

5/25/23 Thursday

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Photos: Iran Unveils Advanced Kheibar Medium-Range Ballistic Missile

The Iranian military announced the introduction of a new and improved medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) on Thursday, described as one of the most advanced missiles Iran has ever produced.

The missile is the latest version of the Khoramshahr series of MRBMs, dubbed the Khoramshahr-4 or Kheibar missile.

Kheibar ("Fortress" in Farsi) is one of the most advanced missiles designed by the experts of the Ministry of Defense's Aerospace Industries Organization. It is a liquid-fueled missile with a range of 2,000 kilometers and a warhead weighing 1,500 kilograms with impressive strategic and tactical capabilities.

Like other Khorramshahr-class missiles, the Kheibar also has the ability to adjust its trajectory in mid-flight, during which the reentry vehicle is in space - a rare capability on ballistic-style missiles.

Upon re-entering the atmosphere, the missile can deactivate its guidance system, rendering it impervious to electronic warfare attacks that might try to disrupt its trajectory during the terminal phase.

It should not be confused with the similarly-named Kheibar Shekan ("Fortress Breaker") missile, another MRBM that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) unveiled last year.

The missile also has an incredibly short launch time of just 12 minutes, and reaches a speed of Mach 16 outside the atmosphere and Mach 8 inside the atmosphere.

Despite its speed, the Kheibar is not considered a hypersonic weapon, since it uses that speed to climb vertically and its warhead follows a ballistic trajectory.

Defense Minister Brig. Gen. Mohammad Reza Ashtiani oversaw the unveiling, which was part of a ceremony marking the 41st anniversary of the liberation of Khorramshahr in 1982.

"We are taking steps to equip the armed forces in various areas of missiles, drones, air defense, and so on, and the unveilings will definitely continue in the future," he said.

Khoramshahr had been essentially annihilated by the Iraqis two years earlier, during the open stages of the invasion that began the Iran-Iraq War. The city was doggedly defended by Iranian troops and civilians, which delayed the Iraqi invasion forces enough to allow the Iranian Army to regroup and form defensive lines deeper inside Khuzestan.

The missile is also being unveiled at a time that Iran is facing increasing threats from Israel and its tensions with the United States remain high.

Earlier this week, Israel Defense Forces Chief of General Staff Herzi Halevi [boasted of the IDF's purported ability](#) to carry out airstrikes against facilities used by Iran's nuclear program.

The US and Iran have still [failed to reach a deal](#) to revive the 2015 nuclear agreement, meaning US sanctions against Iranian industries remain in place, and US politicians wanting to posture as strong on foreign policy have [begun pushing new sanctions](#) on Iran as well.

The Kheibar is not the only new missile developed by Iran, either: earlier this month, the IRGC announced a [new long-range cruise missile](#) with precision strike capabilities and a longer range than the United States' Tomahawk missile.

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Mastering Social Media More Important for DeSantis Than Musk's Backing

Social media is a tool of mass outreach at a scale never seen before, becoming crucial for electoral success. However, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis' appearance with a major tech mogul and owner of one such website isn't likely to move the dial much with voters, one expert told Sputnik.

On Wednesday, DeSantis [formally launched his 2024 campaign](#) for the US presidency, announcing his effort during a joint appearance on a Twitter Space with Twitter CEO Elon Musk. That same day, [a poll released](#) by CNN found that 80% of Republicans prefer either DeSantis or former US President Donald Trump as their 2024 candidate.

Dr. Nicholas Waddy, political analyst and Associate Professor of History at SUNY Alfred, told Sputnik on Thursday that social media would be vital for any candidate that hopes to win, but he was skeptical as to whether Musk's presence would have a noticeable effect on a party captivated by Trump.

"Ron DeSantis deserves a lot of credit for choosing to declare his candidacy in a new and innovative way, through social media. Part of the message he was trying to send was undoubtedly that he is a younger, hipper candidate than Donald Trump," Waddy said.

"Obviously, he was also trying to leverage the newfound popularity of Twitter and Elon Musk (among conservatives) as he did so. As it happened, the technical obstacles blew up in his face, but that will seem like a minor blip if DeSantis can start catching up to Donald Trump and make the Republican presidential primaries competitive and exciting."

"Social media as a whole can play a significant role in our next presidential election, in that it is probably every bit as important as traditional media in terms of Americans' access to information. It is a way for candidates to spread their message without the support and assistance of the mainstream media, for instance. Donald Trump will thus rely on it heavily. It is also, as we discovered in 2020, susceptible to manipulation and a major practitioner of censorship," Waddy said.

"Elon Musk is now very well-regarded by conservatives and Republicans, and thus his support for any one candidate might prove useful, but hardly decisive. Likewise, if Twitter leans one way or another - or at least ceases to persecute Republicans - that will be significant, but there are many other factors that could be seen as crucial in a close election. Much will hinge, for instance, on how aggressively Facebook and Google suppress news which is harmful to Democrats."

The analyst noted, however, that Musk hasn't sunk tons of money or political endorsements into past elections, signaling he has little interest in being a "kingmaker," partisan insider, or candidate.

"The bottom line appears to be that he aspires to play a central role in many policy and pop culture debates," Waddy told Sputnik. "He is more passionate about space exploration and green energy and free speech than he is about partisan politics."

Although more than half a dozen figures have declared themselves candidates for the 2024 GOP nomination, in reality it's likely a two-horse race: DeSantis and Trump.

Since DeSantis won re-election last November, speculation increased that he might run in the next presidential election as well, and pollsters began asking voters what they thought of the idea, with DeSantis or Trump trading places in different polls as voters' favorites.

"DeSantis is currently struggling to hold his own against Trump, and it is doubtful whether Musk's endorsement would alter those dynamics much in itself," Waddy said. "DeSantis will rise or fall on his own merits, by and large. The vast majority of conservatives and Republicans like and respect DeSantis - but they have a longer, much deeper history with Trump."

"The more Democrats (and prosecutors) attack Trump, the more protective many rank-and-file Republicans become toward him," Waddy said, adding that this is, "in all likelihood, part of the Democrats' playbook for 2024."

"By [threatening Trump with prosecution](#) in 2023, they hope to solidify the GOP's loyalty to and embrace of him; and then, in 2024, they intend to neutralize Trump's political viability by trapping him in courtroom dramas and flooding the airwaves with stories about his legal problems," he explained.

"DeSantis will no doubt argue in the meantime that he can concentrate fully on running for the presidency, unlike Trump, and he can offer a fresh and appealing take on conservatism, tested in Florida, to voters, that offers the prospect of expanding the GOP's appeal beyond a narrow base of Trumpers," Waddy explained. "The question is whether anyone will be listening, or whether instead the nation will remain captivated by the spectacle that is Donald J. Trump."

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Transformers Voice Actors to Testify Over Controversial DC Robot Statues

By - Fantine Gardinier

A yearslong legal fight over a pair of statues in Washington, DC, in the likeness of robots from the Transformers film series has entered a comical new phase as the voice actors behind the two characters in question are set to testify in a city hearing over the issue.

According to reports in US media on Thursday, Peter Cullen, the voice actor behind Autobots leader Optimus Prime in the Transformers films and television series, is set to appear alongside Dan Gilvezan, who voiced one of Prime's allies, the transforming robot Bumblebee, in the witness stand.

The two appeared on the list of witnesses for a Thursday hearing of the DC Public Space Committee, which handles permit applications and other business pertaining to the use of public space in the city.

The hearing is just the latest episode in a years-long battle playing out in Georgetown, an affluent riverside neighborhood that has retained a degree of autonomy and identity after being absorbed into the larger capital city.

The two statues flank the door to the home of billionaire Newton Howard, an influential neuroscientist. They are at least 10 feet tall, made of metal car parts, painted in bright blue and yellow, and sit atop two brick square pads that once held planters.

