at incorporating the balloons into the “kill chain” used during an offensive operation, Karako said the balloons “can be trucks for any number of platforms, whether it be communication and data link nodes, ISR [intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance], tracking air and missile threats, or even various weapons - and without the predictable orbits of satellites.”

One [think piece](#) published by the conservative, Washington, DC-based Hudson Institute in April 2022 laid out in detail how this might unfold, with stratospheric balloons serving as “quasi-satellites” during combat ops.

Another program on the 2023 National Defense Authorization Act under the [Classified Programs section](#) was simply labeled “High Altitude Balloon,” and was given \$10 million.

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Rolls-Royce to Build 'Micro-Reactor' for Nuclear-Powered Mars Travel
By - Fantine Gardinier

Luxury automobile maker Rolls-Royce has announced plans to build a miniature nuclear reactor to power a Mars-bound spaceship, saying it will put the first such device into space by 2029. The project is being undertaken in conjunction with the UK Space Agency, which aims to make the island nation into a major player in the burgeoning new space race. The two announced their partnership on a nuclear spaceship engine in 2021.

"Rolls-Royce is the only company in the world with a singular focus on creating mechanical, electrical and nuclear power solutions that will be essential in tackling the challenges of the future," the company said in a Friday [news release](#). "Space is one such challenging and growing sector in which Rolls-Royce believe power, propulsion and thermal management will play a significant role."

Rolls-Royce's micro-reactor, which will run on uranium and be similar to that used on submarines, is hoped to be able to power a spacecraft bound for Mars or another world. Competitors, such as the US-based SpaceX, have chosen to use chemical fuel for the Mars-bound spacecraft they are developing.

"Space nuclear power and propulsion is a game-changing concept that could unlock future deep-space missions that take us to Mars and beyond," USKA Chief Executive Graham Turnock said in the release. "This study will help us understand the exciting potential of atomic-powered spacecraft, and whether this nascent technology could help us travel further and faster through space than ever before."

Although known for its luxury automobiles, Rolls-Royce long ago turned itself into a multi-domain engineering firm, building everything from aircraft engines to nuclear reactors. The company is also working on a small modular nuclear reactor that uses light water (H₂O) rather than the heavy water (D₂O) most typically used to moderate nuclear reactions.

"A Rolls-Royce Micro-Reactor is designed to use an inherently safe and extremely robust fuel form," the company said on Twitter.

"Each uranium particle is encapsulated in multiple protective layers that act as a containment system, allowing it to withstand extreme conditions."

Space probes have been powered by radioactive fuel for decades, but have typically used the heat generated by nuclear decay, although both the US and Soviet Union tested placing nuclear reactors in orbit.

Both the US and China have said they aim to [place nuclear reactors](#) on the moon before the decade is out, as [part of the beginnings](#) of a permanent human base on the lunar satellite.

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Probe Launched After Attacker Punches US Lawmaker Inside DC Elevator

By - Mary Manley

According to a Metropolitan Police Department report, the alleged assailant appeared to be “acting erratic as if he was under the influence of an unknown substance” in the lobby area of Craig’s apartment building. After punching Craig in the face and grabbing her neck, the lawmaker threw her hot coffee at the assailant, causing him to flee.

A US congresswoman was [attacked](#) in Washington, DC, early Thursday while preparing to make her way to work, it has been revealed.

The attack unfolded at around 7:15 a.m. local time as US Rep. Angie Craig (D-MN) was inside the elevator of her apartment building. Aside from some bruising, she is “physically okay,” her chief of staff, Nick Coe, said in a statement. He added the attack did not seem to be politically motivated.

The Minnesota lawmaker informed police the assailant was in her lobby and appeared “erratic as if he was under the influence of an unknown substance.” That same assailant then entered the elevator she was in and “began to randomly do push ups” before punching her in the face, near her chin, and grabbing her neck.

The 50-year-old representative then threw her hot coffee at the alleged assailant to stop the attack, prompting the individual to flee the scene.

“To give you a sense of how strong @AngieCraigMN is, she went straight to the Hill this morning and attended a meeting in the Senate with the governor and me and several members of our delegation about legislation for the people of her district,” Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) said on [Twitter](#).

“No one messes with Angie,” the senator added.

Craig, a retired journalist and former business woman who is a member of the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party (DFL) was elected to her third term during the 2022 midterm elections. She is married to Cheryl Greene, whom she shares four children with.

While the attack may not have been politically motivated, threats against federal lawmakers have increased about 400% in the past six years, according to US Capitol Police Chief Thomas Manger who announced the shocking statistic last [December](#). She is the first openly LGBTQ member of Congress from Minnesota.

“Violence is becoming all too common in our country, and it breaks my heart,” wrote Representative Yvette Clarke (D-NY) on [Twitter](#), calling the incident “terrible.”

“@RepAngieCraig is a dedicated legislator, a phenomenal person, and a cherished friend. I am praying for her recovery.”

The US Capitol Police is reportedly investigating the attack.

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New Study Reveals Children of Overprotective Parents Have Shortened Lifespans

By - Mary Manley

Overprotective fathers may want to pay attention to this study.

[Researchers](#) in Brazil have revealed that children of protective parents—fathers in particular—have an increased risk of dying before the age of 80.

The findings came from data collected from 941 participants part of the English Longitudinal Study of Aging (ELSA). Officials analyzed information from 445 women and 496 men born between 1950 and 1960 and who died between 2007 and 2018.

Despite the subjects of the study belonging to the “Baby Boomer” generation, researchers believe the data can apply to younger generations as well.

“In this case, cultural and social factors may have had a more significant effect than they do now. Having separated parents was seen differently in the past and could be particularly difficult for male children. We can’t know how this would work out now, given the society we have, but it was very heavy for males born in the 1950s and 1960s, the study shows,” study co-author Tiago da [Silva Alexandre](#), a professor of gerontology at the Federal University of São Carlos, said in a statement.

Researchers found that overall, children who are given more freedom and autonomy have a greater chance of living longer. The study revealed men who had an overprotective father, and less autonomy while growing up, are at a 12% higher risk of dying before the age of 80. For women with an overprotective father, dying before the age of 80 is a 22% increased risk.

“The most interesting thing about our study is that we were able to show in numbers what has been discussed about parenting for many years,” said Alexandre.

“Caring and loving relationships with your father and mother during childhood have repercussions for the rest of your life. In particular, our findings show how they affect longevity.” Shockingly, the study also found that men who only lived with one parent during childhood had a 179% risk of dying before the age of 80. They also found that for women who received great care from their mothers as children, the chance of dying before the age of 80 decreased by 14%. The correlation being that those who were well cared for by their mother, will exhibit lower levels of stress later in life and will be at a lower risk for disease.

“Children need parental care and support, but not intrusion, which deprives the child of autonomy,” said Aline Fernanda de Souza Canelada, the study’s co-author.

“Research in psychology shows that this kind of relationship is also weak, because the child is afraid of the parent, and leads to various problems, including unhealthy habits, with some studies showing an increased risk of alcohol and drug abuse, as well as mental health difficulties such as stress, which correlates closely with reduced longevity.”

Researchers involved in the study hailed from the Federal University of São Carlos (UFSCar) in Brazil and University College London (UCL) in the United Kingdom. Their findings were published in the journal *Scientific Reports*.

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Mike Pence Subpoenaed by Special Counsel Leading Investigations Against Donald Trump
By - Mary Manley

The subpoena is one of the most aggressive forms of action taken by the special counsel thus far.

Former US Vice President Mike Pence has been subpoenaed by the special counsel investigating former President Donald Trump's role in the Capitol riot and his efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election, it was reported Thursday.

Special counsel [Jack Smith](#) was appointed by Attorney General Merrick Garland in November to oversee investigations into Trump's destructive actions towards the end of his presidency. Smith has experience prosecuting a sitting US senator, gang members convicted of murdering NYC police officers, and most recently worked as a Kosovo war crimes prosecutor at The Hague. Smith is also overseeing a separate probe into the mishandling by Trump of some 11,000 government [documents](#) and his obstruction of government attempts to retrieve those documents, 300 of which were marked as classified or top secret.

The subpoena, which was first reported by [ABC News](#), requests documents as well as testimony from Pence about Trump's attempt to overturn the 2020 presidential election in an effort to stay in power and the related January 6 attack on the Capitol. It will come as no shock to Pence, whose legal team has been working with federal prosecutors on negotiations regarding the probe for months.

If Pence chooses to invoke claims of executive privilege as a way to avoid the probe it could cause a long and contentious legal battle between prosecutors and Pence's legal team. Trump, likewise, has evoked executive privilege in an attempt to delay and block multiple investigations into his conduct several times.

Pence was publicly blamed by Trump for his "loss" of power. Two months after Trump lost the Oval Office to then-President elect Joe Biden, he urged Pence to use his ceremonial role in overseeing the congressional certification of the Electoral College results as a way to overturn the results of the 2020 election on January 6, 2021.

Pence refused the order, causing Trump to berate him as a "[wimp](#)". Trump then tweeted a condemnation of Pence, stirring the January 6, 2021 rioters to begin chanting "Hang Mike Pence!" during their attack on the Capitol.

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'Very Curious': Scientists Baffled by Images Showing Fragment Breaking Off From Sun
By - Mary Manley

The phenomenon, which is baffling scientists, was caught by NASA on the James Webb Space Telescope and shared to Twitter by Tamitha Skov, a space weather physicist and researcher based in Los Angeles.

