

**5/15/23 Monday**

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US, China Had Secret Submarine Showdown Near Hong Kong Around Jan. 6 Events - Report

The cat-and-mouse game between US and Chinese forces off the Chinese coast reached a dangerous point on January 5, 2021, when US aircraft began harassing Chinese submarines, prompting a Chinese show of force. The showdown happened amid a backdrop of high anxieties about the prospect of then-US President Donald Trump starting a war.

The incident was recently revealed by a Chinese journal, although the report was sparse on the details. According to the outlet, three US Navy aircraft launched an intense hunt for Chinese submarines in the waters between Hong Kong and the ring-shaped atoll known in English as Pratas and in Chinese as Donsha, about 190 miles off the Chinese coast.

The People's Liberation Army (PLA) was conducting naval exercises in the area at the time and after the US aircraft dropped a slew of sonar buoys designed to pinpoint the location of submarines, the Chinese military dispatched a force to the region, the consist of which remains classified.

The sonars were dropped close to Pratas, which is [controlled by the government](#) in Taiwan, which enjoys unofficial US backing but is regarded by Beijing as an illegitimate rebel force on Chinese soil, adding another provocative element to the already-dangerous incident. As the US and Chinese forces came closer together, the US aircraft began destroying their own sonar buoys to prevent them from falling into Chinese hands, where they might be analyzed for their weaknesses.

At one point during the showdown, one of the US aircraft flew just 93 miles from Hong Kong - one of the closer passes made to the Chinese coast by US surveillance aircraft.

US Aircraft Comb South China Sea

The US aircraft were not named in the report, but according to the South China Sea Probing Initiative (SCSPI), a Beijing-based think tank focused on the waterway, the US Navy flew two kinds of sub hunters over the South China Sea that month: the P-8A Poseidon, a maritime patrol aircraft based on the Boeing 737 but modified to carry specialized sub-hunting equipment like sonar buoys and torpedoes, and the P-3 Orion, an older aircraft that also carries a magnetic anomaly detector for spotting the distortions in Earth's magnetic field produced by a large steel object, such as a submarine.

The SCSPI recorded 70 US spy plane sorties across the South China Sea in January 2021, including four on January 5, the day of the showdown, although its data did not say which planes flew that day.

The US Navy has [dramatically increased](#) its surveillance of the South China Sea in recent years after the Pentagon named the waterway as the likely locale for a showdown between Washington and Beijing, both politically and militarily. Several [nations have overlapping](#) territorial and maritime claims on island chains in the region, the largest of which is China's, delineated by a "nine-dash line" that encompasses the majority of the South China Sea.

Those sorties have continued, with [SCSPI reporting](#) 58 such missions last month, including submarine hunters like the P-8A Poseidon, as well as signals intelligence and radar emissions monitoring aircraft.

#### Fears of Attempted US Provocation

The January 2021 showdown didn't happen in a vacuum, though: tensions were already sky-high between Washington and Beijing, and the events of the following day only sent them higher.

On January 6, thousands of Trump supporters breached the US Capitol Building in Washington, DC, as Congress was certifying the results of the November 2020 US presidential election. Trump had claimed his loss in the election was illegitimate due to fraud by the Democrats and encouraged his followers to "Stop the Steal."

Their efforts failed and the demonstrators were cleared from the legislative building by police and US troops, who garrisoned the capital city with more than 25,000 men in the aftermath. However, for Beijing, the concern was far greater: since several months before the election, senior [Chinese military brass had feared](#) Trump might try to hold onto power by provoking some kind of incident that would give him emergency powers. One of the scenarios most feared was an attack on Chinese positions in the South China Sea, or an attempt to goad Chinese forces there into attacking US forces.

US military leaders spoke with their Chinese counterparts several times during that period in an attempt to defuse tensions, one of which came two days after the insurrection, on January 8, 2021. US Gen. Mark A. Milley, the Chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, spoke on the phone for 90 minutes with his Chinese counterpart, PLA Gen. Li Zuocheng, chief of the Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission, to reassure him that the US military would not allow another attempted seizure of power. [Milley later described him](#) as "unusually rattled." Afterward, [Milley reportedly told](#) US Navy Adm. Philip S. Davidson, the commander of US Indo-Pacific Command, canceled operations that the Chinese "might see as provocative" in a further effort to calm things down in the region in the wake of the January 5 showdown near Pratas.

While Chinese anxieties relaxed somewhat after Trump left office later that month and US President Joe Biden was sworn in, tensions between Washington and Beijing have remained high. Biden's administration has kept to the strategy laid out by Trump for "great power competition" with Russia and China, stepping up diplomatic efforts to isolate China internationally and increasing US military support for Taiwan.

Beijing regards Taiwan as a rebellious Chinese province destined to be reunited with the mainland, and thus sees US support for Taiwan as interference in internal Chinese affairs. That is also why the January 5 incident was so provocative: Taiwan controls Pratas and has long feared a [PLA seizure of the island](#), which has no permanent residents, would serve as a prelude to a full invasion of Taiwan itself.

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Durham Report Finds FBI's Handling of Trump-Russia Probe Was 'Seriously Deficient'

A much-anticipated report has been released by US Attorney John Durham, who was appointed special counsel in 2019 to investigate the FBI's decision to launch the Russiagate investigation. Titled a "Report on Matters Related to Intelligence Activities and Investigations Arising Out of the 2016 Presidential Campaigns," [Durham's 316-page report](#) systematically covers the FBI's effort in 2016 and early 2017 to investigate the possibility that Donald Trump's presidential campaign had connections to the Russian government.

His probe was launched after the release of another special counsel's report, that by Robert Mueller, failed to find evidence of such collusion, but revealed much about the FBI's surveillance of Trump and his 2016 presidential campaign team. Both probes were ordered by then-US President Donald Trump.

According to Durham's report, the FBI launched the Russiagate investigation was "seriously deficient" and based on "raw, unanalyzed, and uncorroborated intelligence."

The report finds that the FBI failed to live up to its standards and failed "to critically analyze information that ran counter to the narrative of a Trump/Russia collusive relationship throughout Crossfire Hurricane is extremely troublesome," referring to the FBI's codename for the Russiagate probe.

"These examples are also markedly different from the FBI's actions with respect to other highly significant intelligence it received from a trusted foreign source pointing to a [Hillary] Clinton campaign plan to vilify Trump by tying him to Vladimir Putin so as to divert attention from her own concerns relating to her use of a private email server," Durham wrote.

"Unlike the FBI's opening of a full investigation of unknown members of the Trump campaign based on raw, uncorroborated information, in this separate matter involving a purported Clinton campaign plan, the FBI never opened any type of inquiry, issued any taskings, employed any analytical personnel, or produced any analytical products in connection with the information."

"FBI records prepared by [agent Peter] Strzok in February and March 2017 show that at the time of the opening of Crossfire Hurricane, the FBI had no information in its holdings indicating that at any time during the campaign anyone in the Trump campaign had been in contact with any Russian intelligence officials," Durham wrote. Strzok was the deputy assistant director of the FBI's Counterintelligence Division in 2016 and 2017 and led the Russiagate investigation. Still, Durham's four-year investigation has not resulted in any prosecutions of FBI officials for surveilling Trump's campaign, soliciting help from [private investigators](#) with questionable reputations, or misleading the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court in seeking warrants to do so. Michael Sussman, a former lawyer for Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign, was charged with lying to the FBI but [acquitted in May 2022](#).

Durham's report comes more than three years after [another internal investigation](#) by the Department of Justice Inspector General released in December 2019 by then-IG Michael Horowitz.

That report [sharply criticized the FBI](#) for making "basic and fundamental errors" in deciding to go ahead with the Crossfire Hurricane operation, but "did not find documentary or testimonial evidence that political bias or improper motivation influenced the decisions" to launch the probe in the summer of 2016.

In response to the release of Durham's report, Trump posted on social media that it said, "in other words, the American Public was scammed, just as it is being scammed right now by those who don't want to see GREATNESS for AMERICA!"

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SCOTUS to Hear Trump Hotel Case on Minority Party's Ability to Seek Executive Agency Files

In a rare moment of unity, the administration of US President Joe Biden has aligned with that of his predecessor, Donald Trump, to oppose what's commonly called the "Seven Member Rule." Now, the Supreme Court has agreed to take up a case involving the rule as related to documents from Trump's former Washington, DC, hotel.

The high court agreed on Monday to hear a case on a 2017 attempt by seven Democratic lawmakers on the House Oversight Committee to obtain documents related to Trump's deal to lease the Old Post Office Building in Washington, DC, and open a luxury hotel bearing his name.

At the time, the Democrats were the minority party in both House and Senate, and thus typically shut out of committee decisions to seek documents from other entities.

However, a 1928 law gave that authority to any seven members of the minority party in the House Oversight Committee and any five minority party members in the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, becoming known as the "Seven Member Rule" as a result.

However, according to the Biden administration and the Trump administration before it, that's not really how it works. Biden has similarly refused to cooperate with requests for documents from GOP lawmakers in the minority.

In Trump's time, the government simply refused to cooperate with the requests, even after a federal appeals court ruled 2-1 in 2020 to support use of the "Seven Member Rule." Biden's Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar has told the high court to stay out of the issue.

In [a November 2022 petition](#) opposing the lawmakers' appeal to the Supreme Court, Prelogar called the appeals court decision "erroneous," writing that it "conflicts with this Court's precedents and contradicts historical practice stretching to the beginning of the Republic.

The decision also resolves exceptionally important questions of constitutional law and threatens serious harm to all three branches of the federal government."

The actual reasons for the Democrats requesting such information are unclear, but seem to be related to a belief that Trump hid a significant amount of debt from the General Services Administration when bidding for the Old Post Office Pavilion lease.

A parallel investigation is based on potential conflicts of interest while Trump was president, since delegations from foreign governments with which his administration was doing business also stayed at the hotel during their visits to Washington, DC.