Newton, who erected them in 2021 and has done major research on how the human brain can help pioneer artificial intelligence, said he was inspired by the franchise "because the Transformers represent human and machine living in harmony, if you will."

But for Newton's millionaire neighbors, the robots attract unwanted attention to the community and set a dangerous precedent for what could one day become statues of Soviet leader Joseph Stalin on the block. No, really.

"What's to stop someone from putting up a statue of Joseph Stalin and saying well this is provocative, it's art, it speaks to me," NBC journalist Luke Russert, who lives next door, told a city media outlet. "They are a nuisance, they are an eyesore and they detract from the spirit of the neighborhood. I think a lot of us were perplexed how quickly they went up."

Newton has countered Russert's assertion, saying that the statues "bring joy to children and other people in this rough time of people being cooped in their house. I'm going to fight for them because it really fundamentally hits me at the 'freedom of expression' nexus."

Last month, The Old Georgetown Board, an advisory board for the Commission of Fine Arts, the federal design review agency in Washington, DC, ruled that the statues must come down. On Thursday, the DC Public Space Committee will take the board's recommendation into consideration as it makes the final decision about the robot statues.

That's where Cullen and Gilvezan come in: they're going to testify before the committee in favor of keeping the statues up, and they're going to do so in the personae of their robot characters.

"Bumblebee is going to testify and hopefully turn some heads," Gilvezan told a local paper. He offered two things Bumblebee might tell the committee: "Some of my best friends are human" and "I would hate to think I wasn't welcome in Georgetown."

Gilvezan said he thinks the statues offer up a kind of joy that children need in an "awfully bleak" world.

"I love the idea that somebody is driving by with their kids and suddenly it's, 'Oh, it's Bumblebee and Optimus Prime!' It's going to make their day, and to think that opportunity wouldn't be afforded to them makes me sad," he said. "And it makes Bumblebee sad, too. I can promise you that."

Paul Strauss, an attorney who represents Howard, quipped that the captcha used by the online registration system, which asks users to "prove they're not a robot," was "a little bit discriminatory. We may have an equal protection challenge there."

However, he indicated he intends to make a real legal argument on Thursday, pointing out that owners should be allowed to do something on their property if it doesn't hurt anyone else.

He added: "Are we going to try to have some fun with this? Absolutely."

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Report: Trump Workers Moved Mar-a-Lago Boxes One Day Before FBI Raid

Investigators are viewing the timing of moved boxes, which included sensitive information regarding US national security interests and nuclear-related information, as suspicious, and are using the newfound evidence to near a charge.

Newly surfaced details have revealed that two members of former US President Donald Trump's staff moved boxes containing over 11,000 sensitive government documents a day before agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and a US prosecutor visited his Florida Mar-a-Lago estate.

Citing an anonymous source, a [US media report](#) detailed that Trump and his workers participated in a "dress rehearsal," practicing their relocation of documents before Trump even received a subpoena in May of last year. Staffers moved boxes to a storage area on June 2, before Justice Department attorney Jay Bratt and agents arrived on June 3.

An attorney representing one of the two staffers who moved boxes containing sensitive documents said their client was unaware of what was in the boxes at the time, and that the individual was trying to help Trump's valet, Walt Nauta.

Trump would also keep classified documents in his office where they were visible, and would sometimes bring those documents out to show off to others, evidence gathered by prosecutors indicates.

The timing of Trump's "dress rehearsal" adds to the weight of the ongoing investigation into his actions, and will widen the timeline of events investigators are examining: his subpoena in May, and the FBI raid on August 8.

These new details will also help prosecutors decide whether or not to charge the former president with obstruction of justice or with mishandling national security secrets.

Trump's legal team has shared a mockup of their defense with members of Congress, and are attempting to get in touch with US Attorney General Merrick Garland, suggesting a decision on whether to charge Trump may be drawing near.

However, a grand jury in the case has not convened since May 5, shortly after Garland appointed Jack Smith as a special counsel to head the investigation.

Smith is also investigating Trump's attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 election, in just one of several ongoing investigations into the former commander-in-chief.

The 2022 FBI raid in Florida saw Trump accuse Democrats of orchestrating the incident, claiming the move was driven by desires to block the former president from running for a second presidential term.

Trump has claimed he has done nothing wrong, going so far as to state that he had declassified the government files he'd relocated to his Florida residence.

Recent findings, however, have suggested that the US National Archives dispatched 16 records that broke down the correct declassification process during Trump's time in office.

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Biden, McCarthy Near Debt Ceiling Deal as Possible Default Looms With June 1 Deadline

Negotiators met virtually in an attempt to hammer out a deal that will keep the US from falling into default come June 1. Biden reported that parties were nearing a deal on the debt ceiling; however, the details have yet to be finalized.

US President Joe Biden announced on Thursday that he and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) were closer to a deal addressing the debt ceiling limit, the deadline for which is threatening the US with a debt default.

The pair seemed to be nearing an agreement to raise the government's \$31.4 trillion debt ceiling, a pattern which has persisted with the US government through the last 82 years at least [100 times](#).

While details of the deal have yet to be finalized, negotiators on both sides of the aisle appear to be narrowing down to some compromise: the debt limit will be raised for two years, while federal spending on everything will be capped.

Meanwhile, Republican negotiators have reportedly backed down from their desire to increase military spending.

While Republicans would prefer to slash costs in the deal—including increased wait times for Social Security, and a decrease to the number of teacher, police, and border control agents—Democrats are firmly denying such major cuts to most domestic programs. According to sources familiar with the matter, the two parties are now just \$70 billion apart on discretionary spending.

"Speaker McCarthy and I have a very different view of who should bear the burden of additional efforts to get our fiscal house in order. I don't believe the whole burden should fall on the backs of middle-class and working-class Americans, my House Republican friends disagree," Biden said in a Thursday address.

"Instead, Republicans passed a bill that would make huge cuts in important programs that millions of middle-class and working-class Americans count on."

"I won't agree to that, I put forward a proposal that will cut spending by more than \$1 trillion that freezes spending for the next two years," the president added in his statement. "I proposed making the wealthy begin to pay their share, which will reduce the deficit, but it won't cut programs for hard working Americans."

Any agreement which is made will have to go through the Republican-controlled House of Representatives and the Democratic-majority Senate. Both sides have voiced their dissatisfaction with the deal, which could prolong its work in progress as the US nears its June 1 deadline.

"I don't think everybody's going to be happy at the end of the day. That's not how the system works," McCarthy earlier told reporters.

"We've been talking to the White House all day, we've been going back and forth, and it's not easy," McCarthy added. "It takes a while to make it happen, and we are working hard to make it happen."

The House broke for a weeklong break on Thursday, however, lawmakers have been told to be prepared for a call back to Washington, DC, to vote if a deal is finally drafted. The deal, which only sets wide spending outlines, leaves key details for lawmakers to work on in the coming months.

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Mysterious Boom in South Carolina Rattles State, Leaves Unanswered Questions

Residents and authorities are now wondering if the mysterious boom was connected to military training exercises in Goose Creek, South Carolina.

A mysterious boom has left South Carolinians scratching their heads after being woken up and shaken in their homes. The boom struck residents at around 8:40 a.m. on Tuesday in the state's Lowcountry area.

A doorbell camera in Mount Pleasant was able to capture the surprising event.

Following the mysterious boom, the South Carolina Emergency Management Division began to receive reports from cities Greenville, Columbia and Charleston. The division reached out to several agencies in an effort to investigate what triggered the event.

"Getting several questions about a large boom/rumble in the Charleston area earlier this morning," officials explained via [Twitter](#). "We have no reports of any earthquakes at this time. We're working to determine the source."

Previously, similar "booms" were connected to earthquakes and astronauts returning from space to the coastline. However, no earthquakes were reported and NASA is not expecting to welcome home any astronauts until June.