Scientists are scratching their heads after NASA's James Webb Space Telescope revealed a large chunk of the sun's surface breaking off of the star and circling its north pole like a vortex. The unexpected event has scientists both excited, as well as nervous.

"Talk about Polar Vortex!" writes Skov on Twitter. "Material from a northern prominence just broke away from the main filament & is now circulating in a massive polar vortex around the

north pole of our Star. Implications for understanding the Sun's atmospheric dynamics above 55° here cannot be overstated!"

"Once every solar cycle, it forms at the 55-degree latitude and it starts to march up to the solar poles," explains Scott McIntosh, a solar physicist and deputy director at the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado.

"It's very curious. There is a big 'why' question around it. Why does it only move toward the pole one time and then disappears and then comes back, magically, three or four years later in exactly the same region?"

Scientists believe the answer lies within the sun's magnetic field, but because they are only able to view the sun from Earth's limited "ecliptic plane," the sun's activity still remains somewhat of a mystery.

While it is typical for unusual activity like this to occur on the sun's 55° latitudes once every 11-year solar cycle, this solar prominence, also known as a filament, is the first one to be observed circulating the region in a swirling motion as opposed to shooting out directly into space.

The sun is coming to its most active phase in its 11-year solar cycle and will reach its highest level activity for that cycle in 2025. During this month alone, the sun has released multiple flares that were so [powerful](#) they were able to knock out shortwave radios on Earth.

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Diplomatic Wins? Biden Admin Celebrates Arrival of Hundreds of Convicted Nicaraguan Criminals

By - Wyatt Reed

Washington is painting the transfer of over 200 convicted Nicaraguan criminals to Virginia for their release into the US as a big win for American diplomacy.

Exactly 222 convicted Nicaraguan criminals have been flown to the US for release in what the Biden administration is heralding as a "constructive step" towards improved bilateral relations. "The release of these individuals... by the Government of Nicaragua... opens the door to further dialogue between the United States and Nicaragua regarding issues of concern," Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a [news release](#).

"Upon the release of these individuals from Nicaragua, the United States facilitated their safe transport to Dulles International Airport," Blinken stated.

The former inmates, who left Managua early Thursday and arrived at Dulles International Airport outside Washington, DC, are generally referred to as "political prisoners" by pro-US media due to their involvement in an attempted coup d'etat in 2018.

Many played key roles in the bloody chaos which consumed the Central American country for months and left hundreds of people dead, including dozens of police officers.

On Thursday, Judge Octavio Rothschuh Andino announced, "the immediate deportation of 222 persons sentenced for committing acts that undermine the independence, the sovereignty, and

the self-determination of the people, for inciting violence, terrorism, and economic sabotage, but also for harming the supreme interests of the nation.”

Citing their status as “traitors to the homeland,” Nicaragua’s National Assembly also voted to strip the group of their Nicaraguan citizenship.

Numerous publications have uncovered extensive evidence linking the ringleaders of the unrest to the US Embassy, and Washington has made securing their release from Nicaraguan jail a major priority in its discussions with Managua.

Now the convicts have touched down in Virginia, Blinken explained that “the United States is providing medical and legal support to ease their arrival.”

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US Says Israel Ceding West Bank Control to ‘Fascist’ Minister ‘Step Toward Annexation’ — Report

By - Wyatt Reed

There’s little indication of just what consequences — if any — such a determination by the US would entail for Israel.

The US has warned Tel Aviv that any move to transfer administrative duties over the occupied West Bank to the control of notorious far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich will be considered a ‘step towards annexation,’ corporate media is reporting.

Smotrich, a controversial Israeli figure who’s publicly described himself as a “fascist,” was promised control over the so-called ‘Civil Administration’ in the occupied West Bank in a power-sharing agreement that brought the new Israeli ruling regime to power.

In late January, the Times of Israel [wrote](#) that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had “ruled in favor” of the finance minister’s ongoing feud with Defense Minister Yoav Gallant for military control of the occupied West Bank.

Now “Netanyahu has asked both ministers to present him with their proposals in order for him to decide which authorities, if any, will be transferred to Smotrich,” according to Axios.

Last week, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken flew to Jerusalem, where he reportedly urged the new Israeli regime to pause construction of new settlements and tone down the violence amid a major spike in tensions which saw at least 35 Palestinians killed by Israeli soldiers in January alone.

While all eyes were on Blinken, the Assistant US Secretary of State for Near East Affairs, Barbara Leaf, also traveled to Jerusalem to meet with high-level Israeli officials. That’s where Axios reports US and Israeli sources said Leaf told them the Biden administration is “concerned about the possible transfer of some of the authorities in the West Bank from Galant to Smotrich.”

In meetings that reportedly included senior Israeli military officials and Netanyahu’s national security adviser, Leaf reportedly “said that such a move would further complicate the situation in the West Bank at a time when de-escalation is needed and will be considered by the Biden administration as a step towards annexation by the Israeli government.”

But it's unclear what effect, if any, the Americans' reported exhortations are having on the plans of Israeli settlers — or their figureheads.

If the newly-appointed finance minister is to be taken at his word, it's not much. Less than a week after Blinken's visit, Smotrich publicly [declared](#): "There will be no construction freeze in [the occupied West Bank], period."

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99 Luftballons - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall

The State Department said Thursday that the US is exploring "taking action" against China and the organizations that it claims are linked to what it called an "incursion" into American airspace by a large Chinese balloon.

But the exact implications of that decision aren't immediately clear. It's likely if Washington possessed intelligence capabilities that could be used against Beijing, it'd be using them already.

Since the appearance of WikiLeaks, a number of exposés have shown the US has long surveilled virtually the entire planet, spying on friends and foe alike for over half a century through a variety of underhanded schemes.

But Washington has had relatively little luck in the East in recent years, where its sources have apparently been drying up. Roughly a decade ago, China reportedly executed dozens of secret American agents after identifying an amateurish CIA encryption mistake and rolling up a US spy network.

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Pentagon Proposes Resuming Covert Ukrainian Intelligence Programs – Reports

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Defense is preparing a proposal for Congress to resume funding covert programs that allow US Special Operation troops to employ Ukrainian intelligence operatives to observe Russian military movements and fight disinformation, The Washington Post reported on Friday, citing current and former officials. If approved, the programs, which were suspended ahead of Russia's military operation last year, could resume as soon as next year. With Republicans divided over the amount of US aid to Ukraine, it is hard to say whether they would be approved, according to the newspaper. The programs cost about \$15 million annually worldwide.

It is also unclear whether the US troops would oversee the operatives in Ukraine or from a third country.

For many years, US commandos have employed military and paramilitary units in the Middle East, Asia, and Africa in counter-terrorism operations. However the surrogate programs in Ukraine are used against countries that the US is not in open conflict with, the report noted.

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Stepanov Says Canada Dangerous Place for Russians, Does Not Recommend for Business, Travel

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik that Canada is a very dangerous country for Russian citizens at present and while he would not recommend the country for the purposes of tourism, studying or business he believes such opportunities would eventually return in the future.

"I want to emphasize that Canada is a very dangerous country for Russian citizens today. I would not recommend it either for tourism, education or for business," Stepanov said. "All of these opportunities will return but not soon."

Stepanov, however, emphasized that the Russian government and people remain friendly to all Canadians and seek good relations.

The ambassador made the remarks on the occasion of Diplomats' Day, which is traditionally celebrated in Russia on February 10 and honors Russian diplomatic staff of the past and present. The holiday was created in 2002 by a presidential decree and references February 10, 1549, when the Posolsky Prikaz - Russia's first foreign affairs agency - was first mentioned in official chronicles.

Stepanov noted that last year marked eight decades since Russia and Canada established diplomatic relations.

"We celebrated the 80th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations and the 50th anniversary of the hockey super series in 1972," he said.

Unfortunately, the rabid support of Ukraine's Zelenskyy regime by the cabinet of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau did not allow Canadians to adequately celebrate such memorable dates, Stepanov said.

"This year we plan to focus on the well-being of our compatriots," he said.

The ambassador explained that many Russians in Canada suffer from racism displayed against them as well as from the sanctions illegitimately imposed by the Canadian government on Russia.

"We are also dealing with blocked accounts - frozen money transfers from Russia here and back," Stepanov said.

Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, responding to requests by the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The countries of the collective West, including Canada, have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia and provided military support for Ukraine.

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Russia Ready to Let Canada Hear Its Position But Ottawa Stays Willfully Ignorant - Envoy

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - If Canada wishes to hear Russia's position first hand, Moscow stands ready to do so but the Trudeau government at present remains willfully ignorant, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

"I have said more than once to our Canadian interlocutors that the Russian leadership is open to dialogue. If Ottawa is interested in hearing Moscow's position first hand and not by being told by its older brother, we are ready," Stepanov said. "For now, Trudeau's team remains ignorant at will."

When asked about Canada's position on holding peace talks on Ukraine, Stepanov said, "Official Ottawa is in favor of our strategic defeat."

Stepanov said that a change in Canada's position under the current political class, which has decided to support neo-Nazism in Europe - the vote of Canada in the UN General Assembly on this issue is a litmus test - is possible only with a direct command from the United States.

"[That is] if Washington considers that it is easier for the United States' security to return to finding a new balance of interests with Russia. Canada does not currently have a sovereign foreign policy. It's sad, but true. We, Russia, would like it to be different," he said.

Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, responding to requests by the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The countries of the collective West, including Canada, have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia and provided military support for Ukraine.

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Situation in Canadian Cities With Russian Diplomatic Missions 'Tense' - Envoy

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - The situation in Ottawa and other Canadian cities where Russian diplomatic missions are located remains tense and law enforcement there do not always properly respond to security requests, Russian Ambassador to Canada Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

"The situation in Ottawa and other cities of the country where there are Russian diplomatic missions - Toronto and Montreal - is tense," Stepanov said. "With the beginning of the special military operation in Ukraine, the authorities and the corporate media outlets took an openly Russophobic position."

Stepanov pointed out that the anti-Russian sentiment produces daily pickets and actions near the embassy and consulates general.

"Participants from among the 'Western' Ukrainian diaspora and some Canadians, from among those who have little knowledge of history, sometimes behave aggressively: they attack diplomats' cars, take pictures of the plate numbers and the passengers, including family members and children," he said. "There are threats from time to time. This is definitely worrisome."

In addition, Stepanov said Canadian law enforcement do not always respond appropriately to relevant requests to ensure security.

"So far, only security considerations are the source of self-disciplined restrictions," he said.

Stepanov emphasized that the majority of ordinary Canadians have a good attitude toward Russia and Russians, according to their personal impressions.

Russia launched a military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, responding to requests by the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops. The countries of the collective West, including Canada, have imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia and provided military support for Ukraine. Stepanov made the remarks on the occasion of Diplomats' Day, which is traditionally celebrated in Russia on February 10 and honors Russian diplomatic staff of the past and present. The holiday was created in 2002 by a presidential decree and references February 10, 1549, when the Posolsky Prikaz - Russia's first foreign affairs agency - was first mentioned in official chronicles.

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Russia-Canada Trade Turnover to Continue Negative Trend in 2023 - Envoy

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - The trade turnover between Russia and Canada will likely continue on a negative trajectory in 2023, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

"Ottawa's unfriendly actions have significantly affected the dynamics of bilateral trade," Stepanov said. "According to statistical data from the third quarter of 2022, the trade turnover amounted to about \$730 million. For comparison, trade turnover amounted to nearly \$1.5 billion during the same period last year," Stepanov said.

The ambassador said the main share of transactions of about \$400 million took place in January-February of 2022 - before the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine.

"We predict that the negative trend will continue this year," he said.

Stepanov pointed out that Canada had imposed sanctions on the Nord Stream 2 pipeline project in order to capitalize on its oil and gas opportunities in Europe.

"Canada maliciously supported not only the sanctions but also the terrorist attack committed by well-known forces in the West against the Nord Stream international pipelines," he said, referring to the blowing up of the Nord Stream pipelines in September 2022.

On Wednesday, investigative journalist Seymour Hersh published a detailed account backed by information from sources in the know that the United States was behind the blowing up of the Nord Stream pipelines.

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine after the breakaway Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics requested help in defending themselves from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops.

The countries of the collective West, including Canada, imposing comprehensive sanctions against Russia and have provided military aid to Ukraine in the tens of billions of dollars.

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Right to Property 'Empty Phrase' in Canada When It Comes to Russia - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - Russian businesspeople should keep in mind that the right to private property is an "empty phrase" in Canada when it comes to Russia, Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

"Trudeau's team is trying to get ahead of the Western 'locomotive' on some issues. Among them is a change in national legislation providing for the possibility of forfeiting seized [Russian] assets and their subsequent sale in favor of Ukraine," Stepanov said.

The ambassador referenced the situation surrounding the Canadian company Granite Capital Holding. In December, the Canadian government announced it plans to seize \$26 million from this company, which it said is owned by sanctioned Russian tycoon Roman Abramovich. Media, however, soon reported that Granite Capital Holdings is no longer owned by Abramovich, with documents suggesting he was removed in February 2022 as a beneficiary of a trust that ultimately holds the company.

"At the same time, this is an important signal for our businesspeople. They must understand that any investment in Canadian assets may be subsequently frozen and seized. The right to private property, if the latter has anything to do with Russia, is an empty phrase for Canada," the ambassador stated.

In response to Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, the United States and its allies including Canada rolled out comprehensive sanctions, including a freeze of Russia's international reserves, forfeiture of assets held by sanctioned businessmen, export control measures, cutting off select banks from SWIFT, and the closure of airspace to Russian flights.

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Russia-Canada Ties in 'Deep Freeze,' Contacts Maintained But Cold - Envoy
(Adds background in paras 5-7)

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - Relations between Russia and Canada are in "deep freeze" per Ottawa's choosing and inter-state contacts are maintained but can be described as formally cold, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

"Russian-Canadian relations are now in a deep freeze. Since 2014, through no fault of ours, Ottawa has unilaterally decided to curtail most of the interaction formats," Stepanov said. "After February 24 last year, regional and scientific-academic cooperation fell under the knife." Stepanov, however, noted that in terms of maintaining the channel of interstate relations, opportunities for communication remain.

"But perhaps one can characterize them as official cold," he said.

On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine in response to requests by the Donetsk and Luhansk people's republics to help defend them from intensifying attacks by Ukrainian troops.

The countries of the collective West, including Canada, responded by imposing comprehensive sanctions against Russia and providing military aid to Ukraine in the amount of dozens of billions of dollars.

Stepanov spoke to Sputnik on Diplomats' Day, which is traditionally celebrated in Russia on February 10 and honors Russian diplomatic staff, past and present. The holiday was created in 2002 by presidential decree, in reference to February 10, 1549, the date when the Posolsky Prikaz, Russia's first foreign affairs agency, was first mentioned in official chronicles.

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Russia's Plan to Open Consulate in Vancouver Blocked by Trudeau Gov't - Envoy
(Adds background in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - Russia's plans to open a consulate in Vancouver are being blocked by the Canadian government, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik.

Stepanov had told Sputnik last February that Russia had submitted an official request to increase its consular presence in Canada, but had not received a clear response.

"Trudeau's team has blocked it all," Stepanov said. "Despite declarations of commitment to the policy of multiculturalism, it blocks the access of Russians to consular services."

Russia has a consular section at the embassy in Ottawa, as well as consulates in Montreal and Toronto.

Stepanov spoke to Sputnik on Diplomats' Day, which is traditionally celebrated in Russia on February 10 and honors Russian diplomatic staff, past and present.

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RPT - Journalist Seymour Hersh on Calls to Testify in Russian Duma: 'I Don't Do Politics'

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh told Sputnik in response to a call for him to testify before the Russian Duma on this latest investigative piece on the blowing up of the Nord Stream pipelines that he stays away from politics.

"Many thanks, but I just do the story, not the politics, ever," Hersh said on Thursday when asked whether he would consider testifying before the Russian parliament.

Earlier on Thursday, Duma member Sultan Khamzaev told Sputnik that Hersh should be invited to the lower house of the Russian parliament to discuss in more detail his investigative piece on the blowing up of the North Stream pipelines in September 2022.

Khamzaev also said the discussion can be continued within the framework of the parliamentary commission investigating the United States' activities regarding biolaboratories in Ukraine.

On Wednesday, Hersh wrote an investigative piece describing in detail how US deep-water divers had planted explosives under three of Russia's four Nord Stream pipelines. Hersh wrote, based on insider information from sources in the know, that the US detonated the explosives remotely on September 26, 2022, on the order of President Joe Biden.

Hersh reported that the explosives were planted during a NATO Baltic Sea exercise last summer and cited a source with direct knowledge of the US operational planning as saying that Norway played a key role in helping the United States organize the attack and keep the Swedish and Danish navies in the dark.

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US Unveils \$2Bln Loan to Accelerate Battery Materials Production - Energy Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - The US announced a \$2 billion loan to boost production of electric vehicle (EV) battery components, the Energy Department said in a statement.

The move comes amid Biden administration efforts to reduce reliance on foreign sources like China for critical materials and capabilities indispensable to EV production.

"The US Department of Energy's (DOE) Loan Programs Office (LPO) today announced a conditional loan commitment of \$2 billion to Redwood Materials for the construction and expansion of a battery materials campus in McCarran, Nevada that will support the growing electric vehicle (EV) market in America," the release said on Thursday.

The plant, the release added, will be the first facility in the United States with a "fully closed-loop" lithium-ion battery manufacturing process.

The plant will recycle end-of-life battery and production scrap and remanufacture that feedstock into critical materials, the Energy Department said.

This US wants zero-emission vehicles to make up half of those sold by 2030, including battery electric, plug-in hybrid electric, or fuel cell electric vehicles, the release said.

China currently dominates production of EVs and EV materials. China made about 75 percent of the world's lithium-ion batteries in 2021 versus 7% in the US, according to the IEA.

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US Eases Syria Sanctions to Allow Transactions for Earthquake Relief - Treasury
(Adds context in para 2, details and background in 3-10)

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury said it is providing several months of sanctions relief for Syria in order to allow certain transactions for recovery efforts following a deadly earthquake near the Syria-Turkey border earlier this week.

The relief comes after leaders with the UN and international relief organizations warned that sanctions were hindering efforts to deliver aid in earthquake-struck Syria.

"Today, Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued Syria General License (GL) 23, which authorizes for 180 days all transactions related to earthquake relief that would be otherwise prohibited by the Syrian Sanctions Regulations (SySR)," Treasury said in a release on Thursday.