The [Trump Organization](#), which Trump set up to handle his business affairs while he was president, [sold the property](#) for \$375 million in May 2022, which has since reopened as a Waldorf-Astoria.

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#### Turkiye Election Outcomes Are Unevident

A runoff Turkish election is scheduled to take place May 28 after no contender managed to gain 50% of the vote over the weekend.

The outcome of the May 14 Turkish general election has shown that there is still no obvious winner. That's essentially "broken the belief that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is untouchable", independent investigative journalist Christopher Helali told Sputnik.

While Erdogan received more votes than many observers expected, he failed to receive 50% of the vote, forcing a runoff election with opposition leader Kemal Kilicdaroglu in two weeks.

Erdogan is expected to win the runoff election because the third candidate in the race, Sinan Ogan and his voters are more likely to support Erdogan than Kilicdaroglu in the runoff, Helali told Radio Sputnik's Political Misfits on Monday.

While much of Western media has focused on what the election could mean for geopolitics, Helali said the biggest issues for the Turkish people were economic ones.

"Economic issues for Turkish people have been at the forefront over the past few years. And we've seen some unconventional economic practices by the government to try to rein in inflation. Things that many were quite surprised about in terms of economic policy, that have failed to materialize any real benefits for the Turkish people," Helali explained.

According to Helali, Erdogan had "multiple instances where he could have done different policies that might have affected some significant change economically, but they weren't done."

Helali further suggested that strained Turkish relations with regional governments may soon ease. "I think in particular Greece, Armenia, maybe some changes in regards to Syria," he said.

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#### Elon Musk Subpoenaed in Virgin Island Lawsuit Against JPMorgan for Epstein Connection

Jeffrey Epstein was awaiting trial for multiple sex trafficking crimes when he was found dead in his jail cell. His death was ruled as a suicide by authorities.

The US Virgin Islands have issued a subpoena for Twitter owner and Tesla CEO Elon Musk in relation to the government's lawsuit against JPMorgan Chase for its alleged role in the sex trafficking ring run by deceased pedophile Jeffrey Epstein, court filings revealed on Monday.

The court filing notes the government has had issues finding Musk to present him with the subpoena, which was filed on April 28. The subpoena says the island's government believes Epstein "may have referred or attempted to refer" Musk to JPMorgan.

It asks for Musk to turn over all communications between him, JPMorgan, Epstein, and “all documents reflecting or regarding Epstein’s involvement in human trafficking and/or his procurement of girls or women for consensual sex.”

The subpoena does not accuse Musk of any wrongdoing and is not asking him to testify under oath.

The US Virgin Islands is suing JPMorgan Chase over accusations that the company enabled and benefitted from Epstein’s trafficking of young women and underaged girls to his private island in the American territory. The financial institution is also facing a lawsuit from a woman who claims to be a victim of Epstein, and is weighing the same allegations.

JPMorgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon is set to testify in both lawsuits.

Epstein was a customer of JPMorgan Chase from 1998 to 2013. He plead guilty to a state charge of soliciting sex from an underaged girl in 2008.

The Monday filing also asks a Manhattan judge to allow officials to serve Musk through Tesla’s registered agent. The suit notes that despite hiring a private investigative firm, the government has been unable to find Musk to serve him with the subpoena.

It also says the registered agent previously waived the requirement that their clients be served personally, but did not receive a reply when the government asked if he would in this case.

“The government contacted Mr. Musk’s counsel via email to ask if he would be authorized to accept service on Mr. Musk’s behalf in this matter but did not receive a response confirming or denying his authority,” the subpoena states.

Musk is the latest billionaire to be subpoenaed in the US Virgin Islands’ case against JPMorgan. Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Disney Exec Michael Ovitz, Hyatt Hotels Executive Chairman Thomas Pritzker and billionaire real estate investor Mort Zuckerman have all also been issued subpoenas of similar nature.

Like Musk, the US Virgin Islands says it has been having difficulties serving Page.

In a 2018 interview, Epstein claimed he had advised Tesla during a Securities Exchange Commission (SEC) probe into an infamous Musk tweet in which he said he was “considering” taking Tesla private, and that he had “secured funding.”

The tweet has caused multiple headaches for Musk and Tesla. It resulted in a shareholder lawsuit, though Musk was found not liable in that case. JPMorgan also sued Tesla over the tweet. Tesla has countersued in that case, which is ongoing.

Tesla previously denied that Epstein ever advised the company.

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Trump Lashes Out, Blasts Fox News as 'DeSanctimonious Network'

The attack on the network comes after the former president's relationship with Fox News soured after the cable channel was the first major network to call Arizona for Trump's opponent in 2020, President Joe Biden.

Former US President Donald Trump took to his social media site Truth Social on Monday to lash out against Fox News, which he says is "way down in the ratings."

Trump called the network he previously had a close relationship with as the "DeSanctimonious" network, a reference to his nickname for Governor Ron DeSantis (R-FL), who is expected to challenge him for the Republican nomination for president.

"FoxNews has become the DeSanctimonious Network, but it will never work because he doesn't have the goods. Without my Endorsement, he was a dead man walking. Even with Fox, he's already pretty close to that again!"

The several post rant, which included a poll showing Trump leading DeSantis by 56 points, also compared Fox News to "the Globalist Wall Street Journal and the now, way down, New York Post," adding "They are desperately pushing DeSanctimonious who, regardless, is dropping like a rock."

Prior to the 2020 election, Trump often called into Fox shows. In 2019, he sent 657 tweets about Fox or Fox Business programming, highlighting how the then-president was an avid watcher. However, the relationship worsened after the 2020 election in response to Fox News' decision to call battleground Arizona for his then rival, Democratic contender Joe Biden.

More recently, Trump has criticized both the network's \$787.5 million lawsuit settlement with Dominion Voting Systems and its surprise firing of host Tucker Carlson in April. Trump echoed those criticisms again on Monday.

"Fox News is way down in the Ratings," he claimed. "After firing Tucker Carlson and refusing to fight against a VERY Corrupt and Rigged 2020 Presidential Election, which just cost them plenty of money, prestige, and RATINGS, they are a far cry from what they used to be."

The rant came about an hour after Trump posted about Fox News' rival CNN. The later network hosted a town hall with Trump last week, a move that garnered criticism from the left. Trump again criticized the event's host as "not exactly [renowned US interviewer] Barbara Walters, or even close," but said CNN should "take the GREAT RATINGS!"

According to poll aggregator FiveThirtyEight, Trump holds a 52.5% to 21.9% advantage over DeSantis among Republican voters.

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Record Low 21% of Americans Say Good Time to Buy House - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) – The share of Americans who believe that now is a good time to purchase a house has dropped to 21% in 2023, reaching a new record low, according to a Gallup poll published on Tuesday.

"Twenty-one percent of U.S. adults believe it is a good time to buy a house, down nine percentage points from the prior low recorded last year. The 2022 and 2023 readings are the only times that less than half of Americans have perceived the housing market as being good

for buyers in Gallup's trend since 1978," the poll said.

The results from April's poll are the worst recorded by Gallup since they began collecting data on people's perception of the US housing market in 1978, when 53% had answered positively.

In addition, those polled are more pessimistic when it comes to the prospect of a price drop in the housing market, with only 19% believing that prices will decrease, whereas 56% say they will increase and 25% think no changes will be observed.

The overall pessimism can be attributed to both high acquisition prices, and higher interest rates which combined are making mortgage payment less affordable, the poll showed.

Nonetheless, investing in real estate is still viewed by Americans as the best long-term investment, well ahead of stocks, gold, and other commodities, the poll said.

The poll was conducted via phone interviews from April 3-25 among random sample of 1,013 US nationals throughout the entire country. The margin of error is +-4%, with 95% confidence level.

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US Renews Export Controls on Russia's Rossiya Airlines for 180 Days - Commerce Department

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - The United States has extended export controls on Russia's Rossiya Airlines for another 180 days, the Commerce Department said in a notice in the Federal Register on Tuesday.

The Commerce Department's Bureau of Industry and Security had previously imposed export controls on Rossiya on November 15, 2022 for a period of 180 days due to what it called "ongoing export violations."

"I find that renewal of this order is necessary in the public interest to prevent an imminent violation of the Regulations," Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Export Enforcement said in the new notice. "This Order is effective immediately and shall remain in effect for 180 days. "

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Frozen Russian Assets No Big Problem as Many States Do Not Support US Position - Rogers

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - Renowned US investor Jim Rogers told Sputnik that he does not see the situation with the Russian assets frozen by the United States-led collective West turn into a major problem given that not many nations support Washington's position.

When asked whether the frozen Russian assets may be transferred to Ukraine, Rogers said such a thing could happen and has happened.

"However, I don't think that would be very widespread because the number of countries that are supporting the US position is remarkably low. I think like 30 or 35 countries," he said. "So yes, that could happen to some extent, but there will be too many people who will want to get around

the sanctions and the problems. If you add up the number of countries supporting the United States and the United Nations, they are not very many. ... That aspect, I don't see it turning into a huge problem."

In April, US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said the United States is in talks with its allies on the ways to overcome legal hurdles to use Russian assets seized abroad for the purpose of rebuilding Ukraine. Yellen added that the United States had already started transferring the assets seized from Russian individuals to Ukraine, but the same cannot yet be done with Russia's state-owned assets.

Rogers noted that assets freezes have happened numerous times but also said assets get unfrozen after conflicts end.

"Many people who have their assets frozen suffer for a while, but eventually, if nothing else, the war ends and the assets get unfrozen. And then people get their assets back and they start over," he said.

However, Rogers also went on to say that the freezing of Russian assets has undermined trust and made even allies of the United States nervous that such a measure may be used against them.