The result of the boom could be connected to a military training exercise the US Coast Guard announced would occur on Monday in Goose Creek.

"Joint Base Charleston will be conducting explosive operations at Wharf Alpha on the Cooper River in Goose Creek, SC from May 22, 2023, to May 28, 2023," the [US Coast Guard](#) warned in their statement.

"Mariners are advised a Naval Vessel Protection Zone exists around all US Naval Vessels greater than 100 feet in length. Mariners are urged to use caution while transiting the area."

However, a spokesperson for the Coast Guard said they were also left wondering what the cause of the boom was. Meanwhile, authorities are still investigating what caused the mysterious sound.

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Morning People Are More Satisfied & Religious, Study Finds

An early bird catches the worm, and also tends to be more religious?

Researcher Joanna Gorgol and her colleagues at the University of Warsaw have discovered that those who wake up earlier tend to be more religious than their night owl counterparts. But their studies also showed that those who are religious, tend to have a preference to rise early. The [study](#) looked at two separate groups of Polish adults: one group of 500 participants and another of 728.

Both groups were evaluated on their preferences for the mornings, their conscientiousness, and their life satisfaction. While one group was asked whether or not they believe in God, the other was asked about their belief in general.

The survey's results found that those who were morning people had a higher level of industriousness, which played a major role in affecting their life satisfaction. The survey also found that religious people tend to follow the routine of an early bird person.

"The association between 'morningness-eveningness' and satisfaction with life might stem, at least in part, from higher religiosity among morning-oriented individuals. It means that more morning-oriented individuals may benefit from higher psychological wellbeing thanks to both personality characteristics and attitudes toward religion," study authors [wrote](#).

However, the study authors explain there can be no cause-and-effect relationships to pull from in this study, and that further research may be needed to address those questions.

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Blinken to Visit Sweden, Norway, Finland Next Week to Discuss National Security, Economy

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of State Antony Blinken will visit Sweden, Norway, and Finland from May 29 to June 2 to discuss cooperation on top national security and economic priorities, the State Department said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken will travel to Sweden, Norway, and Finland from May 29 to June 2 to deepen transatlantic cooperation on top national security and economic priorities," the statement said.

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Neuralink Says Received US Approval to Conduct 1st Human Clinical Study of Brain Implants

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The neural interface technology company Neuralink announced that it has received approval from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to conduct its first human clinical study for brain implant devices designed to eventually help people with debilitating issues.

"We are excited to share that we have received the FDA's approval to launch our first-in-human clinical study," the company said in a statement on Thursday.

Recruitment is not yet open for the company's first human clinical trial, but more information on

this matter will be announced soon, the statement added.

Neuralink focuses on the creation of the first two human applications: one that will restore vision and another one that will enable the movement of muscles in people who cannot do so.

Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk, who owns Neuralink, previously said the overarching goal of Neuralink is to ultimately create a whole brain interface with a generalized input and output device that could interface with every aspect of the brain.

Neuralink has an experimental monkey that has had the company's chip implanted in its brain for about half a year and has not developed any side effects, Musk said.

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US to Possibly Announce \$300Mln Ukraine Aid Package on Friday, Mostly Ammunition - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is expected to announce a new \$300 million security assistance package for Ukraine as soon as Friday, Reuters reported.

The report said on Thursday evening that the new package would consist mostly of additional ammunition such as Guided Multiple Launch Rockets for HIMARS launchers.

The United States will provide Ukraine with the military equipment from its own stockpiles through the presidential drawdown authority, the report said.

The United States has provided Ukraine with some \$36 billion worth of security assistance since Russia launched its special military operation in February 2022.

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Port of Baku to Build Terminal for Kazakhstan Grain in Foreseeable Future - Representative

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) - The port of Baku, Azerbaijan, will build a terminal for grain arriving from Kazakhstan in about five years, Baku International Sea Trade Port COO Eugene Seah told Sputnik.

"In the future, [we are] planning to have a facility for the grain terminal ... from Kazakhstan to whomever needs it," Seah said on Thursday.

Building the terminal is not a long-term prospect but rather a "long short-term" one, he said.

Asked whether he expects the terminal to be built within the next five years, Seah said, "Yes, something like that."

Seah noted that the port of Baku's trade turnover of fertilizers decreased slightly in 2022 as compared to 2021, when it reached more than 1.2 million tones.

Oil is not included on the list of the port's main goods and its volumes do not change significantly, Seah said.

Sanctions imposed on Russia by the collective West have had minimal impact on the work of

the port of Baku, since the company receives a minimum number of ships from Russia and the bulk the cargo goes via land routes, Seah added.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, May 26 (Sputnik) -

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- * Ukraine lost up to 270 soldiers, six units of equipment and two ammunition depots in the Donetsk area in the past day, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Thursday.
- * US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin expressed hope that the training for Ukrainian pilots on how to operate F-16 fighter jets will begin in the coming weeks.
- * Kiev may attempt to carry out another resonant provocation, which may involve a storage facility with spent nuclear fuel in Kharkiv, taking into account the lack of Ukraine military gains, an informed source told Sputnik.
- * The Russian security services know their job and know what they are doing, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, commenting on the issue of the security of Russian President Vladimir Putin.

EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION FORUM

- * The Eurasian Economic Union's (EEU) Economic Commission should react quickly to changes in the world, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday.
- * Putin proposed at the EEU summit to create a Eurasian credit rating agency that would ensure the availability of adequate assessment tools to manage the growing economic activity in the integration structure.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS

- * Russia's stance on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict resolution has not changed and is based on the framework of trilateral agreements with Armenia and Azerbaijan, President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday.
- * The issue of unblocking transport links in South Caucasus is on the agenda of the trilateral meeting between leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, Putin said.
- * Armenian border guards and customs officers are ready to ensure normal passage of all vehicles and railway trains between Armenia and Azerbaijan, Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said.

RUSSIAN NATIONAL VINNIK'S COURT CASE IN THE US

- * Russian national Alexander Vinnik, who is facing charges of financial crimes in the United States, would like to be considered for a potential US-Russia prisoner exchange deal in the future, defense attorney David Rizk told Sputnik on Thursday.

* The trial of Vinnik in the United States on federal charges for financial crimes linked to his cryptocurrency platform BTC-e is expected to be set in the fall, Rizk told Sputnik.

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Biden Says Vetoing US Congress Resolution That Nullifies Washington Policing Bill

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Thursday that he is vetoing a joint resolution passed by Congress that nullifies a Washington, DC policing reform bill, instead calling on Congress to pass its own police reform legislation.

"The Congress should respect the District of Columbia's right to pass measures that improve public safety and public trust. I continue to call on the Congress to pass commonsense police reform legislation. Therefore, I am vetoing this resolution," Biden said in a message to lawmakers.

Biden said that although he does not support every provision of Washington's Comprehensive Policing and Justice Reform Amendment Act, Congress' disapproval overturns reforms such as banning chokeholds and requiring officers to take de-escalation training.

Providing law enforcement with the resources they need for "effective, accountable community policing" is a core policy of the Biden administration, the president added.

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US Oath Keeper Rhodes Sentenced to 18 Years in Prison for Role in January 6 Riot – Reports

(Updates with information about Kelly Meggs sentencing in para 4)

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes has been sentenced to 18 years in prison for his role in the riot at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, Politico reported on Thursday.

Rhodes' sentencing is the longest any convicted individual has received for federal offenses connected to the events at the Capitol on January 6, the report said.

In November, Rhodes was convicted of seditious conspiracy and evidence tampering in connection to the January 6 events.

Another Oath Keepers member, Kelly Meggs, who led the Florida chapter of the group, was sentenced to 12 years in a federal prison, CNN said.

Earlier this month, former President Donald Trump said that he would most likely pardon the participants in the January 6 protest who have been convicted of federal offenses if he won the 2024 presidential election.