Earlier this week, southeastern Turkey was hit with deadly earthquakes that killed some 20,000 people in Turkey and Syria and injured tens of thousands of others.

The Treasury said the US government has long had several sanctions waivers in place in Syria to permit most activities in support of humanitarian assistance, including in regime-held areas, by the United Nations, the US government, or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) engaging in transactions in support of certain not-for-profit activities.

However, the Treasury added that this new authorization expands on the current sanctions waivers already in effect in Syria for NGOs, international organizations, and the US government. The Treasury Department said it will continue to monitor the situation in Syria and engage with key humanitarian and disaster assistance stakeholders, key partners and allies, to understand emerging challenges they may face in delivery of services amid recovery efforts.

Earlier on Thursday, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said no sanctions should interfere with relief efforts in Syria as the country is dealing with the fallout of the devastating earthquake. Earlier this week, a senior official with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies told Sputnik that sanctions are slowing recovery efforts in Syria. IFRC Under-Secretary-General for Operations Coordination Xavier Castellanos also said the sanctions increase prices on everything they do, hindering the delivery of humanitarian aid and services.

A Syrian diplomat told Sputnik on Wednesday that unilateral sanctions imposed by the US and EU are preventing third parties from sending aid to Syria to help the country deal with the consequences of the devastating earthquakes.

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Second New Jersey Politician Found Fatally Shot in Past Week - Authorities

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - Milford, New Jersey councilman Russell Heller was shot and killed outside the utility company where he worked one week after a similar murder in the same state, authorities said.

"A former employee of PSE&G, whom authorities identified as Gary T. Curtis, age 58, Washington, New Jersey approached Mr. Heller in the parking lot, shooting him outside of his vehicle," the Somerset Prosecutor's Office said in a statement.

Heller was found on Thursday morning when Franklin Township Police responded to multiple 9-1-1 calls reporting a shooting victim within the parking lot of PSE&G utility company. Detectives tracked down Curtis in a vehicle in Bridgewater Township, New Jersey where he died while suffering from a self-inflicted gunshot wound, according to the release.

The homicide investigation remains on-going to determine motive, the release added.

Heller, a Republican, was elected to the Milford Borough Council in 2017 and again in 2020.

A week ago, Eunice Dwumfour, a Republican council member, who represented Sayreville, was found fatally shot in her vehicle near her home. Police have not identified a suspect or determined a motive in her death. Sayreville is about 55 miles east of Milford.

Authorities are probing if there are any connections between the two deaths but officials in the prosecutor's office have said Heller's death appears to be an isolated incident.

PSE&G said Heller worked with the company for 11 years as a senior distribution supervisor.

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US Military Veterans in Rural Areas Use Outpatient Care Less Than in Cities - Report

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - US armed forces veterans living in rural areas use mental health care programs provided by the Veteran Health Administration (VHA) at only around one fourth the rate that those in urban environments do, the Government Accountability office (GAO) said in a report.

"(T)he rate at which rural veterans used outpatient care was approximately 21%, compared with a utilization rate of 79% for urban veterans," the report said on Thursday.

VHA data showed 27 percent of veterans with serious mental illness who received VHA care lived in a rural area in the same year, the GAO noted.

"VHA does not analyze its data by rurality to compare program utilization and performance for veterans living in rural areas with those living in urban areas. Doing so would help VHA understand the extent to which programs effectively reach rural veterans," the GAO advised.. The GAO made four recommendations, including that VHA analyze intensive mental health care utilization and performance data by rurality and assess and update its guidelines for establishing outpatient intensive mental health programs, the report said.

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NASA Awards Blue Origin Contract to Launch Spacecraft to Study Mars' Magnetosphere

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - NASA announced that it has awarded Blue Origin a contract to launch its spacecraft mission to study Mars' magnetosphere.

"NASA has awarded Blue Origin, LLC of Kent, Washington a task order to provide launch service for the agency's Escape and Plasma Acceleration and Dynamics Explorers mission as part of the agency's Venture-Class Acquisition of Dedicated and Rideshare launch services contract," NASA said in a press release on Thursday.

The ESCAPADE mission will study solar wind energy transfer through Mars' unique magnetosphere, the release said.

Blue Origin was on-ramped to NASA's Venture-Class Acquisition of Dedicated and Rideshare (VADR) launch services indefinite delivery indefinite quantity (IDIQ) contract on January 26, 2022, with a five-year period of performance, the release added.

The release did not provide any details on when the launch could be expected to take place.

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Alec Baldwin Sued After Accidental Shooting Resulting in Death of Cinematographer - Report

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - The parents and sister of an Ukrainian-born cinematographer are suing Hollywood star Alec Baldwin and the producers of the film "Rust" after a gun he held accidentally went off and killed her on the set of the movie, an attorney for the plaintiffs said.

"I believe to let this go and leave this unpunished is unallowable," Svetlana Zemko, the sister of the slain cinematographer Halyna Hutchins, said in a video statement, according to ABC News.

"To lose my sister at least personally for me was a horrible experience and it is one of the biggest losses of my life. And even more devastating is to see the utter suffering of our parents and how their health has sharply declined. It is for this reason that I would like those who are at fault for somebody to carry that responsibility."

Hutchins was working as a cinematographer on the set of the Western film when Baldwin, star of movies such as 1990's "The Hunt for Red October" and 2016's "Paris Can Wait", accidentally shot and killed her while he was practicing using a handgun during filming in New Mexico in October 2021. The director of "Rust," Joel Souza, was also injured in the shooting.

Hutchins' parents and sister, who still live in Ukraine, are trying to deal with the loss of a family member while living in the midst of the war, ABC quoted the family's attorney Gloria Allred as saying.

The lawsuit against Baldwin and the producers of "Rust," filed Thursday in Los Angeles County Superior Court, alleges negligence, battery, intentional infliction of emotional distress and loss of consortium, Allred added.

ABC reported that Hutchins' husband, with whom she shared a young son, previously reached a settlement in his wrongful death lawsuit against the producers of the film. Hutchins' parents and sister were not involved in that lawsuit.

In addition to Baldwin and the film's producers, several members of the "Rust" crew, including armorer Hannah Gutierrez-Reed and first assistant director David Halls, have been named defendants in the latest lawsuit.

Separately, Baldwin and Gutierrez-Reed are charged with two counts of involuntary manslaughter over the death of Hutchins. They are scheduled to make their first court appearance virtually on February 24.

Attorneys for both the Hollywood star and the armorer have vowed to fight the charges.

"Mr. Baldwin had no reason to believe there was a live bullet in the gun — or anywhere on the movie set," lawyer Luke Nikas said in a statement last month. "He relied on the professionals with whom he worked, who assured him the gun did not have live rounds."

Prosecutors argue that Baldwin and Gutierrez-Reed failed to correct reckless safety violations in their roles as producer and armorer, respectively, and that Baldwin had his finger inside the trigger and it was pulled — contradicting his statements saying he never pulled the trigger, ABC reported.

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Trump's Facebook Account Reinstated After 2-Year Suspension - Reports

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's accounts on Instagram and Facebook (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) have been reinstated following a two-year suspension in connection to the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, CNN reported.

The report said on Thursday that Trump is now allowed to post on his Facebook and Instagram accounts, however, he has yet to post anything.

Meta, the parent company of the two platforms, said it decided to lift the ban after determining that the risk to public safety from Trump's online activity has sufficiently receded, the report said. However, Trump will face heightened penalties for repeat offenses, according to a company statement.

Specifically, Trump can again be removed from Facebook for a period between one month and two years, depending on the severity of the violation, the statement added.

Facebook locked Trump's account after the January 6 events at the US Capitol, when some of his supporters entered the building while protesting the certification of results of the 2020 presidential election from several US states, which they considered to be fraudulent.

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US Lawmakers Introduce Resolution Urging Peace Deal, End to Ukraine Aid - Statement (Updates with more details in paras 3, 6; changes attribution, modifies headline, dateline and lede)

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - US House lawmakers introduced a resolution calling for the United States to end its assistance to Ukraine and urging a peaceful settlement of the conflict there, Congressman Matt Gaetz said in a statement.

Gaetz and ten co-sponsors are introducing the bill, known as the Ukraine Fatigue Resolution, following the provision of more than \$110 billion of taxpayer money to Ukrainian initiatives, the statement said on Thursday.

"America is in a state of managed decline, and it will exacerbate if we continue to hemorrhage taxpayer dollars toward a foreign war. We must suspend all foreign aid for the War in Ukraine and demand that all combatants in this conflict reach a peace agreement immediately," Gaetz said in the statement.

The resolution expresses the sense of the House that the United States "must end its military and financial aid to Ukraine," a copy of the bill text said.

The United States is inadvertently contributing to civilian casualties by providing assistance, the resolution also said.

The resolution is sponsored by Republican House members including Gaetz, Andy Biggs, Thomas Massie, Paul Gosar and Matt Rosendale, according to the statement.

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Journalist Seymour Hersh on Calls to Testify in Russian Duma: 'I Don't Do Politics'

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh told Sputnik in response to a call for him to testify before the Russian Duma on this latest investigative piece on the blowing up of the Nord Stream pipelines that he stays away from politics.

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Hersh reported that the explosives were planted during a NATO Baltic Sea exercise last summer and cited a source with direct knowledge of the US operational planning as saying that Norway played a key role in helping the United States organize the attack and keep the Swedish and Danish navies in the dark.