"Of course, everybody is worried," he said. "Right now, many of America's allies are looking for something to compete with the US dollar because they realize it could be used against them too... Now we have to be very careful, there is a different world. And we have to ask a lot of questions we didn't ask before. But I want to say to you again, this is all in the history books, this has all happened before."

After the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the collective West has imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia, including the freezing of nearly half of the country's foreign currency reserves - amounting to about \$300 billion. The European Union alone froze assets of Russian organizations and individuals worth \$23.3 billion, according to European Commissioner for Justice Didier Reynders.

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Controls Like Oil Price Caps Never Work as People Find Ways to Bypass Measures - Rogers

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - Control measures, like the collective West's price cap on Russian oil, have never been effective because people promptly find ways to get around the imposed restrictions, renowned US investor Jim Rogers told Sputnik.

"Throughout history, people have put on price controls or whatever, but these never work because people immediately figure out a way to get around the restrictions and then black markets develop," Rogers said. "Whatever the world does to Russia and oil, it will not have much effect."

Rogers noted that there are many parties that are now selling Russian oil on the black market. "I won't name names, but even the press reports about some of the black markets and the people getting around the sanctions. There are always sanctions busters and new industries develop," he said.

Rogers emphasized that whenever governments impose controls, sanctions or other restrictions, black markets develop.

"So, they [restrictions] affect a few people for a while, but in the end they don't have much effect," he said. Russia is selling a lot of oil to somebody. I am not buying it, but somebody is."

Rogers said none of the restrictions ever have long-term effect because people figure out ways to get around them given that they want to enrich themselves.

"If you know that you can make a lot of money on the black market, some people will go to the black market," he said.

When asked whether European countries can completely move away from Russian oil, Rogers said, "Of course they can move away."

"During the Cold War, Russia was not selling oil to Europe. You remember Mr. Brezhnev, Mr. Stalin, Mr. Khrushchev, those people, Russians were not selling oil to the Europeans. So, of course, they can move away," he said. "If things get really horrible again, we will have that kind of period again in the world. A lot of people will not be able to buy whatever it is from other countries. So it can happen but don't worry, Russia's going to sell their oil, somebody is going to buy Russian oil."

At the end of April, Russian President Vladimir Putin signed a decree allowing the supply of oil and petroleum products under agreements with friendly countries concluded prior to February 1, regardless of the price cap, according to the official legal information portal.

The relevant amendments are being made to the presidential decree on retaliatory measures for the establishment by some foreign states of the maximum price for Russian oil and petroleum products, which entered into force on February 1, 2023.

In December 2022, the European Union imposed an embargo on Russian crude oil, and along with the Group of Seven and Australia, agreed to a \$60 per barrel price cap on oil. In February 2023, the EU also agreed to the European Commission's proposal of a \$100 per barrel ceiling for Russian diesel fuel, and \$45 per barrel for discounted products such as fuel oil.

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Normalizing West-Russia Ties Will Happen as History Does Not Stand Still - US Investor

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - Relations between Russia and the countries of the collective West will eventually return to normal given that history does not stand still, legendary US investor Jim Rogers told Sputnik.

"I know it will happen," Rogers said when commenting on a possible normalization of relations between Russia and the collective West in the future. "I know that all of this will be forgotten someday."

Rogers noted that Germany and the Axis powers were at war with the rest of Europe in 1939, but relations after the war eventually improved.

"Most people don't remember that now. We all drive Volkswagen, we all drive Mercedes. The world moves on. I know this will be forgotten someday. Everybody moves on. History does not stand still," Rogers said.

When asked whether he thinks that the companies that left Russia because of the collective West's sanctions will ever return, Rogers said, "Of course."

Rogers asked whether anyone thinks Russia will be at war for the rest of history, adding that a few years from now people will still have conversations like this one but long-term they will move on.

"People will not remember. You and I will remember it and during the next decade people will remember it, but in 50 years or in 100 years, people will move on and do other things whether we like it or not. That's the way history works."

Since the beginning of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, the countries of the collective West imposed comprehensive sanctions against Russia resulting in an unprecedented cooling in their relations.

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Investor Projects Problems for US Economy No Matter Who Becomes President in 2024

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - The US economy will experience economic issues by 2025 regardless of who is elected as the next president, legendary investor Jim Rogers told Sputnik.

"The US economy will have problems by 2025 whoever is president," Rogers stated.

Current officeholder Joe Biden officially launched his reelection campaign in April.

"He will say he will do everything he can to get reelected. And that means he will spend a lot of money on places where he thinks he can get votes," Rogers said. "That's what they always do, again this has been going on since America was founded. And he will do that. I don't know if it will work or not."

When further asked whether Biden's reelection would affect the US economy, Rogers said he suspects that the economy will be "bad" by November 2024.

"And then he will probably not get reelected because the economy will be bad, but I don't know," the investor said.

Biden may once again square off against his Republican predecessor, Donald Trump. Trump announced his 2024 presidential campaign in November 2022 and is currently the most popular candidate among registered Republicans.

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Growing Debt to Strip US of Status of World's Number 1 Economy - Investor

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - The growing national debt will lead to the United States losing its status as the world's number one economy one day and to the continued deterioration of its standard of living, with some other country overtaking the US's position, American investor Jim Rogers told Sputnik.

"In 100 years, it's going to be much worse. Young people in America are not going to have nearly as good a life as they had before. And some countries are going to rise to replace America as the number one," Rogers said. "What are the consequences? Continued decline in America's standard of living and in America's position in the world. It's happened to everybody. Every country that's been number one has made mistakes and spent a lot of money and gone into debt, has gone into decline."

Rogers recalled that 100 years ago, Britain was the number one country in the world, but then spent a lot of money, and went deep into debt.

"In 1976, they went bankrupt. Literally, the IMF had to fly into London and bail them out, give them emergency loans because they were bankrupt, horribly bankrupt," he recalled. "And the only thing that saved them was the North Sea oil. Then they discovered oil and the North Sea and that saved them. What does it mean? It means that other countries are rising ... America is going that way. But we don't have the North Sea oil to save us."

When asked about what country could overtake the US's place, the investor said that "it should be China," but expressed belief that certain currency constraints may prevent the country from topping the list of world economies.

"The Chinese currency is not convertible. It's not. It's blocked. The technical term, it's blocked. Well, you can't be number one with a blocked currency. It just cannot work," he added.

Rogers noted, however, that the Chinese are opening their currency and they're making it more tradable.

The United States is teetering on the brink of a default of its obligations if the Biden administration fails to get its Republican rivals in Congress to agree to raising the nation's debt ceiling.

The Congressional Budget Office warned on Friday that the United States faced a "significant risk" of defaulting within the first two weeks of June if lawmakers fail to increase the amount of debt the country is legally allowed to take on.

Talks between President Joe Biden and top lawmakers on raising the \$31.4 trillion debt ceiling are expected to resume early this week, after a planned meeting on Friday was postponed to allow staff to continue negotiations.

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US Won't Default But Unlikely to Continue as Dynamic Power With Such Debt - Investor

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - The United States will not go into default, but is unlikely to avoid serious economic issues and continue as a dynamic power with its ever-growing national debt, renowned US investor Jim Rogers told Sputnik.

The White House and Republicans in Congress have been locked in a dispute on a deal to raise the nation's debt limit and thus avert an unprecedented national default as early as June. "They will increase the debt limit, I promise you. Americans are not going to default on its debt. They're not going to call up all the banks in the world and say, 'We're not going to pay you.' That's not going to happen ... They're going to pay their debts," Rogers said.

Rogers believes that the US government "may trick everybody" by acting like they're going to go into default, which is not the case.

"They might go down to the last minute, because they think that will help them negotiate," he said. "I don't know what they're trying to negotiate. Somebody's got to pay this debt. And you know, they don't want to pay it. So they may try to help their negotiating position."

But in the end, Rogers pointed out, the United States will just go deeper and deeper into debt. "The debt limit is absurd. America is the largest debtor nation in the history of the world, which is totally absurd and outrageous, and it's leading to the serious problems in the United States," he said. "No country in history has gotten this deep in debt and not had a serious problem before it was finished. So this is not good for the United States. They may extend the debt limit, may make renew the debt limit or something. But that just makes the situation worse."

Rogers said that the largest debtor nation in the history of the world cannot continue as a dynamic and forceful strong power.

"It is not good being young in America in 2023, because the problems that my teenage children have - when they get older and older - are going to be hard. Because America is so deep in debt and it's getting worse ... It's not good to be a young American because somebody's got to pay this debt. I'm not gonna pay it, I'm gonna be gone. But my poor teenage children are gonna inherit great problems," the investor said.

The Congressional Budget Office warned on Friday that the United States faced a "significant risk" of defaulting within the first two weeks of June if lawmakers fail to increase the amount of debt the country is legally allowed to take on.

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Biden, Congressional Leaders to Meet Tuesday for Further Debt Limit Talks - White House

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden and congressional leaders will meet on Tuesday for further negotiations on raising the debt limit, the White House said in a press release.

"In the afternoon, the President will meet with Speaker Kevin McCarthy, Leader Chuck Schumer, Leader Mitch McConnell, and Leader Hakeem Jeffries at the White House," the release said on Monday.

McCarthy said in earlier remarks that there has been no progress in negotiations since Biden and the four congressional leaders met last week to renew talks on raising the debt limit.

On Sunday, Biden said he is optimistic about negotiations to raise the debt limit, but McCarthy told reporters at a news conference on Monday that talks are not in a good place.

However, Biden and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell issued separate statements last week assuring the US public that the United States would not default on its debt.

The White House and Republicans in Congress have been locked in a dispute on a deal that would avert an unprecedented national default as early as June.

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Axiom Mission Ready for Sunday Launch to Space Station With Saudi Paying Passengers - NASA

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - The second joint NASA-SpaceX-Axiom manned space mission to the International Space Station (ISS) is ready to launch on schedule next Sunday, senior mission officials said during a teleconference with members of the press.