The US Department of Justice said at least 1,000 people in nearly all 50 US states had been arrested for crimes related to the events at the US Capitol, which the government contends sought to disrupt a joint session of Congress to document and count the electoral votes that

would determine the 2020 US presidential election.

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Georgia Balancing Relations With Russia, Taking Into Account Interdependence - Official

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Georgia is balancing its relations with Russia by taking into consideration the two countries' interdependence, Georgia Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development Energy Policy and Investment Projects Department head Jubo Turashvili told Sputnik on Thursday.

"We are depending on each other, so we are doing every single balance of our relations, our strategy current steps," Turashvili said. "The cooperation between Russia and Georgia in all the fields are always in the process because we are neighbors and we have some kind of cooperation between each other."

Earlier in May, Russian President Vladimir Putin lifted a ban on Russian airlines flying directly to Georgia. In a separate decree, Putin also canceled the visa regime for Georgian citizens with the exception of those going to work in Russia, effective May 15.

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Georgia Imports Electricity From Russia Based on Factual Circumstances - Economy Ministry

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Georgia imports electricity from Russia coming from its factual circumstances, Georgia Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development Energy Policy and Investment Projects Department head Jubo Turashvili told Sputnik on Thursday.

When asked if he is interested in importing more energy resources from Russia, Turashvili said, "All the countries try to identify their local resources."

Turashvili explained that regarding electricity imports, "this is the factual circumstances we have and we are doing it."

"Even Russia, even Georgia, even Armenia, Azerbaijan - they all try - even the United States - all the countries try to identify their local resources," Turashvili added.

In June 2022, David Narmania, Chairman of the Georgian National Energy and Water Supply Regulatory Commission, said the country will continue to import electricity from Russia due to the low cost compared to electricity from Turkey and Azerbaijan.

Based on the sensitivity of tariffs, Tbilisi "does not have the luxury of abandoning relatively cheap Russian energy for political reasons," Narmania added.

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Canada Sending 43 AIM-9 Missiles to Ukraine, 5 Field Medics to Poland - National Defense

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Canada will send 43 AIM-9 missiles to Ukraine and 5 additional Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) medical trainers to Poland and provide advanced medical skills to Ukrainian personnel, the Ministry of National Defense said on Thursday.

"Minister Anand announced that Canada is expanding its presence in Poland under Operation UNIFIER. Five additional Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) medical trainers will be deployed to Poland," the Ministry of National Defence statement reads.

In addition, Canada will be donating 43 AIM-9 anti-air missiles from CAF stocks to Ukraine, noting that it would help the Ukrainian Armed Forces in its air-defence efforts, the statement added.

CAF's five new medical trainers will be joining seven others who already are deployed in Poland under the advanced medical skill training program for the Armed Forces of Ukraine, the statement said.

The statement added that on May 15 both the CAF and Latvian National Armed Forces began the joint junior officer leadership development training program for Ukrainian personnel.

Canada's military supply to Ukraine is on schedule, having already delivered machine guns, assault rifles, cleaning kits and ammunition magazines, the statement said.

The provision of 1 million 5.56mm rounds and 4,800 new assault rifles will be delivered in the coming weeks, the statement added.

Since Russia began the special military operation in Ukraine, Canada has pledged more than \$8 billion in aid to Kiev, including \$1 billion in military assistance. Canada has also trained more than 36,000 Ukrainian soldiers since 2015, of whom 2,400 since February 2022.

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US Imposes Visa Restrictions on 2 Malian Military Commanders - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed visa restrictions on two Malian military commanders for their alleged roles in human rights violations in the city of Moura, the US State Department announced on Thursday.

"Today, the Department of State is imposing visa restrictions on two Malian military commanders ... for their involvement in gross violations of human rights," the State Department said in a press release. "Col. Moustaph Sangare, then-commander of the 33rd Parachute Commando Regiment, and Maj. Lassine Togola, acting commander of the Autonomous Special Forces Battalion, were responsible for elements of the Malian armed forces that conducted the operation in Moura."

According to the State Department, the Malian Armed Forces allegedly conducted a military operation in Moura in March 2022 with the support of the Russian private military company Wagner Group, resulting in more than 500 casualties.

The action adds to the US Treasury Department's decision to impose sanctions on the head of the Wagner Group in Mali, Ivan Laslov, that was announced earlier in the day.

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UN Security Council to Discuss Zaporizhzhia NPP Safety on May 30

UNITED NATIONS, May 25 (Sputnik) – The UN Security Council will convene on May 30 to address the safety of Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (NPP), Swiss Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nicolas Bideau told Sputnik on Thursday.

Switzerland holds the presidency of the UN Security Council in May.

"The Security Council will meet on the safety of the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant on May 30. IAEA DG Grossi will brief. The meeting will be chaired by Swiss MFA, Federal Councillor Ignazio Cassis," Bideau said.

Located on the left bank of the Dnipro River, the Zaporizhzhia NPP is the largest nuclear power plant in Europe by number of units and energy output.

The NPP came under Russian control in early March 2022 during Russia's special military operation. It has come under Ukrainian shelling several times, raising international concerns over the possibility of a nuclear accident.

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US Sanctions Russian Citizen Ivan Maslov for Being Linked to PMC Wagner in Mali - Treasury

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) – The United States on Thursday imposed sanctions on Russian national Ivan Maslov for his alleged link to the Wagner Group private military company (PMC) in Mali, the Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) said in a press release.

"Today, the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned Ivan Aleksandrovich Maslov, the head of Russian Private Military Company 'Wagner' (Wagner Group) paramilitary units and its principal administrator based in Mali," the press release said.

Maslov is a Wagner Group senior security official who was tasked by the group leaders, Yevgeniy Prigozhin, and Dmitry Utkin, to lead the Wagner Group's mercenary units in Mali, the release added.

The Wagner Group has operated in the country since 2021 after the Malian authorities hired the group to train soldiers and protect high-profile officials following a military coup d'etat in 2020.

In January, the United States designated Russia's private military company Wagner Group as a significant transnational criminal organization.

On Monday, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said that the Wagner Group is allegedly seeking to acquire some weapons from foreign suppliers and transfer them through

Mali for use in Ukraine, adding that Washington has not yet seen any indications that these acquisitions have been finalized or executed.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova refuted the US claims and said that the Wagner Group has not attempted to purchase and transfer any weapons through the territory of Mali.

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Russian National Vinnik's Trial in US Expected to Be Set in Fall - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The trial of Russian national Alexander Vinnik in the United States on federal charges for financial crimes linked to his cryptocurrency platform BTC-e is expected to be set in the fall, defense attorney David Rizk told Sputnik on Thursday.

"We expect to set a trial in his case in the fall," Rizk said.

The US government accuses Vinnik of enabling criminal activity through BTC-e by obscuring and anonymizing transactions and sources of funds. Vinnik denies the charges against him.

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Russian National Vinnik Would Like to Be Part of Possible US-Russia Prisoner Swap - Lawyer

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Russian national Alexander Vinnik, who is facing charges of financial crimes in the United States, would like to be considered for a potential US-Russia prisoner exchange deal in the future, defense attorney David Rizk told Sputnik on Thursday.

"I would assume that he has been part of the discussion regarding a future swap but I do not have specifics," Rizk said. "As you know, he would like to be included in a prisoner trade."

The United States is currently working to achieve a deal with Russia for the return of US nationals Evan Gershkovich and Paul Whelan.

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US F-16 Deliveries to Taiwan Delayed Due to 'Complex Developmental Challenges' - Air Force

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - US deliveries of new F-16 fighter jets to Taiwan have been delayed due to "complex developmental challenges," an Air Force official said in a statement to Sputnik on Thursday.

"Taiwan's new-build F-16 Block 70 program may be delayed due in part to complex developmental challenges," the official said.

According to the official, the US government, Taiwan and Lockheed Martin are actively working to mitigate the delays and to deliver the fully capable aircraft to partners as soon as possible.