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SpaceX Test-Fires All 33 Rocket Engines of Starship Super Heavy Rocket For First Time
(Updates with details in paras 4-5)

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - SpaceX for the first time test fired all 33 Raptor engines of its Starship super heavy booster rocket, according to a live stream of the event.

SpaceX conducted the test on Thursday afternoon from Starbase, Texas, representing a key milestone test before it attempts to launch the rocket into orbit in early March as previously expected.

SpaceX has said it plans to use the Starship spacecraft to send humans to Mars.

SpaceX founder Elon Musk said in a later statement that only 31 engines were fired overall after the team turned one engine off just before the ignition test and one other engine stopped by itself.

Musk said 31 engines is enough to launch the rocket into orbit.

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Islamic State Threats Increasing in Conflict Areas, Africa Remains Biggest Concern - UN
UNITED NATIONS, February 10 (Sputnik) - Threats by the Islamic State terrorist group, or Daesh (outlawed in Russia), have increased in and around conflict zones and cause particular concern in central and southern Africa, UN Office of Counter-Terrorism Under-Secretary-General Vladimir Voronkov said.

"The report asserts that, despite leadership losses and expenses that are diminishing its cash reserves, the threat posed by Daesh to international peace and security remains high and has increased in and around conflict zones where the group and its affiliates are active," Voronkov told the UN Security Council on Thursday.

The expansion of Islamic State is primarily worrying in the context of central and southern Africa, as well as the Sahel region in the north of Africa, Voronkov added.

Last year, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN body Anna Evstigneeva said that the United Nations resolution on countering terrorism must be implemented effectively given that the Islamic State and other terror groups are present in Afghanistan and are expanding their presence in Central Asia.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has warned that international terror groups are trying to infiltrate the successor countries of the former Soviet Union and the level of danger from threats in the region has not been decreasing.

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SpaceX Test-Fires All 33 Rocket Engines of Starship Super Heavy Rocket for First Time

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - SpaceX for the first time test fired all 33 Raptor engines of its Starship super heavy booster rocket, according to a live stream of the event.

SpaceX conducted the test on Thursday afternoon from Starbase, Texas, representing a key milestone test before it attempts to launch the rocket into orbit in early March as previously expected.

SpaceX has said it plans to use the Starship spacecraft to send humans to Mars.

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US Approves \$55Mln Sale of Air-to Ground Guidance Systems to Singapore - Agency

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - The US government has approved a \$55 million sale of guidance systems for air-launched, ground support munitions and their laser guidance systems to Singapore, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Singapore of air-to-ground munitions kits, and related equipment and services for an estimated cost of \$55 million," the DSCA said in a press release.

The DSCA delivered the required certification notifying Congress of this possible sale also on Thursday, the release said.

The sale also includes DSU-38 laser guidance sets; common munitions built-in-test/reprogramming equipment; spare parts, consumables and accessories; repair and return support; and aircraft and munitions support, the release added.

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Space Station Could Set Precedent For US-Russia Cooperation in Arctic - NSC Official

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) - The US government should consider making an exception to cooperate with Russia on "life and death" issues in the Arctic area, using as a precedent the way it continues to cooperate with Moscow in running and maintaining the International Space Station (ISS), National Security Council Russia Director Chris Kofron told a meeting at the Woodrow Wilson Center on Thursday.

"In outer space, we have carved out life and death exceptions for cooperating with the Russians: Maybe this could be a model for the Arctic," Kofron told the meeting, which was entitled, "Deterring Russia in the High North."

However, Kofron added that the United States and its NATO partner nations with territory in the Arctic such as Denmark, Norway and Canada, and now about-to-join Finland and Sweden should not expect any reliable cooperation with Russia in current conditions while the conflict in Ukraine continues.

"Russia has a bastion defense mindset [in the Arctic] ... We don't think Russia will cooperate with other Arctic nations in good faith. ... Russia seems to have linked cooperation in all spheres to our support for Ukraine," he said.

Russia has continued to build up its military forces in the Arctic region with a posture that indicated its goal of controlling it, Kofron added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, February 10 (Sputnik) -

EARTHQUAKES IN TURKEY, SYRIA

* The death toll from the earthquakes in Syria has increased to 1,347, Health Minister Hassan al-Ghabash said on Thursday.

* The death toll in Turkey has exceeded 17,000 and the number of injured tops 71,000, the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority said.

* Rescuers from Russia are searching for survivors in Turkey's Hatay Province, three local citizens were taken from under rubble over the past day, the Russian Emergencies Ministry said.

* The World Bank announced \$1.7 billion in new assistance for Turkey to help the country recover from the recent devastating earthquakes and aftershocks.

NORD STREAM PIPELINES

* The report of investigative journalist Seymour Hersh on Washington's involvement in the explosions at Nord Streams has once again pointed to the need to have open international investigation into the incidents and punish the individuals responsible, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

US-CHINA TENSIONS

- * The Chinese balloon shot down off the coast of the US state of South Carolina over the weekend will yield valuable intelligence, US House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries said on Thursday.
- * The United States will assess its overall posture and strategic approach as it learns more about the Chinese surveillance balloons, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Hemispheric Affairs Melissa Daltons said in a congressional hearing.
- * The Biden administration believes it is dangerous that the Chinese military is not answering the Pentagon's calls following the downing of an alleged Chinese balloon conducting surveillance over the United States, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner said.
- * The United States assessed the risk of intelligence collection by an alleged Chinese surveillance balloon as low to moderate while it transited the country last week, Operations Director for the Joint Staff Lt. Gen. Douglas Sims II said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- * US House lawmakers introduced a resolution calling for the United States to end its assistance to Ukraine and urging a peaceful settlement of the conflict, according to a copy of the bill obtained by Fox News.
- * Volodymyr Zelenskyy admitted that he had previously told German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President Emmanuel Macron that the Minsk agreements were "impossible" and he did not plan to implement them.
- * The execution of Russian prisoners of war is down to Ukraine's Western patrons, the silence of international organizations is shameful, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.
- * London will not transfer fighter jets to Kiev, if it could affect the security of United Kingdom, The Telegraph reported, citing 10 Downing Street.

SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- * The European Union, at Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's request, will expand sanctions against representatives of the Russian media, as well as impose restrictions against a number of politicians and the military, European Commission head Ursula von der Leyen said on Thursday.
- * The United States and the United Kingdom imposed sanctions on seven members of the alleged Russia-based cybercrime gang Trickbot, the US Department of the Treasury said.
- * The report of Hersh on Washington's involvement in the explosions at Nord Streams did not break in Western media, which is surprising, Peskov said.
- * Moscow is confident that there will be consequences for the United States after the publication of the report of Hersh on Washington's involvement in the explosions at Nord Streams, despite the fact that US officials deny everything, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergey Ryabkov told Sputnik.

GAS EXPLOSION IN NOVOSIBIRSK

* An apartment block of a five-story building has collapsed in the Russian region of Novosibirsk due to a gas explosion, Novosibirsk Region Governor Andrey Travnikov said on Thursday.

* The number of people that have been killed in a household gas explosion in the city of Novosibirsk in Russia's Novosibirsk region has risen to two, Governor Andrey Travnikov said.

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Assailant Attacks US Congresswoman Craig in Her Washington Home - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - An unknown assailant has attacked US Congresswoman Angie Craig in the elevator of her Washington apartment building as a result of which she bruises, the congresswoman's office said in a statement on Thursday.

"This morning about 7:15 a.m., Rep. Craig was assaulted in the elevator of her apartment building in Washington, DC Rep. Craig defended herself from the attacker and suffered bruising but is otherwise okay," the statement said. "The congresswoman called 911 and the assailant fled."

There is no evidence that the attack was politically motivated, the statement said.

Craig represents the second congressional district in the state of Minnesota and was elected to Congress in 2018.

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Yahoo to Lay Off Over 20% of Workforce - Reports

NEW YORK CITY, February 9 (Sputnik) - Internet search provider Yahoo plans to lay off more than 20% of its total workforce, following through with last month's massive job cuts at top competitor Google, news portal Axios reported Thursday.

Yahoo's cuts, which are part of a major restructuring of its ad tech unit, will impact more than 50% of Yahoo's ad tech employees, or specifically more than 1,600 people, Axios said, attributing the information to executives at the company.

Axios also quoted Yahoo CEO Jim Lanzzone as saying in an interview that the layoffs were not due to financial challenges, but rather, strategic changes to the company's Yahoo for Business advertising unit, which is not profitable.

These changes will be "tremendously beneficial for the profitability of Yahoo overall," Lanzzone said, adding that it will allow Yahoo "to go on offense" and invest more in other parts of its business that are profitable.

Google said late last month it was laying off 12,000 workers across product areas and regions, or 6% of its workforce. Its parent company Alphabet added 50,000 workers over the past two years as the coronavirus pandemic created greater demand for its internet search, advertising and other services.

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US Announces \$85Mln in Humanitarian Aid to Earthquake Victims in Turkey, Syria - USAID

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide \$85 million in humanitarian aid to victims of the recent earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, US Agency for International Development (USAID) administrator Samantha Power said on Thursday.

"Today, the United States announced \$85 million in urgent humanitarian assistance to provide shelter to the displaced, food, medicine and other desperately needed aid to those in need," Power said in a statement via Twitter.