"We had a great overview today: We are targeting May 21 at 5:37 am for lift off," NASA Space Operations Mission Directorate Manager Joel Montalbano told the teleconference on Monday.

The mission will blast off from Launch Complex 39A at NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida and the crew will travel to the orbiting outpost aboard the SpaceX Dragon spacecraft Freedom, after launching on the company's Falcon 9 rocket, NASA said in a statement.

"The Ax-2 crew members are Commander Peggy Whitson, Pilot John Shoffner and Mission Specialists Ali Alqarni and Rayyanah Barnawi representing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," NASA said.

The crew are scheduled to stay on the ISS for eight days and conduct science, education and commercial activities, NASA added.

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Oil Price Up 1% on Impact of Canadian Wildfires, Talk of US Strategic Reserve Refill

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - Oil markets rose on Monday as traders factored in Canadian wildfires and their impact on crude exports from the North American producer. Gains were also boosted in after-hours trade by a report that the United States could buy an initial three million barrels to refill its heavily drawn-down oil reserve.

London-traded Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, settled up \$1.06, or 1.4%, at \$75.23 per barrel. Brent dropped by 14% over the previous four weeks.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude settled up \$1.07, or 1.5%, at \$71.11 per barrel. WTI had fallen by 15% over the past four weeks.

At least 300,000 barrels of oil equivalent per day production was shut down last week in Alberta, media reports said. In 2016, Canadian wildfires knocked out more than a million barrels of oil equivalent per day of production.

On the average, the United States sources about half of its oil imports from Canada.

"It's significant no doubt, what's at stake from these wildfires," John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, told Sputnik. "That aside, there is also some technical rebound after four straight weeks of losses in crude futures. But going ahead, the path of least resistance still seems lower as worries over the state of the US economy, inflation and debt prevail over everything else."

Crude futures also spiked briefly in New York's post-settlement trading after the US Department

of Energy announced it would buy three million barrels of crude in its first attempt to refill the nation's strategic oil reserve after extensive draws over the past 18 months.

WTI jumped briefly in post-settlement trade to \$71.67, reacting to the report. By 5:11 p.m. ET (21:11 GMT), the US crude benchmark had fallen back from those highs to trade at \$71.31.

Since last week, news wires have used sources within the Department of Energy or Biden administration to report about the government's attempts to refill the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR).

Last week, a headline erroneously stated that all scheduled SPR sales will be canceled in the bid to hasten the refill.

US Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm later clarified in a briefing with lawmakers in Congress that purchases would only begin after the completion of mandated sales that would end next month.

Bloomberg noted in its Monday report that an earlier attempt to refill the reserve, via another 3 million barrel-purchase, was canceled by the Energy Department in January, saying the offers it received were either too expensive or did not meet other specifications.

The Biden administration said toward the end of last year that its aim was to refill the reserve when prices were at or below about \$67-\$72 per barrel.

The administration has leaned heavily on the SPR since late 2021 to offset tight crude supplies that had raised fuel costs for Americans. As of last week, the SPR's crude balance was at its lowest since November 1983 after the release of about 200 million barrels or more from the reserve over the past 18 months.

The Biden administration's use of the SPR has been a highly-charged matter for oil bulls and opponents of President Joe Biden. Both sides accuse him of indiscriminately releasing hundreds of millions of barrels from the stockpile to subdue crude prices and shore up his political standing with American voters - when the reserve is meant for emergency use, in times of critically short oil supply.

Biden, in his defense, said he was acting to reduce record high pump prices of fuel, which stood at above \$5 per gallon last June and now hovers at around \$3.50. The administration also blames last year's high crude prices for US inflation getting to four-decade highs of above 9% in June.

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US Confirms Buying 3Mln Barrels in First Bid to Refill Heavily Drawn-Down Oil Reserve

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will buy three million barrels in its first bid to refill the country's heavily-drawn oil reserve, the Department of Energy said in a statement on Monday.

"The "DoE ...will purchase up to 3 million barrels of oil for the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) in continuation of the Biden-Harris Administration's three-part replenishment plan," the statement said, adding that the department "intends to purchase more oil later this year".

Since last week, news wires have used sources within the DoE or the administration to report

about the government's attempts to refill the SPR.

The Biden administration has leaned heavily on the SPR since late 2021 to offset tight crude supplies that had raised fuel costs for Americans. As of last week, the SPR's crude balance was at its lowest since November 1983 after the release of about 200 million barrels or more from the reserve over the past 18 months.

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In his defense, Biden said he was acting to reduce record-high fuel pump prices, which stood at above \$5 per gallon last June and now hover at around \$3.50. The administration also blames the previous year's high crude prices for US inflation getting to four-decade highs of above 9% in June.

The DoE statement on Monday reinforced the president's argument, saying that analysis by the Treasury Department indicated that last year's SPR releases, along with coordinated releases of oil reserves by international partners of the United States, succeeded in reducing pump prices of US gasoline "by up to roughly 40 cents per gallon compared to what they would have been absent these drawdowns".

It added that the three-part replenishment strategy involved direct purchases with revenues from emergency sales; exchange returns that include a premium to volume delivered; and securing of legislative solutions that avoid unnecessary sales unrelated to supply disruptions so as to strategically maintain volume.

It said the DoE has also secured the cancellation of 140 million barrels in congressionally mandated sales scheduled for fiscal years 2024 through 2027.

"This cancellation has already led to significant progress toward replenishment and will allow the SPR to have the same number of barrels in reserve by the end of FY 2027 that it would have had emergency barrels not been sold in 2022," the statement said.

London-traded Brent crude, the global benchmark for oil, settled up \$1.06, or 1.4%, at \$75.23 per barrel. Brent dropped by 14% over the previous four weeks.

New York-traded West Texas Intermediate, or WTI, crude settled up \$1.07, or 1.5%, at \$71.11 per barrel. WTI had fallen by 15% over the past four weeks.

WTI jumped briefly in post-settlement trade to \$71.67, reacting to reports about the DoE's planned purchase of crude for the SPR.

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FBI Says Could Have Prevented Missteps Identified in Durham Probe With Reforms Made Since

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - The FBI could have prevented missteps identified by Special Counsel John Durham's probe into the US government's investigation of alleged ties

between Donald Trump and Russia if it had implemented reforms made since the incidents in question, the agency said in a statement.

“The conduct in 2016 and 2017 that Special Counsel Durham examined was the reason that current FBI leadership already implemented dozens of corrective actions, which have now been in place for some time. Had those reforms been in place in 2016, the missteps identified in the report could have been prevented,” the FBI said on Monday.

The statement did not include examples of the corrective actions taken by the FBI since the events examined by the Durham probe. Durham was tasked in 2019 with reviewing the US government’s investigation of alleged ties between the campaign of then-candidate Trump and Russia, including surveillance of a former campaign adviser.

Durham released the results of his probe in a report earlier on Monday. The report concluded that the FBI never should have launched its Trump-Russia probe.

The report also revealed that, in contrast to its investigation of Trump, the FBI declined to pursue intelligence from a trusted source indicating a potential plan by the campaign of Hillary Clinton to vilify Trump in an effort to divert attention away from her own political scandals.

The report reinforces the importance of ensuring the FBI “continues” to do its work with the “rigor, objectivity, and professionalism” the American people expect and deserve, the FBI statement added.

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UPDATE- Special Counsel Durham Says FBI Should Have Never Launched Trump-Russia Probe – Report

(Changes attribution, provides additional details throughout the text)

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) - US Special Counsel John Durham concluded that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) should have never launched the probe into the alleged collusion between former President Donald Trump and Russia during the 2016 election, according to a report compiled by Durham over the course of three years.

“Based on the review of Crossfire Hurricane [investigation] and related intelligence activities, we conclude that the Department [of Justice] and the FBI failed to uphold their important mission of strict fidelity to the law in connection with certain events and activities described in this report,” the report said on Monday.

According to Durham, the FBI should have ignored “raw, unanalyzed and uncorroborated” intelligence that allegedly indicated that connections existed between the Trump campaign and the Russian government.

The Special Counsel notes that at the outset of the Crossfire Hurricane investigation, the FBI possessed no information that would indicate that at any time during the presidential campaign in 2016 anyone in the Trump team had been in contact with Russian intelligence officials.

The Durham report indicated that the FBI reacted differently to the Russia collusion case and to information about the Clinton campaign’s plan to smear Trump.

“Unlike the FBI’s opening of a full investigation of unknown members of the Trump campaign

based on raw, uncorroborated information, in this separate matter involving a purported Clinton campaign plan [to vilify Trump by tying him to Russian President Vladimir Putin], the FBI never opened any type of inquiry... in connection with the information," the report said.

Moreover, the Special Counsel also found that the speed and manner in which the FBI opened and investigated Crossfire Hurricane during the presidential election season reflected a noticeable departure from how it approached prior matters involving possible attempted foreign election interference plans aimed at the Clinton campaign.

However, Durham does not recommend any new charges against individuals or "whole charges" regarding the way the FBI handles politically charged investigations, the report added.

Durham was appointed as a Special Counsel by former US Attorney General William Barr in May 2019 to review the FBI's actions in the alleged Trump-Russia collusion probe, including the FBI spying on Trump's former campaign adviser.

In August, the Wall Street Journal reported that Durham's team of prosecutors also focused the probe on individuals outside the FBI who provided information that helped fuel the 2016 investigation into the alleged collusion and whether tipsters knew the information they provided was false.

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FBI Engaged, Paid Russian National Danchenko for Never-Corroborated Info on Trump - Durham

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The FBI engaged and paid Russian national Igor Danchenko for information related to alleged ties between then-US presidential candidate Donald Trump and Russia, which was never verified and used to justify US government surveillance of the Trump campaign, Special Counsel John Durham said on Monday.