Earlier in May, Taiwanese officials said they expect the first two of the 66 new F-16 fighter jets to be delivered between July and September of 2024, adding that the delay is caused by software issues with the aircraft, media reported.

In 2019, the United States approved a \$8 billion sale of 66 new F-16 jets for Taiwan, which would grow its fleet to more than 200 such aircraft.

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China Says African Union Request for Adequate Peacekeeping Funding 'Legitimate' - UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, May 25 (Sputnik) - The African Union's (AU) request for the United Nations to provide adequate funding for its peace support operations (PSO) is legitimate and reasonable, Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun said on Thursday.

The UN Security Council met to discuss African Union-led peace support operations and related issues, notably those regarding their financing.

"In February this year, the AU summit adopted a consensus paper, stressing the need to provide AU PSO with adequate, predictable, and sustainable funding and calling for support from the UN. Aspirations of African countries in this regard are legitimate and reasonable and merit the great attention and active support from the international community," Zhang said during a UN Security Council meeting on peace and security in Africa.

Zhang stated that the principle of African-led solutions for African problems should be applied, and that all peacekeeping operations, their planning, mandating, deployment, and management, should be led by Africa.

China backs Africa in improving its peace support capacity and will support Africa in its quest for sustainable funding for AU peacekeeping operations.

US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said her country supports "in principle" the use of UN contributions for AU peace operations.

"We believe such contributions must be subject to Security Council authorization and the important conditions set forth in resolutions 2320 and 2378 and must be consistent with standards we apply to all UN peacekeeping missions," Thomas-Greenfield added.

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UPDATE - African Countries Can Make Responsible Decisions on Ensuring Peace, Security - Nebenzia

(Updates with more details in para 5)

UNITED NATIONS, May 25 (Sputnik) - African states can make responsible decisions

regarding ensuring peace and security on their continent, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

"Madame President, now African colleagues are able to take responsible decisions on ensuring peace and security in their region," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting on peace and security in Africa.

The ambassador made the comments on the issue of African Union-led peace support operations and related issues.

Nebenzia said Russia supports the position expressed by African states in a consensus letter at the African Union summit held in February, when they emphasized the necessity for the United Nations to allocate adequate, predictable and sustainable funding for the organization's peace support operations.

Nebenzia expressed Russia's opinion that it is not normal for the African Union peace keeping operations to be dependent on irregular assistance either from individual countries or associations related to them.

Moreover, the ambassador said the African Union-led missions, in contrast to those of the United Nations, have the advantage and ability to react swiftly to emerging threats and ensure their forces' readiness.

"We're convinced that Africans better than anyone else, know the nature and root causes of instability in their region," Nebenzia added.

Russia is ready to participate in substantive discussions on issues related to AU peacekeeping operations under the premises of a future negotiation process or Security Council resolution on the issue, Nebenzia added.

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White House Says Has Seen Reports of Russia Moving Nuclear Weapons in Belarus

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has seen reports of Russia moving nuclear weapons into Belarus, but has not adjusted its nuclear posture, White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

"We have seen the reports of Russia and Belarus arrangement, and we will continue to monitor. We have not seen any reason to adjust our own nuclear posture," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

The spokesperson also said there is no indication that Russia is preparing to use nuclear weapons, but characterized Moscow's move as another example of making an irresponsible and provocative choice.

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Biden Renews Calls for Police Reform on Anniversary of George Floyd Death - White House

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden on Thursday issued a statement on the three-year anniversary of the death of George Floyd in police custody in which he called for continued police reform throughout the United States.

"George Floyd's murder exposed for many what Black and Brown communities have long known and experienced - that we must make a whole of society commitment to ensure that our Nation lives up to its founding promise of fair and impartial justice for all under the law," Biden said.

The murder and injustice sparked one of the largest civil rights movements in generations, with calls from all corners to acknowledge and address the challenges in the US criminal justice system and in the country's institutions more broadly, Biden said.

Biden signed an executive order a year ago that included establishing a database for police misconduct, banning the use of chokeholds and restricting no-knock warrants in federal law enforcement agencies, but these measures have not been implemented by the majority of the 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States, according to media reports.

Advocates for police reform have opposed measures such as the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, saying the bill doubles down on reform strategies that have historically failed to center marginalized communities and address police violence nationwide.

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US Oath Keeper Rhodes Sentenced to 18 Years in Prison for Role in January 6 Riot - Reports

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes has been sentenced to 18 years in prison for his role in the riot at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, Politico reported on Thursday.

Rhodes' sentencing is the longest any convicted individual has received for federal offenses connected to the events at the Capitol on January 6, the report said.

In November, Rhodes was convicted of seditious conspiracy and evidence tampering in connection to the January 6 events.

Earlier this month, former President Donald Trump said that he would most likely pardon the participants in the January 6 protest who have been convicted of federal offenses if he won the 2024 presidential election.

The US Department of Justice said at least 1,000 people in nearly all 50 US states had been arrested for crimes related to the events at the US Capitol, which the government contends sought to disrupt a joint session of Congress to document and count the electoral votes that would determine the 2020 US presidential election.

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with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

African Countries Can Make Responsible Decisions on Ensuring Peace, Security – Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, May 25 (Sputnik) – African States can make responsible decisions when it comes to ensuring peace and security on their continent, Russia's envoy to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Thursday.

Nebenzia's comments came when addressing the session's topic of African Union (AU) led peace support operations, and related issues.

"Madame President, now African colleagues are able to take responsible decisions on ensuring peace and security in their region," Nebenzia said during a UN Security Council meeting on Peace and Security in Africa.

Nebenzia added that Russia supports the position expressed by African states in a consensus letter from February's AU Summit, where they stressed the necessity for the UN to allocate AU's peace support operations with adequate, predictable, and sustainable funding.

The ambassador expressed Russia's opinion that it is not normal for AU's peace keeping operations to be depending on irregular assistance either from individual countries or associations related to them, adding that African led operations should be based on African solutions.

Moreover, Nebenzia underscored that when it comes to peace keeping operations on the African continent, AU led missions in contrasts with the UN have the advantage and ability of reacting swiftly to emerging threats and ensure the readiness of their forces.

"We're convinced that Africans better than anyone else, know the nature and root causes of instability in their region," Nebenzia pursued.

Russia is ready to participate in substantive discussion on issues related to AU peacekeeping operations under the premises of a future negotiation process or Security Council resolution on the issue, Nebenzia added.

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Ukraine Likely Unable to Capture All Contested Territory From Russia in Near Term - Milley

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Ukraine is likely unable to capture all contested territory from Russia as the regime in Kiev desires, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said on Thursday.

"The Ukrainian strategic objectives are to liberate all of Russian-occupied Ukraine... That might be achievable militarily, but probably not in the near term," Milley said during a press briefing.

Russia is also likely unable to achieve its objectives such as removing of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and capturing of Kiev by military means, Milley said.

The conflict could end in a negotiated settlement between Russia and Ukraine, although intense fighting is likely to continue until then, Milley added.

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Milley Says His Staff, EUCOM Working to Confirm If US Equipment Used In Belgorod Attacks

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - US Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Mark Milley said on Thursday that his staff are working with European Command (EUCOM) to confirm whether US-supplied military equipment was used in recent attacks on Belgorod.

Earlier this week, the Russian Defense Ministry published a video of the aftermath of the elimination of a Ukrainian sabotage and reconnaissance group that attacked the Grayvoronsky district in the Belgorod region on Monday. The footage shows several burned-out armored vehicles, as well as US-made Humvees, partially caught in craters from exploding ammunition.

"I've got the [Joint Chiefs] staff looking at that with EUCOM staff to to confirm it ... The rule that we have established with the Ukrainians is to not use US-supplied equipment to attack into the geographic space of Russia," Milley said after a Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting with allies.