Earlier this week, southeastern Turkey was hit with deadly earthquakes that killed some 20,000 people in Turkey and Syria and injured tens of thousands of others.

Earlier on Thursday, the World Bank announced \$1.7 billion in new assistance for Turkey to help recovery efforts following the earthquakes.

At least three US citizens were killed in the earthquake, the State Department said on Thursday.

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World Bank Announces \$1.78Bln in Assistance for Turkey After Devastating Earthquakes

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The World Bank has announced \$1.7 billion in new assistance for Turkey to help the country recover from the recent devastating earthquakes and aftershocks, according to a statement released on Thursday.

"The World Bank announced today \$1.78 billion in assistance to help relief and recovery efforts following devastating earthquakes and aftershocks in Turkey that have already resulted in massive loss of life, injuries, and very significant damages in and around southeastern Turkey," the statement said.

The World Bank will also start a rapid damage assessment to identify specific areas where it can support Turkey's reconstruction efforts going forward, the statement said.

Immediate assistance totaling \$780 million will be offered to Turkey through the Contingent Emergency Response Components and an additional \$1 billion is being prepared to support those affected by the earthquake, the statement said.

"On behalf of the World Bank Group, we express our deepest condolences to the people of Turkey and Syria for the great loss you have suffered as a result of the devastating earthquakes," World Bank Group President David Malpass said in the statement.

The death toll from Monday's earthquakes and ongoing aftershocks in Turkey has exceeded 17,000 and the number of injured has risen above 71,000, according to the Disaster and Emergency Management Authority.

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State Dept. Says US Denial of Any Involvement in Nord Stream Sabotage Credible

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Thursday that the US government's denial of any involvement in the sabotage of the Nord Stream pipelines is credible.

"I absolutely do," Price said during a press briefing when asked if the US government's denial of any involvement in the incident is credible.

Price described the report as propaganda, adding that it should be rejected.

Seymour Hersh, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist who blew the whistle on US atrocities in Vietnam War and more recently on prisoner torture at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, wrote in a blog post on Wednesday that American deep-water divers had planted explosives under three of the four Russia's Nord Stream pipelines that were detonated remotely last September at the order of President Joe Biden.

Hersh claimed that the explosives were planted during a NATO Baltic Sea exercise last summer and cited a source with direct knowledge of the US operational planning as saying that Norway played a key role in helping the US organize the attack and keep the Swedish and Danish navies in the dark.

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State Dept. Says at Least 3 Americans Killed in Turkey-Syria Quake

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - At least three Americans have been confirmed dead in the devastating earthquakes in Turkey and Syria, but this figure is likely to rise, State Department spokesman Ned Price said on Thursday.

"We were in a position to confirm last night that there is an initial tragic tally of three Americans who have been known to have lost their lives in these earthquakes. Unfortunately, given the scale, the magnitude of destruction, and ultimately the death toll, I think we are all under the again somber expectation that that number could rise," Price told a press briefing.

The death toll from Monday's earthquakes in Turkey and neighboring Syria has topped 20,000.

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US Treasury Chief Yellen Renews Pressure on China to Fix Zambia's Debt Crisis

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen renewed pressure on China on Thursday to help expedite the global effort to restructure Zambia's borrowings, instead of allegedly being focused on preserving its control as the largest lender to the debt-mired African state.

Yellen, who had previously called on China to outrightly forgive its loan to Zambia, used a more diplomatic tone in urging Beijing to help the international effort in rectifying weaknesses in the Common Framework debt-restructuring process that has left Lusaka stuck and unable to develop its economy.

"China really needs to come to the table on this," Yellen said during a discussion on African debt hosted by the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies. The US treasury chief bemoaned "China's lack of willingness to comprehensively participate and to move in a timely way" on Zambian debt.

The national debt of Zambia rose \$2.7 billion, or 9.3%, year-on-year in 2022. The country is in severe debt distress and urgently needs deep and comprehensive debt treatment in line with the Joint WB-IMF Debt Sustainability Analysis that called for \$8.4 billion in debt relief in 2022-2025 and additional relief through 2031.

Like other poor countries, Zambia borrowed heavily from Beijing and Western fund managers that snapped up its dollar-denominated bonds to build infrastructure and finance other government projects. About one-third of Zambia's foreign debt is estimated to be in the hands of Chinese lenders.

World Bank President David Malpass said last month that China's actions in talks among countries that lent money to Zambia are delaying a restructuring of the African nation's debt, adding that Beijing needs to move on such unfeasible demands. "China is asking lots of questions in the creditors committees, and that causes delays, that strings out the process," Malpass said in an interview in late January.

Yellen, who visited Zambia last month, had urged the country's creditors to work quickly to restructure its debt, and accused China of obstructing a deal. The Chinese Embassy in Lusaka, Zambia's capital, responded by urging the United States to stop sabotaging unspecified sovereign nations' efforts to solve their debt issues.

The Zambian debt talks are a test case for how quickly and well sovereign debt restructuring can work in an era where developing countries have issued dollar bonds to private owners and China has emerged as the largest sovereign lender.

In Zambia's case, talks have been slow, without any agreement reached on debt relief almost two years after the country decided to restructure its debt under the Common Framework.

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Shallow Recession Risk at least for Global Economies - Fitch Ratings

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - Global economies are at risk of a shallow recession at least as central banks stay focused on using interest rates to fight inflation resulting from inordinate spending, Fitch Ratings said on Thursday.

"The risk environment for global credit remains challenging despite recent macro data showing continued strength in developed market labor markets, positive demand signals from China and falling headline inflation," the ratings agency said in an outlook. "Shallow recessions remain likely as central banks continue to focus on countering underlying inflationary pressures."

While central banks stay on the path of higher-for-long rates, a surprise cooling in inflationary trends could cause them to retreat, Fitch said, adding that this was, however, not its bet.

"Sustained downside inflation surprises of sufficient pace and scale could halt monetary policy tightening and even drive a pivot back toward loosening," the ratings agency said. "However, such a pivot is by no means certain nor part of Fitch's base case."

Fitch said there was "significant uncertainty as to the pace of disinflation" from core inflationary pressures, continued strength in labor markets and the return of Chinese consumers unconstrained by COVID-19 restrictions.

"The potential for the current inflationary and monetary conditions to be more structural than cyclical in nature is a key risk for global credit," Fitch said.

Breaking it down further, Fitch said there were significant uncertainties for financial conditions and economic growth as years of low inflation and accommodative monetary policy transition into structurally higher long-term inflation rates as well as nominal interest rates.

"An elevation in policy and geopolitical risk, strategic economic competition and increased domestic political polarization would compound credit pressures," it added.

Fitch's outlook comes as economists grapple with policy-makers in the United States over the likelihood of a recession this year. US GDP grew 2.9% in the fourth quarter of 2022, advance estimates show, slowing from a 3.2% expansion in the third quarter. If the first quarter of 2023 shows a GDP contraction as well, then the economy would technically be in a recession.

On rates, the Federal Reserve has increased US interest rates by 450 basis points over the past year, taking them to a peak of 4.75% from just 0.25% after the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020.

US inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, grew at 6.5% per year, the slowest since October 2021. Still, that was more than three times the Fed's annual inflation target of 2%.

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US Senator Says Officials 'Evasive' in Classified Briefing to Lawmakers on Chinese Balloon

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - US officials provided evasive answers to lawmakers during a classified briefing on the Chinese balloon that crossed the United States earlier this month, Senator John Kennedy said on Thursday.

"I'm not going to talk in detail about the evasive answers that we received today, in large part because many of them were evasive and I don't understand their answers. Perhaps that was intentional," Kennedy told reporters after the briefing.

Earlier on Thursday, lawmakers held public committee hearings on the matter as well, hearing testimony from defense officials on the Biden administration's decision to track the balloon over

the continental United States before shooting it down over the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of North Carolina.

Kennedy said he would like answers on how long and how many times China has sent "spy balloons" over the United States, as well as how many times the intelligence community communicated the matter to the military.

The United States alleges that the high-altitude balloon was conducting surveillance of potentially sensitive national security sites, while China claims the airship was engaged in scientific research. The US military and FBI have said they are currently working to gather and analyze debris from the balloon to further understand it.

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UK Starts Building Third Dreadnought Class Ballistic Missile Submarine - BAE

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - Work has begun on building the United Kingdom's third Dreadnought class ballistic missile submarine Warspite in the north of England, BAE Systems announced in a press release on Thursday.

"BAE Systems has today marked the start of construction of the third Dreadnought class submarine Warspite at its shipyard in Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria," the release said.

Warspite is the third of four Dreadnought class ballistic missile submarines being designed and built by BAE Systems, the release said.

"Due to enter service from the early 2030s, the boats will carry the UK's nuclear deterrent and be the biggest, most powerful and technically advanced submarines ever delivered to the Royal Navy," the release said.

Construction of the first two boats, Dreadnought and Valiant, is already well underway, the release added.

UK Defense Procurement Minister Alex Chalk described the Dreadnought class submarines as crucial to maintaining the nation's national security, according to the release.

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US, Japan Hold Strategic Dialogue on Democratic Resilience – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) – The United States and Japan discussed democratic resilience issues during the Strategic Dialogue inaugural meeting on Thursday, the State Department said.

"On February 9, the United States and Japan held the inaugural US-Japan Strategic Dialogue on Democratic Resilience in Tokyo, Japan," the statement read.