From January 2017 through October 2020, the FBI conducted multiple interviews with Danchenko regarding information he provided for a dossier compiled by investigator Christopher Steele on alleged ties between Trump and Russia, which was paid for and used by the Clinton campaign, Durham said in a report on his probe into the origins of the US government's Trump-Russia investigation.

Danchenko never provided "any corroborating evidence" to support the Steele allegations, the report said, adding that Danchenko described his interactions with sub-sources as "rumor and speculation."

Moreover, significant parts of what Danchenko told the FBI were inconsistent with what Steele told them during prior interviews, the report said. Danchenko lived in Washington for many years, despite assertions on surveillance applications that Steele's source was based in Russia, the report said. However, the FBI never corrected assertions in their surveillance renewal applications, the report said.

"Rather, beginning in March 2017, the FBI engaged Danchenko as a CHS [confidential human source] and began making regular financial payments to him for information – none of which corroborated Steele's reporting," the report said.

Investigators also never resolved prior concerns about a previous preliminary FBI investigation into potential espionage by Danchenko before employing him as a paid source, the report said.

The Durham report, released Monday, concluded that the FBI never should have launched its probe into alleged ties between Trump and Russia. Durham was tasked in 2019 with reviewing the US government's probe into Trump-Russia ties, which included surveillance on a former campaign adviser.

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#### SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 16 (Sputnik) -

##### WESTERN MILITARY SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

\* Ukrainian troops will begin training on US M1 Abrams tanks in Germany in the coming weeks, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Monday.

\* France can start training Ukrainian pilots "right now," French President Emmanuel Macron said.

\* France is not supplying weapons to Ukraine that would allow it to attack or reach the territory of Russia, Macron said.

\* The United Kingdom has no plans to send fighter jets to Ukraine, the UK Prime Minister's Office said.

##### ELECTIONS IN TURKEY

\* Turkey's Supreme Election Council announced on Monday that the second round of the presidential election is scheduled for May 28.

\* Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that he is confident in winning the second round with an even greater percentage of votes.

\* The United States is closely monitoring the results of the presidential election in Turkey, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said.

##### UKRAINE CONFLICT

\* Russian paratroopers repelled an attempted attack by Ukrainian servicemen, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Monday.

\* An explosion in the center of Luhansk on Monday injured seven people, including Igor Kornet, the acting interior minister of the Luhansk People's Republic (LPR), LPR acting head Leonid Pasechnik said.

\* Power has been cut off in two mines in the Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) due to shelling, a total of 86 people were inside and work has begun on their evacuation, the Ministry of Coal and Energy of the DPR said.

\* Ukrainian military casualties amounted to 235 soldiers and mercenaries, as well as 15 pieces of military equipment, in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense

Ministry said.

#### US DEBT CEILING

\* President Joe Biden may hold another meeting on raising the US debt ceiling with Congressional leaders before he departs for a trip to Japan, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Friday.

\* Biden said there has been no progress in talks with congressional leaders on raising the debt ceiling.

#### SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

\* The United States will announce new sanctions in response to the expansion of defense cooperation between Russia and Iran, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Monday.

#### BLACK SEA GRAIN INITIATIVE

\* Talks about extending and improving the Black Sea Grain Initiative will continue in the coming days, UN Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths said on Monday, three days before the initiative is set to expire.

\* Russia cannot guarantee that the Black Sea Grain Initiative will be extended beyond May 18, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said.

\* New negotiations on the extension of the grain deal - that will expire on May 18 - in Istanbul are not planned this week, an informed source told Sputnik.

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FBI Investigators Did Not Corroborate Any Allegations From Steele Dossier –Durham’s Report

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – The Federal Bureau Investigation (FBI) investigators who probed the alleged Trump-Russia collusion did not and could not corroborate any allegations from the so-called “Steele dossier,” according to an over 300-page report compiled by US Special Counsel John Durham over the course of three years.

Durham was appointed as a Special Counsel by former US Attorney General William Barr in May 2019 to review the FBI’s actions in the alleged Trump-Russia collusion probe, including the FBI spying on Trump’s former campaign adviser.

“Our investigation determined that the Crossfire Hurricane investigators did not and could not corroborate any of the substantive allegations contained in the Steele reporting. Nor was Steele able to produce corroboration for any of the reported allegations, even after being offered \$1 million or more by the FBI for such corroboration,” Durham concluded in the report.

Durham added that Russian National Igor Danchenko, identified in December 2016 as one of the primary sub-sources for the Steele dossier, was also unable to corroborate any of the allegations in the reports, when interviewed by the FBI in January 2017, and characterized the information he provided to the former UK intelligence officer as “rumor and speculation” and the

product of casual conversation.

The Steele dossier for several years served as a guide for US authorities to investigate the alleged ties between the Trump campaign and Russia.

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Smugglers to Continue Seeking to Drive Migration on US Southern Border Post Title 42 - DHS

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - Human smugglers will seek new ways to drive up illegal migration on the US southern border regardless of efforts to deter such crossings over the last several days following the expiration of Title 42, senior US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) official Blas Nunez-Neto said on Monday.

A massive number of illegal crossings was anticipated after Title 42 expired, but this human wave never came, most likely due to tighter policy restrictions and more security personnel sent to the southern border in light of the COVID-era public health policy expiring late Thursday night.

"It is still early though and we are mindful that smugglers will continue to look ways look for ways to take advantage of changes in border policies, to weaponize disinformation, and drive migration through the region," Nunez said during a press briefing.

The National Border Patrol Council (NBPC) warned earlier on Monday that although illegal crossings on the US border with Mexico have calmed since last week, it nevertheless expects some 100,000 immigrants to attempt to enter the United States soon.

According to Nunez, the United States experienced a surge of daily illegal crossings on the southern border averaging more than 10,000 about three days before Title 42 expired Thursday night. However, since Friday, illegal crossings on the southern border have averaged less than 5,000 a day, he added.

The governments of Mexico and Guatemala are currently deploying security personnel to their own southern borders to try to manage the movement of US-bound migrants, Nunez said. The governments of Panama and Colombia are also engaged in efforts to crack down on human smuggling networks in their region, Nunez said.

Hundreds of migrants, including those from Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, have been deported to Mexico since Friday under Title 8 authorities, Nunez said.

Moreover, Nunez said thousands of other migrants currently in US custody are going through the asylum process and US immigration enforcement's expedited deportation process.

US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said last week that migrants who attempt to enter the United States without utilizing the appropriate lawful avenues would face tougher consequences after the policy is lifted.

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## Trump Says US Public Scammed After Durham Releases Report on FBI's Russia Collusion Probe

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said on Monday that the American public was scammed as shown by Special Counsel John Durham's conclusion in his just released report that the FBI should have never launched an investigation into allegations of Trump-Russia collusion.

"After extensive research, Special Counsel John Durham concludes the FBI never should have launched the Trump-Russia probe! In other words, the American Public was scammed, just as it is being scammed right now by those who don't want to see GREATNESS for AMERICA!," Trump said in a message at Truth Social.

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## FBI Did Not Pursue Intel on Alleged Clinton Plan to Vilify Trump Via Russia Ties- Durham

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The FBI did not pursue intelligence from a trusted source indicating a potential plan by Hilary Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign to vilify then-competitor Donald Trump via purported ties to Russia in order to divert attention away from her own scandals, Special Counsel John Durham said on Monday.

"The speed and manner in which the FBI opened and investigated Crossfire Hurricane during the presidential election season... reflected a noticeable departure from how it approached prior matters involving possible attempted foreign election interference plans aimed at the Clinton campaign," Durham said in a report on his probe into the origins of the US government's investigation into Trump and Russia.

The agency approached its Trump investigation differently than it approached intelligence from a trusted foreign source indicating a potential plan by the Clinton campaign to "vilify Trump by tying him to [Russian President] Vladimir Putin" so as to divert attention away from concerns regarding her use of a private email server for official communications, the report said.

The FBI never opened any type of inquiry, employed personnel or developed an analytical product in connection with the information, the report said. However, the CIA considered the matter significant enough to brief the President, Vice President, Attorney General and FBI Director on it within days of receipt, the report added.

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## US Congressman Connolly's Staff Attacked by Baseball Bat-Wielding Assailant - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Gerry Connelly said in a statement on Monday that a man with a baseball bat attacked and injured two members of his staff working in

the lawmaker's congressional office in Washington.

"This morning, an individual entered my District Office armed with a baseball bat and asked for me before committing an act of violence against two members of my staff. The individual is in police custody and both members of my team were transferred to the hospital with non-life threatening injuries," Connolly said in the statement.

The authorities have not provided the attacker's name and said his motive or other details about the attack are not known at present.

Connolly, 73, who has represented Virginia's 11th congressional district since 2009, called the attack "unconscionable and devastating."

"I have the best team in Congress. My District Office staff make themselves available to constituents and members of the public every day. The thought that someone would take advantage of my staff's accessibility to commit an act of violence is unconscionable and devastating," Connolly added.

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Durham Finds FBI Had No Information Trump Campaign Contacted Russia When Opening Probe

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US Special Counsel John Durham said on Monday that the FBI had no information indicating the Trump campaign had been in contact with Russian officials at the time when the agency opened the probe into allegations that the campaign was colluding with Russia.

"FBI records prepared by [agent Peter] Strzok in February and March 2017 show that at the time of the opening of Crossfire Hurricane, the FBI had no information in its holdings indicating that at any time during the campaign anyone in the Trump campaign had been in contact with any Russian intelligence officials," Durham said in a report to the US Attorney General Merrick Garland.

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US Envoy to UN to Participate in Europe's Register of Damage for Ukraine - US Mission

UNITED NATIONS, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States intends to participate in the Council of Europe's Register of Damage for Ukraine, the US Mission to UN Media Note said on Monday.