Milley said he has seen the videos showing the aftermath of the Belgorod attacks, but underscored that he cannot say with definitive accuracy at the moment whether the footage shows US-supplied equipment.

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Top US General Milley Says 'No Magic Weapons' for Ukraine, Including F-16s

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - There is no such thing as a "magic weapon" in war that can single handedly win a conflict, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said on Thursday, following the Biden administration's decision to provide Ukraine with F-16 fighter jets.

"There are no magic weapons. An F-16 is not, and neither is anything else," Milley said during a press briefing.

Ukraine would need a substantial number of modern fighter jets to contest Russia in the air, Milley said.

It will take a considerable length of time to develop Ukraine's air force to the size and scope believed necessary, Milley added.

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Caspian Pipeline Consortium Important for Kazakhstan, Accounts for 80% of Exports - Envoy

(Adds background in para 5)

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The Caspian Pipeline Consortium (CPC) remains an important project for Kazakhstan, accounting for 80% of its oil exports, Kazakh Ambassador to the United States Yerzhan Ashikbayev told Sputnik.

When asked whether the CPC remains an important project for Kazakhstan, Ashikbayev said: "Undoubtedly."

"Even statistically, this is 80% of our exports, and Kazakhstan is also working to increase oil production. As far as I know, we are finishing our work to expand the project at the Tengiz field, which will add significant volumes of oil. And we need to understand how to transport these additional volumes, while taking into account the risks [of sanctions] you point out," he said.

"Our goal, of course, is to develop the oil industry, a key sector of the Kazakh economy, and to remain a reliable supplier of energy resources to global markets," the ambassador added.

The CPC pipeline system is a major international oil transportation project bringing together Russia, Kazakhstan and leading oil companies. The 930-mile-long pipeline links oil fields in Western Kazakhstan with Russia's Black Sea coast, from where oil is shipped to tankers at the CPC sea terminal.

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Danish, Dutch to Lead EU Coalition Providing F-16 Training to Ukrainian Forces - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Denmark and the Netherlands will lead EU efforts to train Ukrainian pilots to use F-16 fighter jets and a training framework will be developed in the coming weeks, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Thursday.

"I especially want to thank Denmark and the Netherlands, which have decided to lead a European coalition in providing F-16 training for Ukrainian forces," Austin said after a virtual Ukraine Defense Contact Group meeting with allies. "In the coming weeks, my Dutch and Danish counterparts will work with the United States and other allies to develop a training framework."

Austin further said that Norway, Belgium, Portugal and Poland have already offered to contribute to F-16 training and expects more countries to join on this initiative soon.

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Virgin Galactic Successfully Launches Unity 25 Spacecraft After Almost 2 Years Grounded

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) – Richard Branson's Virgin Galactic successfully on Thursday afternoon launched its first in almost two years Unity 25 space mission on VSS Unity spaceplane that took six people on board to the edge of space for a couple of minutes.

"Successful boost, WE HAVE REACHED SPACE!," the company said via Twitter.

VMS Eve, a carrier mothership, took off from the Spaceport America complex near Truth or

Consequences, New Mexico and launched the spacecraft at 12:24 p.m. Eastern Time.

According to Virgin Galactic, the spacecraft would first climb to an altitude of about 47,000 feet and then release VSS Unity spaceplane with two pilots and four Virgin Galactic employees on board at about 262,000 feet (approximately 80 km).

The Unity 25 crew included Flight Sciences Engineer Chris Hule, Virgin Galactic Astronaut Instructor Luke Mays, Chief Astronaut Instructor Beth Moses, Mission Commander Mike Masucci, Mission Pilot C. J. Sturckow, Jamila Gilbert, Jameel Janjua and Pilot Nicola Pecile

In September 2021, the US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said Virgin Galactic could resume flight operations after it concluded its investigation of the Unity 22 launch mishap, which was carrying Branson.

The FAA said it determined that Virgin Galactic's Unity 22 launch on July 11 deviated from its assigned airspace when it descended from space and the company failed to notify the agency about the incident as required.

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Kyrgyzstan Considers Russia Strategic Partner, Working in This Direction - Envoy to US

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Kyrgyzstan considers Russia a strategic partner and is working in that direction, Kyrgyz Ambassador to the United States Bakyt Amanbaev told Sputnik.

"Russia is our strategic partner and we are working in that direction," Amanbaev said on the sidelines of the 7th Annual Trans-Caspian Forum, when asked whether Kyrgyzstan will seek US sanctions waivers if the country faces restrictions for cooperation with Moscow.

Earlier at the same event, Nicholas Berliner, senior director for Russia and Central Asia at the US National Security Council, said the United States is determined to sanction companies of any nation that helps Russia circumvent sanctions.

In April, senior US officials, including Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson and Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes Elizabeth Rosenberg, visited Central Europe and Central Asia with a focus on countering sanctions evasion.

Nelson went to Switzerland, Italy, Austria and Germany from April 16-22. Rosenberg traveled to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from April 23-28.

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the West rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow.

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Geoeconomic Fragmentation May Have Serious Multi-Decades Impact on Global Economy

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) –Geopolitical fragmentation may have a significant impact on the entire global economy in decades ahead, First Deputy Managing Director Gita Gopinath said on Thursday.

“Geeconomic fragmentation can potentially have enormous ramifications for the global economy in the years and decades ahead,” Gopinath said at the IMF Conference on Geoeconomic Fragmentation.

She warned that the early signs of fragmentation are taking root, and that the global economy already faces a surge in the number of trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) restrictions. That is particularly visible in the high-tech sector, she added.

“The number of trade and FDI restrictions has increased three-fold since 2018,” Gopinath said. IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva warned earlier in May that trade fragmentation could cost up to 7 percent of global GDP in the long term.

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OSCE Says Expects to Conduct Needs Review Next Spring for 2024 US Election Monitoring

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) intends to conduct a needs assessment next spring for a possible monitoring mission for the United States' 2024 national elections, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) said on Thursday.

“While all OSCE states have committed to inviting ODIHR as well as international observers from other OSCE countries to observe their national elections, it's too early at this point to expect an invitation for these elections. We would expect to carry out a needs assessment mission to the US in spring next year, in line with the same comprehensive and systematic methodology we use in every country,” ODIHR Spokesperson Katya Andrusz said in a statement to Sputnik.

During a needs assessment, ODIHR speaks to a range of stakeholders, including government officials, election administrators, members of the judiciary, media and civil society, Andrusz said. Only after the assessment does ODIHR decide whether and what kind of election observation mission to send to a country, Andrusz said.

On Wednesday, the US Department of Homeland Security warned of possible domestic terrorism threats linked to “perceptions of the 2024 general election cycle” and other legislative and judicial decisions related to political issues.

Following US midterm elections in November, for which ODIHR sent monitors, OSCE Special Coordinator Margareta Cederfelt told Sputnik that the organization hopes the US will continue to invite them for observation missions.

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Caspian Pipeline Consortium Important for Kazakhstan, Accounts for 80% of Exports - Envoy

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The CPC pipeline system is an international oil transportation project bringing together Russia, Kazakhstan and leading oil companies.

When asked whether the CPC remains an important project for Kazakhstan, Ashikbayev said: "Undoubtedly."

"Even statistically, this is 80% of our exports, and we are also working to increase oil production in Kazakhstan. As far as I know, we are finishing our work to expand the project at the Tengiz field, which will add significant volumes of oil. And we need to understand how to transport these additional volumes, also taking into account the risks [of sanctions] you point out," he said.

"Our goal, of course, is to develop the oil industry, a key sector of the Kazakh economy, and to remain a reliable supplier of energy resources to global markets," the ambassador added.

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RECAST - Sanctions on Oil Transit Via Russia Would Be 'Apocalyptical' - Kazakh Ambassador to US

(Recasts to fix the headline)

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The West imposing sanctions on oil transit via Russia would have "apocalyptic" consequences, and Kazakhstan is interested in the stable supply of its energy products, Ambassador to the United States Yerzhan Ashikbayev told Sputnik.