The meeting under the leadership of US Under Secretary of State Uzra Zeya and Deputy Minister for Foreign Policy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Keiichi Ichikawa highlighted the

strength of the bilateral alliance and the countries' shared efforts to bolster democracy and respect for human rights, it added.

Both sides discussed joint efforts to advance a free and open Indo-Pacific and promote human rights globally, and agreed to strengthen cooperation. "They committed to deepening cooperation in multilateral venues, including the G7 and UN, and building democratic resilience at home and around the world, including through the framework under the Summit for Democracy," the statement read.

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US Welcomes Release of 222 Political Prisoners in Nicaragua - Blinken

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The United States welcomes the release of political prisoners in Nicaragua, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Thursday.

"Today, the United States welcomes 222 individuals who had been imprisoned by the government of Nicaragua for exercising their fundamental freedoms and have endured lengthy unjust detentions," Blinken said.

The release of the individuals, one of whom is a US citizen, marks a constructive step toward addressing human rights abuses in Nicaragua, Blinken said.

The move also opens the door to further dialogue between the United States and Nicaragua regarding "issues of concern," Blinken said.

All of the released persons arrived at the Washington airport earlier on Thursday, Blinken said.

"The United States is providing medical and legal support to ease their arrival," he added.

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US Senator Says He's 'Troubled' by Potential of US Involvement in Nord Stream Blast

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - US Senator Mike Lee tweeting from his personal account said he is troubled by the fact he cannot at once dismiss the notion that the United States was involved in the attack on Russia's Nord Stream pipeline.

On Wednesday, Seymour Hersh, an investigative journalist, published a report on his substack claiming that US Navy divers were responsible for the blast, which massively damaged the pipeline.

"I'm troubled that I can't immediately rule out the suggestion that the US blew up Nord Stream. I checked with a bunch of Senate colleagues. Among those I've asked, none were ever briefed on this. If it turns out to be true, we've got a huge problem," Lee said.

The Nord Stream 2, a gas pipeline, was destroyed under the Baltic Sea in September of last year.

The blasts occurred on September 26 at three of the four strings of Nord Stream 1 and 2 underwater pipelines built to carry a combined 110 billion cubic meters of Russian gas to Europe

annually. The incidents halted gas deliveries to Germany ahead of the cold season, prompting a gas price hike and a scramble for alternative sources in the European Union.

Germany, Denmark, and Sweden launched separate investigations into the suspected sabotage, with German media reporting trust issues among the three EU nations. The Russian chief prosecutor's office said it had opened an inquiry into possible international terrorism.

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US Lawmakers Introduce Resolution Urging Peace Deal, End to Ukraine Aid

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - US House lawmakers introduced a resolution calling for the United States to end its assistance to Ukraine and urging a peaceful settlement of the conflict, according to a copy of the bill obtained by Fox News.

Congressman Matt Gaetz and ten co-sponsors are introducing the bill, known as the Ukraine Fatigue Resolution, following the provision of more than \$100 billion of taxpayer money to Ukrainian initiatives.

The resolution expresses the sense of the House that the United States "must end its military and financial aid to Ukraine," the bill text said.

In addition, the resolution "urges all combatants" to reach a peace agreement.

The United States is inadvertently contributing to civilian casualties by providing assistance, the resolution also said.

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US Must Include 'Real Science' to Reduce Police Violence - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The authorities in the United States need to include "real science" in many areas of policing to reduce violence by law enforcement officers and change the policing culture, Associate US Attorney General Vanita Gupta said on Thursday.

"There is a lack of real science in a lot of areas in policing and we have to change that," Gupta said during an online conversation with the Washington Post.

Gupta pointed out that there are certain issues related to what she called a low culture of policing in police departments across the United States that must be addressed.

Gupta acknowledged the US federal government must play a significant role in implementing reforms, but also emphasized the importance of cooperation with partners in the US states and municipalities.

"Research matters, local efforts matter to really understand what is happening in the local departments," she said.

The most recent ABC News/Washington Post poll revealed that 41% of Americans say they think police in the United States treat blacks and whites equally.

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Chinese Balloon Shot Down Over US Will Yield Valuable Intelligence - House Minority Leader

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The Chinese balloon shot down off the coast of the US state of South Carolina over the weekend will yield valuable intelligence, US House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries said on Thursday.

"President Biden took decisive action in making sure that [the] balloon was taken down in a way that will yield significant intelligence benefits from our country," Jeffries told a Capitol Hill press conference.

Earlier on Thursday, a senior State Department official said the balloon flew above the United States for eight days and carried multiple antennas capable of collecting signals intelligence.

China has condemned the US government for shooting down what it called a weather balloon. However, the State Department official said the balloon was equipped to monitor communications. Consequentially, the Biden administration may take retaliatory action against China, the official said.

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US House Passes Resolution Disapproving of DC Policy Allowing Non-Citizens to Vote

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed a resolution expressing disapproval of the District of Columbia's (DC) policy of allowing non-citizens to vote in local elections.

House lawmakers passed the resolution in a vote of 260-162, with 42 Democrats joining Republicans in support of the measure.

In November, the DC Council passed a bill allowing non-citizens, including illegal immigrants, to vote in the district's elections.

"The Local Resident Voting Rights Amendment Act disenfranchises American citizens and could have a ripple effect across other large US cities. To add insult to injury, this legislation makes no exception for foreign nationals or diplomats. This means that representatives from other countries, including agents of the Chinese Communist Party, can vote in DC elections," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the resolution.

Voting is a constitutional right that only American citizens should hold in the United States, Scalise said.

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Biden Says No Decision Yet on Visit to Poland, Silent on Prospects for Ukraine Trip

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said Thursday there is a possibility he may visit Poland, when asked about reports of him preparing to travel to Poland and Ukraine on the anniversary of Russia's special military operation.

"I haven't made a decision when I'm going to Poland or even if for certain I am going to Poland," Biden told journalists.

When asked if there is any possibility that he might go to Ukraine, he stressed: "There's a possibility I may go to Poland, but that's all."

The Biden administration is considering how to mark the first anniversary of Russia's operation in Ukraine but the president has no travel plans at present, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Wednesday.

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US House Passes Resolution Condemning Transit of Chinese Balloon Over Country

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed a resolution condemning the transit of a Chinese balloon over the United States as a violation of the country's sovereignty and denouncing China's alleged surveillance program.

House lawmakers passed the resolution with bipartisan support in a unanimous vote of 419-0.

The resolution condemns the transit of a high-altitude Chinese balloon over the United States last week, which culminated in the US military shooting down the airship once it went over the Atlantic Ocean. The United States alleges the balloon was engaged in surveillance activities, while China claims it was conducting scientific research.

The resolution also denounces the alleged attempts by China to "deceive the international community" through false claims about its intelligence collection campaigns.

Moreover, the resolution establishes a new policy of "promptly and decisively" acting to prevent foreign aerial surveillance platforms from violating US sovereignty.

"Instead of taking decisive action before the Chinese Communist Party-controlled balloon invaded our skies, President Biden waited days and allowed it to cross nearly the entire continental United States," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the resolution. "This is unacceptable. China cannot be allowed to send surveillance platforms over the US homeland, in the vicinity of our most sensitive military bases."

The United States is currently in the process of recovering debris from the shot-down airship, which officials claim will be used to increase understanding of Chinese balloons and their function. The resolution also calls on the Biden administration to keep Congress informed on the situation through briefings.

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'Dangerous' That China Not Answering Pentagon After Downing of Chinese Balloon-US Official (Updates with background in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration believes it is dangerous that the Chinese military is not answering the Pentagon's calls following the downing of an alleged Chinese balloon conducting surveillance over the United States, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner said on Thursday.

"Over the last several months, the PLA [People's Liberation Army] has continued to view the mil-to-mil relationship as something that they turn on and off to express displeasure with other things that are happening in the relationship, we think that's really dangerous," Ratner said during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing. "We continue to have an outstretched hand, including immediately following the downing of the balloon and unfortunately to date, the PLA is not answering that call."

On Tuesday, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said China declined a US request to hold a call between US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe after the US military downed a suspected Chinese surveillance balloon last week.

The United States believes it is vital for the United States and China to maintain open lines of communication in order to responsibly manage the relationship, especially in such moments, Ryder said.

Although the US claims the balloon was engaged in surveillance activities, China maintains that the airship was conducting scientific research. The US ultimately shot down the airship over the Atlantic Ocean and is now collecting debris for further analysis.

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"Over the last several months, the PLA [People's Liberation Army] has continued to view the mil-to-mil relationship as something that they turn on and off to express displeasure with other things that are happening in the relationship, we think that's really dangerous," Ratner said during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing. "We continue to have an outstretched hand, including immediately following the downing of the balloon and unfortunately to date, the PLA is not answering that call."

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US to Assess Strategic Approach While Learning More About Chinese Balloons - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The United States will assess its overall posture and strategic approach as it learns more about the Chinese surveillance balloons, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Hemispheric Affairs Melissa Daltons said in a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"As we learn more about these balloons, their global activities, as we are able to assess the collection capabilities of this particular high altitude balloon through the recovery efforts, we are going to be assessing our overall posture and disposition and strategic approach," Dalton told the US Senate Appropriations Committee.

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Pentagon Says China Has Intention to Invade Taiwan by End of Decade, But US Can Prevent It

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon believes China has plans to invade Taiwan by the end of the decade, but it can be prevented, Ely Ratner, assistant secretary of defense for Indo-Pacific security affairs, said on Thursday.