"The United States has expressed its intent to join the Council of Europe's "Register of Damage Caused by the Aggression of the Russian Federation against Ukraine on or after February 24, 2022," as a founding Associate Member..." the statement said. "As head of the U.S. delegation to the Summit, Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield, U.S. Representative to the United

Nations, will represent the United States in joining the enlarged partial agreement establishing the Register.”

It is an important step to hold Russia accountable, it added.

The US plans to provide funding, working with Congress, to support the registry, according to the US Permanent Mission to the UN.

Russia launched a special military operation in Ukraine on February 24 last year. Russian President Vladimir Putin has stated that the operation's goal is to protect people who have been subjected to bullying and genocide by the Kyiv regime for eight years. To achieve this, according to him, Russia plans to carry out the "demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine" and to bring to justice all war criminals responsible for "bloody crimes against civilians" in Donbass.

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Special Counsel Durham Says FBI Should Have Never Launched Trump-Russia Probe - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US Special Counsel John Durham concluded that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) should have never launched the probe on the alleged collusion between former President Donald Trump and Russia during the 2016 election, CNN reported on Monday citing a Durham-compiled report over the course of three years.

According to Durham, the FBI should have ignored "raw, unanalyzed and uncorroborated" intelligence that allegedly indicated connections existed between the Trump campaign and the Russian government, the report said.

However, Durham does not recommend any new charges against individuals or "whole charges" regarding the way the FBI handles politically charged investigations, the report added.

Durham was appointed as a Special Counsel by former US Attorney General William Barr in May 2019 to review the FBI's actions in the alleged Trump-Russia collusion probe, including the FBI spying on former Trump's campaign adviser.

In August, the Wall Street Journal reported that Durham's team of prosecutors also focused the probe on individuals outside the FBI who provided information that helped fuel the 2016 investigation into the alleged collusion and whether tipsters knew the information they provided was false.

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US Special Counsel Finds FBI Lacked Analytical Rigor During Trump-Russia Probe - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - Special Counsel John Durham's probe into the origins of the US government's investigation into alleged collusion between former president Donald Trump and Russia found that the FBI lacked analytical rigor and failed to uphold strict fidelity to

the law, Fox News reported on Monday.

Durham's probe report, obtained by the outlet and set to be released to the public Monday, determined that the FBI failed to uphold its mission of strict fidelity to the law in connection with their investigation of Trump, the report said.

Senior FBI personnel displayed a "serious lack of analytical rigor" towards information they received from politically-affiliated persons and entities, the report is quoted as saying.

Former US Attorney General William Barr announced in April 2019 that Durham would lead a review of the government's investigation of Trump, which has led to one FBI attorney pleading guilty to altering a statement connected to a wiretap warrant used against the Trump campaign.

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At Least 3 Dead, Others Injured in Shooting in Farmington, New Mexico – Police

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – At least three individuals are dead and several others injured as a result of a shooting in the city of Farmington in the US state of New Mexico, the local police said on Monday.

"There are multiple civilian victims with at least 3 deceased," the police said in a statement. One suspect, whose identity is unknown, was confronted and killed on the scene, it added.

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US 'Committed' to South Africa Ties Despite Arms Sales Allegations - State Department

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States continues to be committed to its relationship with South Africa amid rising tensions over US allegations that the country provided arms to Russia, State Department Spokesman Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"I'll note that our relationship with South Africa remains strong and we continue to be committed to the affirmative agenda of our bilateral relationship," Patel said at a press conference.

The comment comes a week after US Ambassador Reuben Briget publicly accused South Africa of supplying weapons to Russia for use in the Ukraine conflict despite its neutral stance on Moscow's special military operation. The South African government has denied these claims and announced an independent inquiry into the matter.

While speaking to South African broadcaster News24 on Thursday, Briget accused South Africa of supplying ammunition to Russia via a Russian ship that docked at a naval base in Cape Town in December of last year.

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ATF Says Responding to Reports of Mass Shooting in Farmington, New Mexico

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The US Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) is responding to reports of a mass shooting in Farmington, New Mexico, the bureau's Phoenix office said on Monday.

"ATF is responding to a report of a mass shooting in Farmington, New Mexico," ATF Phoenix said in a statement via Twitter.

Farmington Municipal Schools also released a statement via social media on Monday, informing the public that all of the area's schools were placed on "preventative lockdown" at the request of the Farmington Police Department.

Four locations remain on lockdown as of the latest update, with lockdowns at all other locations lifted, the schools' statement said.

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US Monitoring Situation Regarding Alleged South Africa Military Sales to Russia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States takes seriously and closely monitors the situation regarding alleged shipments of military equipment from South Africa to Russia, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Monday.

"This is something we are taking seriously," Ryder told reporters when asked whether the United States believes South Africa has provided weapons and ammunition to Russia.

However, Ryder declined to get into the specifics but did say the US government has raised the issue with the South African government.

Ryder noted that the United States has strongly urged countries not to provide military and other support to Russia.

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Ukrainian Crews Expected to Begin Training on US Abrams Tanks in Coming Weeks - Pentagon

(Updates with details in para 4)

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - Ukrainian troops will begin training on US M1 Abrams tanks in Germany in the coming weeks, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Monday.

"I can confirm that the 31 M1 Abrams training tanks have arrived at Grafenberg, Germany in preparation for subsequent training of Ukrainian tank crews. Those crews are expected to arrive and begin training in the next couple of weeks," Ryder said during a press briefing.

The training is intended to prepare Ukrainian crews and maintainers for "critical roles" in operating the tank, Ryder said.

The 31 tanks are intended just for training and do not necessarily have combat capabilities, Ryder added, when asked whether the training tanks could remain on the continent for use in an anticipated offensive operation by Ukraine.

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State Dept. Says Aware of American Sentenced to Life Imprisonment in China For Espionage

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware of a Chinese court sentencing an American to life in prison in connection to espionage charges, State Department Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Monday.

"We are aware of the sentencing of a US citizen in the PRC [People's Republic of China] on charges of espionage," Patel said during a press briefing.

Earlier in the day, an intermediate people's court in China's eastern city of Suzhou sentenced Hong Kong Permanent resident Liang Chengyun, who holds a US passport, to life in prison for espionage.

Chengyun, 78, also known as John Shing-wan Leung, was deprived of political rights, the court said in a statement, adding that the Chinese authorities had confiscated his property worth 500,000 yuan (\$71,800) as part of the first instance trial.

No other details on the case were provided by the court.

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## US Consumer Debt Stands at \$17 Trillion, Credit Card Defaults at Pandemic Level - Fed

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The US consumer debt has exceeded \$17 trillion the first time ever, with Americans defaulting on credit card and car loans as much as they did during the coronavirus pandemic or more, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York said in its quarterly report on household debt and credit on Monday.

Total household debt in the first quarter of 2023 rose by \$148 billion, or 0.9%, to \$17.05 trillion, the report said, adding that balances were also \$2.9 trillion higher than at the end of 2019, before the pandemic-triggered recession.

"The share of current debt becoming delinquent increased for most debt types," the report said. "The delinquency transition rate for credit cards and auto loans increased by 0.6 and 0.2 percentage points, respectively approaching or surpassing their pre-pandemic levels."

Credit card balances were flat in the first quarter, standing at \$986 billion, but auto loan balances increased by \$10 billion in the first quarter, bucking the typical trend of balance declines in first quarters, the report said.

Student loan balances slightly increased to \$1.6 trillion. Other balances, which include retail cards and other consumer loans, increased by \$5 billion, the report said.

In total, non-housing debt grew by \$24 billion for the first quarter, the report added.

Mortgage balances rose modestly by \$121 billion and stood at \$12.04 trillion at the end of March, according the report.

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## Biden Not Making Indo-Pacific Trip to 'Arm Twist' Countries on China Ties - Kirby

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden is not making an upcoming trip to the Indo-Pacific region to pressure other countries regarding ties to China, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Monday.

"We are not making countries choose between the United States and the PRC," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We are not going to the Indo-Pacific this week to arm twist."

Biden still expects to depart later this week for a trip to the Indo-Pacific region, including stops in Japan for a G7 summit and Australia for a meeting of Quad leaders, Kirby said.

Biden's trip will also include a stop in Papua New Guinea – the first time a sitting US president has visited any Pacific Island country.

Biden will discuss cooperation on areas including emerging and critical technologies, public health and climate change during his meetings, Kirby said.

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## Iran Seeking Military Equipment From Russia Worth Billions of Dollars - Kirby

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - Iran wants to get billions of dollars worth of military equipment from Russia, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Friday.

"Russia has been offering Iran unprecedented defense cooperation including on missiles, electronics, air defense," Kirby said. "In total, Iran is seeking billions of dollars worth of military equipment from Russia... This is a full-scale defense partnership that is harmful to Ukraine, to the region - the Middle East - and to the international community."

Kirby also said that Iran is also seeking to purchase from Russia attack helicopters, radars and combat trainer aircraft.

In March, Iran's mission to the United Nations told Sputnik that Iran has finalized a deal to purchase Su-35 fighter jets from Russia, but information on the number of aircraft and the timing of their delivery has been classified.

The mission did not specify when the deal was finalized nor when and how many aircraft were supposed to be delivered from Russia.

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said in March that Tehran and Moscow are striving to enhance their cooperation, including in the military sphere.

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## Kirby Says Nothing to Provide on Reports of Former US Embassy Worker Detained Russia

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Monday that he has no information to provide regarding reports of Russian authorities charging a former US embassy employee with collaboration with a foreign state or organization.

"I don't have anything... I'd have to look into that," Kirby said during a press briefing, when asked about the reports.

Earlier on Monday, Russia's Federal Security Service charged a former employee of the US embassy in Russia, Robert Shonov, with alleged crimes related to "collaboration on a confidential basis with a foreign state or international or foreign organization," a source familiar with the matter is quoted as telling Russian media.

Shonov was arrested in Vladivostok and transported to a detention center in Moscow for further questioning, the source reportedly said. Shonov could serve up to eight years in prison if convicted, the report added.