When asked whether he sees risks that Western sanctions would make it difficult or impossible for Kazakhstan to transit oil and energy resources through projects passing through Russian territory, Ashikbayev said: "You are drawing some kind of a apocalyptic scenario."

"We proceed from the mutual interest of all parties, the interest in the stability of the global market, in the stability of supplies," Ashikbayev said. "It is vital for the functioning of our economy and for the entire global economy."

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McCarthy Says Briefly Discussed Talks on US Debt Ceiling With Former President Trump

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said on Thursday that he has spoken to former President Donald Trump about the ongoing talks with the White House on raising the United States' debt ceiling as negotiations on the issue with current President Joe Biden remain unresolved.

"I did talk to President Trump the other day, it came up, but just for a second," McCarthy told reporters, when asked whether he has discussed the debt ceiling with Trump.

Trump recommended the House speaker get a "good agreement" with Biden, McCarthy added. McCarthy and Biden are engaged in ongoing negotiations to raise the debt ceiling, with McCarthy backing House Republicans' proposal to raise the limit in exchange for cuts to government spending, while Biden advocates for a no-strings-attached increase.

There is a risk that the US government will default on its financial obligations as early as June 1 if an agreement is not reached, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen has warned.

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Turkey Sees Little Progress in Talks With US on Buying Small Nuclear Reactors - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - Turkey sees little progress in the bilateral talks with the United States on the possibility of purchasing small modular reactors and expects concrete proposals in order for the talks to proceed further, Turkish Ambassador in Washington Murat Mercan said on Thursday.

"We still have not seen much progress in our bilateral talks," Mercan said during the 7th Annual Trans-Caspian Forum in Washington.

The Turkish ambassador emphasized that "concrete steps and proposals" from the United States are needed to advance the bilateral talks.

In December, the Turkish government and commercial industry partners started talks with the United States to purchase small nuclear reactors in order to achieve the net-zero carbon emission goals by 2053.

Ankara has said it aims to gradually discontinue its dependency on coal by purchasing small

modular reactors.

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Almost 60% Asian Americans Support Democrats, Half of Vietnamese Are Republicans – Poll

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) –Almost 60 % of Asian Americans associate themselves with Democrats, but about every second Vietnamese is Republican, a new Pew Research Center poll said on Thursday.

“Overall, about six-in-ten Asian American registered voters (62%) identify as Democrats or lean to the Democratic Party, and 34% are Republicans or GOP leaners,” the poll said.

More than half of Americans with Chinese roots and about two-thirds of US registered voters who are Filipino, Indian (68%), or Korean (67%) identify as Democrats or lean Democratic. However, only 42% of Vietnamese Americans expressed the same opinion, while 51% identified themselves as Republicans, according to the survey.

Younger Asian voters are far more likely to support Democrats than other generations.

“Among all Asian Americans who are registered to vote, 88% of those under 30 identify with or lean to the Democratic Party, compared with 67% of those ages 30 to 49, 51% of those 50 to 64, and 48% of those 65 and older,” the poll said.

At the same time, only 11% of Asian registered voters under 30 are Republicans. However, among Asians 65 and older, 43% are Republicans or Republican-leaning, it added.

Almost three-quarters of Asians born in the US (73%) and 56% of those born abroad consider themselves as Democrats.

“A quarter of U.S.-born Asians are Republicans or lean to the GOP, as are 39% of those who are foreign born,” the poll noted.

The survey was conducted from July 5, 2022, to Jan. 27, 2023, among 7,006 Asian Americans.

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South Carolina Governor Signs Bill Banning Abortion After Detectable Heartbeat - Statement

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - South Carolina Governor Henry McMaster signed a bill banning abortions in the state after a heartbeat is detected in the fetus, the governor's office said on Thursday.

"Governor Henry McMaster today was joined by members of the General Assembly and members of the pro-life community to sign S. 474, the Fetal Heartbeat and Protection from Abortion Act, into law," the office said in a statement.

The bill prohibits abortions after a fetal heartbeat has been detected, with exceptions for rape or incest during the first twelve weeks of pregnancy, medical emergencies or fatal fetal anomalies, the statement said.

South Carolina stands ready to defend the legislation against any legal challenges, the statement added.

The bill is effective immediately.

The legislation comes following a US Supreme Court ruling last year that overturned the Roe v. Wade decision and returned the right to regulate abortions to state governments in the United States.

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US GDP Up 1.3% in First Quarter of 2023, Half of Previous Quarter's Pace - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The US economy expanded at an annualized rate of 1.3% between January and March, the Commerce Department said in its second reading for the period on Thursday.

The Commerce Department issues three GDP readings for each quarter. The second reading for the first quarter of 2023 came in at half of the pace seen in the previous fourth quarter of 2022.

Economists polled by US media had forecast GDP growth of 1.1% for the first quarter of this year. While the Commerce Department upped that in its second reading for the period, what it reported was still at the midpoint of the 2.6% growth cited for the October to December period. "The consumer was stronger than anticipated, leading to a higher revision to Q1 [first quarter]," economist Adam Button said on the ForexLive forum, analyzing the contributors to the enhanced GDP reading.

Consumer spending accounts for 70% of the US economy.

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US Eyes More Investments in Central Asia's Energy, Health, Education - NSC Director

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The United States expects to make more direct investments in Central Asia's energy, agriculture, health, education and tourism sectors, Nicholas Berliner, senior director for Russia and Central Asia at the US National Security Council, said on Thursday.

"We hope to see more US direct investments in Central Asia in energy, agriculture, environment, tourism, health, educational sectors and others," Berliner said at the 7th Annual Trans-Caspian Forum.

The US sees many opportunities to continue deepening its partnership ties with Central Asia, the official said.

In particular, the country will seek to broaden cooperation with the region on sustainable development goals, energy transition and energy security, as well as in addressing

environmental threats, Berliner said.

The US also continues to expand its English language and cultural outreach, with plans to return the Peace Corps to several Central Asian countries, he added.

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Over 20 Warships, 35 Aircraft Participate in Formidable Shield NATO Drills-UK Rear Admiral

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) – Over 20 warships and submarines are participating in NATO's 2023 Formidable Shield exercise in Europe, UK Rear Admiral and Deputy Commander of STRIKFORNATO James Morley said on Thursday.

"We brought together more than 20 ships and submarines, 35 aircraft, and 8 ground-based units, including US Marine Corps HIMARS and Norwegian advanced surface-to-air missile system," Morley told reporters during a virtual press briefing.

All participants are working together to counter the broad range of subsonic, supersonic, and ballistic missile targets, he added.

"Formidable Shield combines routine tactical training with the most offensive and defensive live missile-fire events that you will see anywhere in the world," Morley said.

He emphasized that the exercise represents an opportunity for NATO allied air, land, and maritime forces to come together to improve the integration combat credibility.

British Rear Admiral also noted that the conflict in Ukraine does not affect the exercises, which demonstrate the mutual commitments of NATO allies to deter aggression and to defend the alliances' territory.

Formidable Shield is a biannual drill that is happening on May 8-26 this year with the participation of 13 NATO allied and partner nations, including approximately 4,000 personnel from across the alliance.

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US Jobless Claims Up Slightly After Previous Week's Cut, Complicating Fed's Task

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The number of Americans filing new claims for unemployment benefits rose just moderately last week, the Labor Department reported Thursday as it slashed a large number of filings from the previous week in a move that suggested a relatively strong jobs market that could complicate the Federal Reserve's plan to pause rate hikes.

The Fed has identified robust US job and wages growth as key drivers of inflation, saying both have to cool measurably in order for it to stop a year long of rate hikes.

Initial claims for unemployment benefits increased by 4,000 to 229,000 for the week ended May 20, said the Labor Department, which also revised down the prior week's filings by 17,000

applications.