"I think they have intention. But I absolutely I think we can get to the end of this decade without them committing major aggression against Taiwan," Ratner said.

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Pentagon Official Reiterates Chinese Invasion of Taiwan Not 'Imminent or Inevitable'

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - An invasion of Taiwan by China is not "imminent or inevitable," Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner reiterated in a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"Secretary [Lloyd] Austin has said repeatedly he and the [Defense] Department do not believe that an invasion of Taiwan is imminent or inevitable. That continues to be our assessment," Ratner told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

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Pentagon Reiterates that Chinese Invasion of Taiwan Neither Imminent Nor Inevitable

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Defense reiterated Thursday that an invasion of Taiwan by China is neither imminent nor inevitable.

“Secretary Austin has now said repeatedly he and the department do not believe that an invasion of Taiwan is imminent or inevitable. That continues to be our assessment,” Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner said during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

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US State Department Affirms US Support for Taiwan's Asymmetric Weapons Capability

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman affirmed on Thursday US support for Taiwan’s defense, specifically its asymmetric weapons capability. “Since 2010, we have notified Congress of over \$37 billion in arms sales to Taiwan, including more than 21 billion since 2019. We think this is quite critical. We believe we need to help them in asymmetric weapons capabilities, help them train and integrate their reserves, make sure that they have mobile and agile systems,” US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

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Risk of Chinese Intel Collection by Alleged Spy Balloon ‘Low to Moderate’ - US Military

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The United States assessed the risk of intelligence collection by an alleged Chinese surveillance balloon as low to moderate while it transited the country last week, Operations Director for the Joint Staff Lt. Gen. Douglas Sims II said on Thursday.

"As the balloon crossed through Canada and approached the US border, the assessment for potential intel risk to sensitive, critical US sites in the upper Midwest increased, and the president asked for kinetic courses of action," Sims said during testimony to the Senate Appropriations Committee. "In determining potential options, the risk of Chinese intelligence collection was deemed to be low to moderate."

Although the US claims the balloon was engaged in surveillance activities, China maintains that the airship was conducting scientific research. The US ultimately shot down the airship over the Atlantic Ocean and is now collecting debris for further analysis.

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US FY2024 Budget Will Commit More Resources to Indo-Pacific - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration's budget request for FY2024 to be released in March will have a substantial increase in resources committed to the Indo-Pacific region, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman said on Thursday.

"I can't give you specifics because we are still working on the FY2024 budget to be released the next month but you will see in the budget a deep and broad commitment and a significant increase in our resources for the Indo-Pacific," Sherman said.

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House Committee Panel Asks for Hunter Biden Records on Business Dealings - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) – Hunter Biden has been asked by the US House Committee on Oversight and Accountability to hand over records on family business dealings, Chairman James Comer said on Thursday.

"House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Chairman James Comer (R-Ky.) is calling on Hunter Biden, James Biden, and Eric Schwerin to provide documents, communications, and records related to President Biden's involvement in his family's business schemes," the committee statement reads.

Both James and Hunter Biden, as well as Schwerin were "key witnesses" in the ongoing investigation on President Biden involved in the family local and international business schemes, the statement continued.

The current evidence reveals the family business was building around the President's political career and connections, the statement continued, adding some even included members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), while all being done to the detriment of US citizens interest. "This is a threat to national security," Comer said as quoted by the statement, when addressing the possibility of President Biden being compromised by his dealings, in his decision making. Biden and his family must be transparent and be held accountable, the statement continued, adding that US citizens deserve to know if the President has been involved in fraud and other kind of abuses.

The Oversight Committee is currently investigating President Biden's and his family's over foreign business deals, to assess whether he has compromised national security.

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US Exploring Action Against PLA-Linked Chinese Entities Behind 'Spy Balloon' - State Dept.
(Adds details in paras 3, 4)

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) – The United States will consider taking action against Chinese entities linked to the People’s Liberation Army that allegedly supported the "surveillance" balloon's incursion into US airspace last week, the State Department said Thursday.

"The United States will also explore taking action against P.R.C. entities linked to the P.L.A. that supported the balloon’s incursion into U.S. airspace," a State Department official said, as quoted by The New York Times.

They added that the US government was "confident" that the balloon manufacturer had direct business ties with the PLA. The company advertises balloons on its website and has also posted videos that appear to be from previous flights in the airspace of the US and other countries. Their flight patterns match those of the balloon over the US last week.

They also said that the surveillance balloon that traversed the US last week had multiple antennas that could likely collect and geo-locate communications signals. The balloon also included solar panels large enough to power "multiple active intelligence collection sensors."

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US, UK Impose Sanctions on 7 Members of Alleged Russia-Based Cybercrime Gang Trickbot (Adds details in paras 3-10)

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) – The United States and the United Kingdom imposed sanctions on seven members of the alleged Russia-based cybercrime gang Trickbot, the US Department of the Treasury said on Thursday.

"Today, the United States, in coordination with the United Kingdom, is designating seven individuals who are part of the Russia-based cybercrime gang Trickbot. This action represents the very first sanctions of their kind for the U.K., and result from a collaborative partnership between the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control and the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office; National Crime Agency; and His Majesty’s Treasury to disrupt Russian cybercrime and ransomware," the statement said.

Sanctions were imposed against Vitaly Kovalev, Maksim Mikhailov, Valentin Karyagin, Mikhail Iskritskiy, Dmitry Pleshevskiy, Ivan Vakhromeyev, and Valery Sedletski.

Kovalev is described as a senior figure within the Trickbot Group.

"Today, an indictment was unsealed in the US District Court for the District of New Jersey charging Kovalev with conspiracy to commit bank fraud and eight counts of bank fraud in connection with a series of intrusions into victim bank accounts held at various US-based financial institutions that occurred in 2009 and 2010, predating his involvement in Dyre or the Trickbot Group," the statement read.

The US Treasury alleges that the members of the group are linked to Russia's intelligence services. "The Trickbot Group’s preparations in 2020 aligned them to Russian state objectives and targeting previously conducted by Russian Intelligence Services. This included targeting the US government and U.S. companies," it stated.

Trickbot, first identified in 2016 by security researchers, was a trojan virus that evolved from the Dyre trojan.

"Dyre and Trickbot were developed and operated by a group of cybercriminals to steal financial data. The Trickbot trojan viruses infected millions of victim computers worldwide, including those of US businesses, and individual victims. It has since evolved into a highly modular malware suite that provides the Trickbot Group with the ability to conduct a variety of illegal cyber activities, including ransomware attacks," the Treasury said.

Trickbot targeted US hospitals and other medical organizations during the COVID-19 pandemic, it stated.

The indictment, unsealed by a New Jersey court, said that Kovalev did knowingly and intentionally execute and attempt to execute a scheme and artifice to defraud financial institutions, including several major US banks such as Wells Fargo, to obtain money, funds and other assets. The document also listed Kovalev's co-conspirators, who have not been charged yet. All of them are Russian citizens and resided in or near New York City, according to the indictment.

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UN Chief Says People in Turkey, Syria Face Nightmare on Top of Nightmare After Earthquakes

UNITED NATIONS, February 9 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said that people in Turkey and Syria are suffering one nightmare after another as a result of Monday's catastrophic earthquakes and aftershocks as well as the lack of supplies to help them in the situation.

"People are facing nightmare on top of nightmare," Guterres said on Thursday.

The United Nations is rushing to help and this is why UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths will travel to areas affected by the earthquakes this weekend, Guterres added.

Earlier on Thursday, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that the death toll from the devastating earthquake in Turkey has increased to 16,170, and another 64,194 were injured. Seismologist Dogan Perincek told Sputnik on Thursday that a new powerful earthquake may occur soon in the area of Turkey's Canakkale port in the Sea of Marmara due to increased seismic activity there.

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US Senators Introduce Bipartisan Bill to Formally End the Gulf and Iraq Wars - Statement

WASHINGTON, February 9 (Sputnik) – A bipartisan bill was introduced to repeal the 1991 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMFs) and formally end the Gulf and Iraq wars, the Senators said in a joint statement on Thursday.

“Today, U.S. Senators Tim Kaine (D-VA) and Todd Young (R-IN) and U.S. Representatives Barbara Lee (D-CA-12), Chip Roy (R-TX-21), Abigail Spanberger (D-VA-07), and Tom Cole (R-OK-04) reintroduced bipartisan legislation to repeal the 1991 and 2002 Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMFs), formally end the Gulf and Iraq wars,” the joint statement reads. Senators said the Congress has repeatedly failed to repeal the AUMFs which were respectively passed 32 and 20 years ago, despite concerns of future presidents misusing them, the statement continued.

Moreover, Senators believe that repealing the AUMFs would consolidate the current relationship it has with a “sovereign, democratic” Iraq, the statement added.

Kaine expressed the 1991 and 2002 AUMFs are no longer needed, the statement said, adding that US Congress “owes” servicemen, veterans and their families the formal end of those wars.

Senator Young added that today’s Iraq a strategic partner of the US, particularly in advancing security throughout the Middle-East, the statement pursued, but with the AUMFs still active, Baghdad officially remains a foe to Washington.

“This inconsistency and inaccuracy should be corrected,” Young said as quoted by the statement.

The Bill was first introduced in 2019 and it aimed at preventing misuse of military force and carrying operation without Congressional approval.