Russian authorities have requested Shonov's detention be extended for three months, with no court date set at this time, the Lefortovo court also reportedly said.

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Grain Deal Talks to Continue at Technical Level - UN Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, May 15 (Sputnik) - Parties to the grain deal will continue talks at the technical level in the coming days, UN spokesman Stephane Dujarric said on Monday.

"I expect more formal discussions at the technical level to take place in the next few days," Dujarric told a briefing.

The grain deal, which is meant to facilitate exports of Ukrainian and Russian agricultural products from Black Sea ports amid conflict, is set to expire on May 18 unless extended again.

From May 10-11, Russia, Ukraine, Turkey and the United Nations held talks on an extension of the grain deal. Earlier on Monday, Russian Ambassador to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said that Moscow cannot guarantee that the Black Sea deal will be extended if no progress is reached to unblock Russia's agricultural exports, still hampered by Western sanctions.

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Any Negotiated Ceasefire in Ukraine to Leave Russia in Strong Position – Condoleezza Rice

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said on Monday that any negotiated ceasefire in Ukraine at the current stage of the conflict would leave Russian forces in a strong position and allow them to resume their advancement.

"At present, any negotiated ceasefire would leave Russian forces in a strong position to resume their invasion," Rice said in her keynote address at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit.

According to Rice, the determining factors of the Kremlin's decision-making are President Vladimir Putin's belief that Moscow still can win in this conflict and that time is still on its side.

Russia has been conducting a special military operation in Ukraine since February 24, 2022. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the operation aims to "protect people subjected to genocide by the Kiev regime for eight years." According to the president, the ultimate goal of the operation is to liberate Donbas and create conditions that guarantee Russia's security.

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US Default Would Isolate World From Dollar-Related Investments - Deputy Treasury Secretary

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - A default by United States on its financial obligations would reduce the willingness of people throughout the world to invest in products and instruments backed by the US dollar, Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said on Monday.

"[A] US default would make US debt and economy worse," Adeyemo said in an interview with news portal npr.org. "[A] US default would make people less willing to invest in dollar assets."

The United States is teetering on the brink of a default of its obligations if the Biden administration fails to get its Republican rivals in Congress to agree to raising the nation's debt ceiling.

The Congressional Budget Office warned on Friday that the United States faced a "significant risk" of defaulting within the first two weeks of June if lawmakers fail to increase the amount of debt the country is legally allowed to take on.

Talks between President Joe Biden and top lawmakers on raising the \$31.4 trillion debt ceiling are expected to resume early this week, after a planned meeting on Friday was postponed to allow staff to continue negotiations.

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Ex-US Secretary of State Rice Says Putin, Xi Seek to Limit American Power, Influence

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – Former US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said on Monday that the presidents of China and Russia, Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, seek to limit American power and influence around the world.

“Xi Jinping’s relationship without limits with Vladimir Putin is based on ... one thing only - a desire to check American power and influence and the power and influence of our allies, who are also committed to freedom, and to ultimately replace those who believe in freedom and particularly the United States as a dominant military and technological power in the world,” Rice said in her keynote address at the Copenhagen Democracy Summit.

According to Rice, this goal explains why China is considering lethal military assistance to Russia because if Moscow loses in the conflict in Ukraine, it can set back the entire plan to undermine American power.

Following the “uncomfortable” US withdrawal from Afghanistan, Putin and Xi believe that the United States is not up to the challenge of confronting them, Rice added.

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US Closely Monitoring Turkish Election Outcome, Biden Ready to Work With Winner - Kirby

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is closely monitoring the results of the presidential election in Turkey, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Monday.

"We're closely monitoring [the elections]. It certainly looks like it's going to be going to a runoff," Kirby said during a press briefing.

US President Joe Biden looks forward to working with whichever candidate wins the election, Kirby added.

Earlier on Monday, Turkey's Supreme Election Council announced a second round of voting

scheduled for May 28, after neither incumbent Recep Tayyip Erdogan nor main challenger Kemal Kilicdaroglu managed to obtain a majority of votes in the first round.

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Biden Might Meet With Congress Leaders Again on Debt Ceiling Before Japan Trip - Kirby

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden may hold another meeting on the debt ceiling with Congressional leaders before he departs for a trip to Japan, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Friday.

Biden is set to participate in the Group of Seven leaders' summit in Hiroshima this week. "They may be having another meeting with congressional leaders before he leaves but we are still planning to leave as scheduled on Wednesday," Kirby told a briefing.

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US To Announce New Russia-Related Sanctions In Coming Days - Kirby

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The United States will announce new sanctions in response to the expansion of defense cooperation between Russia and Iran, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Monday.

"In the coming days, we'll be announcing additional designations against those involved in the increased military trade between Russia and Iran," Kirby said.

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US Arrests Massachusetts Man for Allegedly Helping China Spy on Dissidents – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – US authorities have arrested a man in Massachusetts for allegedly acting as an agent of China by providing Beijing with information about Chinese dissidents in the United States, the Justice Department said in a press release on Monday.

"Litang Liang, 63, of Brighton, was indicted on one count of acting as an agent of a foreign government without providing notification to the US Attorney General and one count of conspiracy to act as an agent of a foreign government without providing notification to the US Attorney General," the release said.

The Justice Department alleges that Liang worked as an agent for China from about 2018 through at least 2022.

Liang allegedly provided Chinese officials with photographs and information on individuals and

organizations in the Boston area and helped China's Ministry of Public Security identify potential recruits. He also helped organize a rally aimed at countering a planned pro-democracy protest, the department said.

Liang's work allegedly focused on individuals and groups with pro-Taiwan leanings. On one occasion, he allegedly informed Chinese officials about the identity of a person who "sabotaged" Chinese flags in Boston's Chinatown in 2018. A year later, he gave Chinese officials a video of a dissident attending a pro-Hong Kong march, the Justice Department said.

Liang faces up to 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for failing to inform the US government that he was a foreign government. He has also been charged with conspiracy to act as an agent of the Chinese government without notifying the US attorney general, a charge that carries up to five years in prison and a fine of \$250,000.

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Governments Continue to Use Torture Against Religious Minorities – Blinken

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – Many governments in the world continue to use torture and beatings against religious minorities within their borders, the US Secretary of State said on Monday.

"Unfortunately, the report documents the continuation, and in some instances, the rise of very troubling trends. Governments in many parts of the world continue to target religious minorities." Blinken said, presenting the annual State Department report on religious freedom in the world.

Governments are using torture, beatings, unlawful surveillance, and other methods to apply pressure on believers, Blinken added.

The report describes the status of religious freedom in 199 countries and territories.

United States Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom Rashad Hussain described China as one of the worst violators of religious rights in the world.

"They [Chinese authorities] continue their oppression of Tibetan Buddhists, Chinese Christians, and Falun Gong practitioners," Hussain said.

He also accused Beijing of imprisoning and targeting Uighurs, as well as sending them to re-education camps.

Hussain also mentioned that for the second year in a row, the US considers Russia as a country of particular concern over religious freedom. He expressed the opinion that Moscow targets faith communities within its borders and beyond.

"Brave people of faith in Russia, who directly speak against its brutal war against Ukraine, are targeted for repression," he said.

The report also noted that Iran has one of the worst records in the world on religious freedom. Tehran continues to target minority groups, including Bahais, Christians, non-Shia Muslims, and others, it added.

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US Border Patrol Union Says Anticipates 100,000 Migrants to Soon Cross Southern Border

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The National Border Patrol Council (NBPC) said on Monday that although illegal crossings on the US border with Mexico have calmed after the Title 42 public health policy expired last week, it nevertheless expects some 100,000 immigrants to attempt to enter the United States.

"While the Biden admin. and their MSM [mainstream media] crow about how wonderful things are since Title 42 ended, the reality is that there are over 100K future illegal aliens waiting on the MX [Mexican] side of the border. They are being metered by the cartels and MX govt [Mexican government], but make no mistake, they're coming," the NBPC said via Twitter.

Earlier on Monday, US Border Patrol Chief Raul Ortiz said 14,752 migrants were apprehended on the southern border over the last 72 hours, down from the nearly 10,000 daily apprehensions taking place days before Title 42 came to an end.

On Sunday, US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas has estimated that illegal border crossings from Mexico dropped by 50% in the past two days after Title 42 restrictions expired on Thursday night.

Title 42 restrictions were implemented in March 2020 under President Donald Trump in response to the COVID-19 pandemic to allow for prompt deportations of illegal migrants to Mexico or their countries of origin.

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Nebenzia Says West Has No 'Genuine Concern' for Ukrainians

UNITED NATIONS, May 15 (Sputnik) – The West has no "genuine concern" over the fate of Ukrainians and even less for the people of Donbas, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Monday.

Speaking at a UN Security Council meeting on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, Nebenzia said that during the entire month of April — when Russia held the UNSC presidency — not a single meeting on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine had been held, with the West demonstrating "no interest" in the issue.

"In April, we didn't have meetings on this topic for a month ... Today, we can see that the EU members have lined up to read out their similar statements and tick that box. And this is yet another illustration of the fact that there's no genuine concern with the fate of people who live in Ukraine. And even less with those who live in the liberated territories of Donbas," Nebenzia said.

The ambassador said that no Western delegation had expressed concern over the humanitarian situation in Donbas since 2014.

Nebenzia regretted that no "expression of sorrow" had been voiced by the West in relation to the April 28 Ukrainian shelling of a passenger bus in downtown Donetsk, which killed nine

civilians, including a child.

"Where is your commitment to the protection of civilians?" Nebenzia told the western delegations, asking if they considered Donbas residents the "wrong" kind of civilians.

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US Court Rules Against Elon Musk in Dispute Over Tesla Oversight of Tweets - Order

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The US Second Circuit Court of Appeals on Monday issued a summary order affirming a lower court's ruling that billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk must abide by an agreement made with the US Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), which requires a Tesla attorney to review his activity on Twitter.