"Initial jobless claims [came in at] 229K versus 245K estimate," economist Greg Michalowski said in a post on the ForexLive forum as he joined other analysts in noting that the data undershot the Fed's target for softer trends in labor.

The labor market has been the juggernaut of US economic recovery from the COVID-19 breakout, with hundreds of thousands of jobs being added without fail since June 2020 to make up for the initial loss of 20 million jobs to the pandemic. Average monthly wages have also grown without a stop since May 2021.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, hit 40-year highs in June 2022, expanding at an annual rate of 9.1%. Since then, it has slowed, growing at just 4.9% per annum in April, for its slowest expansion in two years. The Fed's favorite price indicator, the Personal Consumption Expenditures, or PCE, Index, meanwhile, grew by just 4.2% in March.

The Fed has raised rates by 10 times since the end of the coronavirus pandemic in March 2022, adding a total of 500 basis points, or 5%, that has brought rates to a peak of 525 basis points, or 5.25%.

The central bank's next rate decision is on June 14.

Federal Reserve Governor Chris Waller suggested on Wednesday the central bank may skip a rate increase in June but still lean towards a July hike depending on inflation data. St. Louis Fed President James Bullard, one of the more aggressive advocates for tighter monetary policy, has suggested at least two more rate hikes, totaling 50 basis points, that would bring rates to a peak of 5.75%.

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US House Passes Bill to Address Fentanyl Crisis, Label Drug 'Schedule I' Substance

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed legislation to address the fentanyl crisis in the United States by increasing research into the drug and labeling all its variants as Schedule I substances under federal law.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Halt All Lethal Trafficking of Fentanyl (HALT Fentanyl) Act, in a vote of 289-133.

The bill permanently classifies fentanyl-related substances (FRS) in Schedule I of the Controlled Substances Act, placing greater regulatory oversight on the drug. The legislation also allows for further research of FRS.

"If the temporary order scheduling FRS ends, several FRS will become street-legal, law enforcement will lose authority to seize them, and drug traffickers will continue to funnel increasingly deadly drugs into the United States," House Majority Leader Steve Scalise said in a statement on the bill.

More than 150 people die from fentanyl and synthetic opioid-related overdoses every day in the US, making fentanyl the leading cause of death for Americans under 50 years old, Scalise noted.

House lawmakers amended the legislation prior to passage to require the US Attorney General

to issue interim rules to implement the bill within six months of enactment, instead of the initial one-year timeframe.

The House also amended the bill to include the US Defense Department among a list of agencies to be included in research on fentanyl.

The passage vote was the last expected roll call vote of the week, although lawmakers may receive notice to return if US President Joe Biden and congressional leaders reach a deal to raise the debt ceiling.

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RPT - US Won't Hesitate to Sanction Any Nation Helping Sidestep Sanctions - NSC Russia Director

(Repeats to fix the day of the week in lede)

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is determined to sanction any nation that helps Russia circumvent sanctions, Nicholas Berliner, senior director for Russia and Central Asia at the US National Security Council, said on Thursday.

"We won't hesitate to move against entities no matter which country they're from, that helped Russia wage this war, or helped it circumvent these sanctions," Berliner said at the 7th Annual Trans-Caspian Forum. "We hope to see that all states and jurisdictions and the economies take active steps to protect themselves and the banking sectors from being used for evasion and backfill activity."

In April, senior US officials, including Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson and Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes Elizabeth Rosenberg, visited Central Europe and Central Asia with a focus on countering sanctions evasion.

Nelson went to Switzerland, Italy, Austria and Germany from April 16-22. Rosenberg traveled to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from April 23-28.

After the start of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the West rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow.

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Americans Express Most Pessimistic View on Retirement Since 2012 - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) – American expectations about their retirement prospects are now the most pessimistic they have been since 2012, a new Gallup poll said on Thursday.

"Nonretired Americans' expectations for a comfortable retirement are the most pessimistic they have been since 2012, falling 10 percentage points since 2021, including five points in the past year. At the same time, retirees in the U.S. broadly continue to report that they have enough

money to live comfortably," the poll said.

In all, 43% of people who are currently working think they will have enough money to live comfortably. It is 14% less than it was in 2019. In 2002-2004 the share of Americans who had the same opinion was steady at the level of 59%. However, in 2012 it decreased to 38%.

On the other side, more than three-quarters (77%) of retirees said they have enough money. This number remains unchanged since last year. However, there has been a slight but steady decreasing trend since 2020 (81%).

Women are less optimistic about their comfort after retirement than men (36% and 50%). Young people at the age of 18-29 are much more confident in their future than those who are 30-49 years old (54% against 38%).

"About six in 10 retired adults, 59%, report that Social Security is a major source of their retirement income - but far fewer nonretirees, 34%, expect it will be for them," the poll said.

Instead, almost half of nonretirees (48%) said they would rely more heavily on retirement savings accounts, it added.

"In the past year, home equity has dropped six points as a major income source among both retired and nonretired adults, and the 15% of retirees reporting it is the lowest on record by one point," the survey noted.

Results for this poll were based on telephone interviews conducted in April 3-25, 2023, among 1,013 adults living in all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

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House Speaker McCarthy Says No Catastrophe if Parties Fail to Reach Deal on Debt Ceiling

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) – US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said on Thursday that he does not believe that the United States is in for a financial disaster should the White House and congressional leaders fail to reach a deal on raising the national debt limit.

“No, no,” McCarthy said in an interview when asked whether there is going to be a catastrophe if the parties fail to reach a deal on the debt limit. “We know there's money coming in, we know there's ability to get things done.”

At the same time, McCarthy remains confident that the parties will be able to reach a deal on the debt limit, sooner or later, while it will not solve all the problems the American economy faces these days.

Earlier in May, Deputy Treasury Secretary Wally Adeyemo said the US government defaulting on its financial obligations would reduce the willingness of people throughout the world to invest in products and instruments backed by the dollar.

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

Talks between President Joe Biden and congressional leaders on raising the debt ceiling have brought no results yet as all negotiating parties continue to stand their ground on the issue.

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Biden, Trump Enjoy Significant Leads in Iowa Ahead of Primary Elections - Poll

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump are set to secure significant leads in their party primary elections in Iowa, according to an Emerson College poll published on Thursday.

Among Democratic caucus voters, 69% would vote for Biden, whereas 11% and 10% would support Robert Kennedy Jr and Marianne Williamson, respectively.

On the Republican side, Trump has the support of 62% of caucus voters, followed by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (20%), former Vice President Mike Pence (5%) and former US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley (5%).

The Emerson College Polling survey of Iowa voting intentions was conducted between May 19-22 among a sample of 1,064 registered voters with a +/- 2.9% error margin.

Traditionally, Iowa was the first state to hold primary elections. Democrats, however, reordered the presidential primary calendar for 2024, elevating black voices and making South Carolina the first state to hold a caucus.

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US Senator Vows to Use All Tools to Impede Any Debt Ceiling Deal Without Spending Reform

WASHINGTON, May 25 (Sputnik) – US Senator Mike Lee promised on Thursday to use all available tools to impede any potential deal to raise the debt ceiling if the legislation lacks significant spending reforms.

“I will use every procedural tool at my disposal to impede a debt-ceiling deal that doesn’t contain substantial spending and budgetary reforms,” Lee, a Republican from Utah, said via Twitter.

He expressed concern that the current negotiations between the White House and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy are moving in that direction.

“If they do, that proposal will not face smooth sailing in the Senate,” he warned.

On Wednesday, McCarthy said that congressional Republican leaders and the White House still remain far apart on certain issues related to raising the nation’s \$34.1 trillion debt ceiling, prompting him to send negotiators into another round of talks.

US House Republicans passed a plan last month to raise the debt ceiling in exchange for cuts to government spending, although President Joe Biden and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer have rejected the proposal.