Musk challenged a ruling by the US District Court for the Southern District of New York upholding the terms of the SEC settlement deal. The agreement was reached after Musk tweeted in 2018 about securing funding to take Tesla private, causing its shares to jump in value; Tesla remains a publicly traded company.

Musk contended that the consent decree with the SEC warrants modification due to changed circumstances and potential First Amendment violations.

"Musk argues that the SEC's methods of enforcing the consent decree constitute changed circumstances that have made compliance with it substantially more onerous. We disagree," the Second Circuit Court of Appeals said in the order.

The court also found no evidence to support Musk's claims that the SEC used the agreement to conduct "bad-faith, harassing investigations" of his protected speech, the order said, adding that the SEC has opened just three inquiries into Musk's tweets since 2018.

Parties entering into consent decrees may voluntarily waive their First Amendment and other constitutional rights, the order said. Musk could have litigated or negotiated a different agreement had we wished to preserve his rights, but cannot re-open a final judgment "merely because he has now changed his mind," the order said.

However, the court expresses no view as to the substance of Musk's underlying First Amendment claims, the order added.

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Prospects For Political Process Towards Two-State Solution Continue To Diminish - DiCarlo

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - The chances for a political process aimed at achieving a two-state solution continue to decrease, UN Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo said on Monday.

"On this day of commemoration I address you with deep concern, as we see the prospects for

restarting a political process towards a two-state solution based on UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements continue to diminish," Di Carlo said. "Across the occupied West Bank, including East Jerusalem, the rapid expansion of settlements, illegal under international law, is dramatically altering the land envisioned for the future Palestinian state."

Di Carlo went on to say that the violence, including the settlements-related violence, remains pervasive, while evictions, demolitions, and seizures of Palestinian-owned property continue unabated.

"Such actions undermine the prospects for the establishment of a viable continuous Palestinian state," she stated.

DiCarlo spoke at the High-level UN event to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Nakba. Relations between Palestine and Israel have been adversarial since the latter's founding in 1948. Palestinians seek diplomatic recognition of their independent state on the territories of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which is partially occupied by Israel, and the Gaza Strip. The Israeli government refuses to recognize Palestine as an independent political and diplomatic entity and builds settlements in the occupied areas despite objections from the United Nations.

The already tense bilateral relations were additionally complicated after Israeli security forces stormed the Al-Aqsa mosque, one of the holiest Muslim sites, on April 5, arresting hundreds of worshippers, which provoked rocket attacks from the Gaza Strip and the territory of Lebanon.

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Ukraine State Sovereignty Transferred by US Firm Under Cover of Investments - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, May 15 (Sputnik) - Ukraine's state sovereignty is being transferred by the giant investment firm BlackRock, headquartered in the United States, under the guise of investments in economic projects, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said on Monday.

"Under the cover involving private investments in economic projects, what is happening is transfer of state sovereignty under external control of a large investment fund [BlackRock] with headquarters in New York," Nebenzia said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The Russian ambassador explained that capital does flow into Ukraine but its distribution will be given to BlackRock.

The US company has also concluded an agreement to launch a Ukrainian Development Fund, Nebenzia said.

The World Bank estimated in March that Ukraine will need about \$411 billion over the next ten years to recover from the conflict it is engaged in.

BlackRock is one of the world's leading providers of investment and risk management services and has more than \$8.5 trillion of assets under management.

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US Urges Ukraine Government, Religious Leaders to Practice Tolerance - Report

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – The United States urges Ukraine's government and religious leaders in the country to practice tolerance and mutual understanding, the US State Department said on Monday in its annual report on religious freedom in the world.

“[US] Embassy officials continued to urge the government and religious leaders to practice tolerance, restraint, and mutual understanding to ensure respect for all individuals’ religious freedom and preferences. Embassy officials also continued to encourage religious groups to resolve property disputes peacefully and through dialogue with government officials,” the report said.

The report accused Russia of “widespread religious freedom abuses” in Ukraine. It also said that the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) continue to label the Orthodox Church in Ukraine (OCU) a “schismatic group.”

“UOC leaders continued to accuse the OCU of seizing churches belonging to the UOC; the OCU responded that parishioners, rather than the OCU, had initiated the transfers of affiliation within the provisions of the law,” the report said, adding that the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew gave it autocephaly (independence) in 2019.

A senior State Department official confirmed that Washington is cooperating with the Ecumenical Patriarch on the issue of Ukraine. “We have been in communication with the Ecumenical Patriarch, and we continue to work closely with him and the church to combat malign influence efforts that the Russians are engaging in Ukraine,” he told reporters in a press briefing.

In late 2018, then-Ukrainian President Poroshenko and Patriarch Bartholomew initiated the creation of the so-called Orthodox Church of Ukraine. The new church was granted autocephaly, the status of an autonomous Christian church. The Russian Orthodox Church, which like many other churches, considers the new formation to be non-canonical, severed relations with the Constantinople Patriarchate and other spiritual leaders who recognized the split.

In recent months, Ukrainian authorities have increased pressure on the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) of the Moscow Patriarchate. On December 2, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signed an order on restrictive measures against representatives of religious organizations allegedly connected with Russia. On January 1, the clergy of the UOC was denied access to the Assumption Cathedral of its headquarters, the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, while the OCU received permission from the authorities to hold a Christmas service in the cathedral on January 7.

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Russia Can Not Guarantee Black Sea Grain Deal Will Be Extended Beyond May 18 - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, May 15 (Sputnik) - Russia cannot guarantee that the Black Sea Grain Initiative will be extended beyond May 18, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vasily Nebenzia said on Monday.

"But we would like to recall here that already in March at the time of the then extension, we warned if there is no progress on the five systemic issues blocking Russia supplies, we can't guarantee that the package agreement will be extended," Nebenzia said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

Russian agricultural supplies continue to be blocked by Western sanctions and there are no prospects for easing them, Nebenzia added.

The part of the United Nations-brokered grain exports agreement pertaining to Russia expires on May 18.

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Biden Says No Updates on Debt Ceiling Talks With Congressional Leaders

(Modifies headline, lede, para 3 as per the pool correction, provides background in paras 5-6)  
WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday there have been no updates on his talks with Congressional leaders regarding raising the debt ceiling.

"No," Biden told reporters when asked whether there were any updates on the talks.

Separately, US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy told CNN that they are still "far apart" in the budget talks. He stated that it "seems like they want a default more than a deal."

McCarthy said that a deal should be done by this weekend in order "to have a timeline to be able to pass it in both houses."

The White House and Republicans in Congress have been locked in a dispute on a deal that would avert an unprecedented national default as early as June.

Biden told the White House press pool on Saturday that the talks were "moving along" but the "crunch point" had not been reached yet.

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Biden Taps Monica Bertagnolli as Head of US National Institutes of Health - White House

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden intends to nominate cancer specialist Monica Bertagnolli as head of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), the White House said on Monday.

"Today, President Biden announced his intent to nominate Dr. Monica Bertagnolli as Director of the National Institutes of Health, the world's preeminent biomedical research organization," the White House said in a statement.

Bertagnolli is a "world-renowned" surgical oncologist, cancer researcher and educator with the

vision and leadership to deliver on NIH's mission to promote human health and seek fundamental knowledge, the statement said.

Bertagnolli currently serves as Director of the National Cancer Institute. Bertagnolli has worked on the Biden administration's Cancer Moonshot project, helping launch efforts in cancer prevention and early detection, the statement said.

"Dr. Bertagnolli is a world-class physician-scientist whose vision and leadership will ensure NIH continues to be an engine of innovation to improve the health of the American people," Biden is quoted as saying in the statement.

Lawrence Tabak currently serves as Acting Director of the NIH, having been appointed by Trump administration Health Secretary Alex Azar.

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#### Biden Says No Progress on Debt Ceiling Talks With Congressional Leaders

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden said on Monday there has been no progress in talks on raising debt ceiling with Congressional leaders.

"No," Biden told reporters when asked where there was any progress.

Separately, US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy told CNN that they are still "far apart" in the budget talks. He stated that it "seems like they want a default more than a deal."

McCarthy said that a deal should be done by this weekend in order "to have a timeline to be able to pass it in both houses."

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#### Soros Says 'Alive, Healthy' Amid Reports of Death

WASHINGTON, May 15 (Sputnik) – US billionaire George Soros, 92, on Monday, dismissed rumors of his death and said that he is "alive and healthy."

"Rumors that I had a heart attack are completely false. I am alive and healthy," Soros said in a tweet.

News about Soros' alleged death from a heart attack has circulated on Twitter since Monday morning. The news was coming from an account with only a couple of followers.

Soros has been accused of using his philanthropic activity as a front for campaigns to undermine national governments and change the course of elections in a number of countries via his Open Society Foundations. Russia listed his charities as undesirable organizations in 2015.

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UN Says Talks on Black Sea Grain Deal to Continue Over Coming Days as Deadline Looms

UNITED NATIONS, May 15 (Sputnik) - Talks about extending and improving the Black Sea grain deal will continue in the coming days, UN Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs Martin Griffiths said on Monday, days before the initiative is set to expire.

"In recent weeks, we have engaged in intensive discussions with the parties to the Black Sea Initiative, to secure agreement on its extension and the improvements needed for it to operate effectively and predictably. This will continue over the coming days," Griffiths told the UN Security Council.

The grain deal was brokered by the United Nations and Turkey in July 2022 to facilitate exports of Ukrainian and Russian agricultural products from Black Sea ports during the hostilities that began in February of that year. The deal has been extended twice, most recently in March, and is due to expire on May 18.

Russia has repeatedly stated that the part of the deal regarding efforts to unblock Russian grain and fertilizer exports has not been fulfilled due to Western sanctions.