

7/3/23 Monday

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'We Need More Money': NATO Leaders Say Spending Must Increase Even After Ukraine Conflict

As the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) prepares for its summit in Vilnius, Lithuania, later this month, the alliance's leaders are making a new push for reorganization, upgrades, and even more spending, to continue long after the present conflict in Ukraine is over.

Speaking to reporters on Monday, Royal Netherlands Navy Adm. Rob Bauer, the chair of NATO's military committee, said the alliance needs a big boost in spending to prepare for some later confrontation with Russia.

"We should never underestimate the Russians and their ability to bounce back, as they have shown in history a couple of times," Bauer said.

Indicating he believes Russia "will learn lessons" from its special operation in Ukraine, he said that Brussels "will continue to look at them as a serious threat," including in the theaters of land, air sea, and space, where Russian forces "are still very, very capable," as well as its formidable nuclear weapons capabilities.

The NATO official said that in the Lithuanian capital next week, the 31-member alliance will approve new regional military plans that include a high-readiness stance, and discuss how to increase military spending by its members.

"We have to go and do our work - to reach the higher number of forces with a higher readiness, we need to exercise against the plans, we need to buy the capabilities that we require," he said, "and that will take time."

"We need more money, collectively, to pay for that," Bauer said, adding that NATO's new model for high-readiness forces will require "making sure that the nations have a mechanism in place to increase the numbers of people that are available for the armed forces."

Several NATO members have already made big increases or plans for increases since the special military operation began in February 2022, and NATO rushed to funnel weapons and funding to Kiev in what has since become largely a proxy war against Russia. In January, French President Emmanuel Macron [unveiled a plan](#) to "reform and transform" the French military with a 40% increase in spending in the 2025-2030 period.

On Monday, German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius revealed Berlin would aim to hit its pledge of spending 2% of its gross domestic product (GDP) next year with a €51.8 billion military budget.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg made a similar appeal to Bauer earlier this year, urging members to increase spending to reach at least 2% of their gross GDP.

"I think we should move from regarding the 2% as a ceiling to toward the 2% of GDP as a floor and minimum," Stoltenberg told reporters in February, using as justification not only the "threat" posed by Russia, but also China, which is thousands of miles from any NATO member's territory.

The military alliance is already by far the world's largest agglomeration of military expenditure, with just one member, the United States, accounting for 39% of global military spending by itself.

By comparison, Russia accounts for just 3.9% of global military expenditure, and China accounts for 13%. The two nations are third and second, respectively, in military spending after the US, [according to the latest report](#) by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI).

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'Not Safe to Dive': Deep Sea Experts Warned for Years of OceanGate's Submersible Design

Since the fateful disaster that killed five men aboard a tourism submersible near the wreck of the RMS Titanic last month, more details have emerged about the company's fraught safety practices, including that other deep-sea diving experts had warned for years about the submersible's unorthodox design.

When Stockton Rush, CEO of Oceangate Expeditions, launched his Titan submersible on June 18 to take himself and four other passengers to see the wreck of the Titanic 2.5 miles beneath the surface of the North Atlantic, it was on board a vehicle that almost every industry expert had long refused to associate themselves with.

Some of those experts spoke with a US magazine recently, sharing their experiences with being either ignored or dismissed by Rush when they raised their concerns, or fired for pointing out problems, or threatened with litigation if they told others about the dangers they had witnessed.

'You Can't Cut Corners in the Deep'

Rob McCallum, one of the founders of EYOS Expeditions and the designer and leader of the Five Deeps Expedition to visit the five deepest sites in the world's oceans, said he had warned Rush years ago about the poor design of the Titan.

"You can't cut corners in the deep," McCallum had told Rush. "It's not about being a disruptor. It's about the laws of physics."

Rush's design for the Titan, which was initially called Cyclops II, used a number of unorthodox features that Rush touted as innovative and cost-saving. However, for many of them, including essential safety-related items, it seems that experts in the field of deep sea diving raised concerns.

The Cyclops II had been based on a previous submersible, Cyclops I, which Rush had purchased and retrofitted, adding a number of features such as converting its control systems to operate off a PlayStation 3 controller. The Cyclops I was only rated to a depth of 500 meters. For the Cyclops II (Titan), however, he only made incremental changes, such as substituting the sub's steel hull for a carbon fiber tube.

McCallum said that Rush "wanted me to run his Titanic operation for him," since McCallum had already visited the wreck of the cruise liner and was well-known around the world as an expert at diving to much greater depths. However, upon seeing the Cyclops I's design, McCallum immediately knew there were going to be major issues.

"Everyone was drinking Kool-Aid and saying how cool they were with a Sony PlayStation," he told me. "And I said at the time, 'Does Sony know that it's been used for this application? Because, you know, this is not what it was designed for.' And now you have the hand controller talking to a Wi-Fi unit, which is talking to a black box, which is talking to the sub's thrusters. There were multiple points of failure." The system ran on Bluetooth, according to Rush. But, McCallum continued, "every sub in the world has hardwired controls for a reason - that if the signal drops out, you're not f*cked."

During a shallow water test in a marina, Cyclops I became stranded after just such a breakdown. He mused that the sub "was a mutt." McCallum said he advised Rush to get the Cyclops II inspected and approved by a marine-certification agency before attempting to take it down to the Titanic, but after Rush categorically dismissed the idea.

"Stockton didn't like that," McCallum said. "He didn't like to be told that he was on the fringe." McCallum said that as news spread that Rush was offering tourist visits to the Titanic, "people would ring me, and say, 'We've always wanted to go to Titanic. What do you think?' And I would tell them, 'Never get in an unclassified sub. I wouldn't do it, and you shouldn't, either.'"

Inadequate Acrylic Window

Other aspects of the Cyclops II/Titan's design got warnings, too. The seven-inch-thick acrylic viewing port, for example, was only rated to about 1,300 meters, or about one-third of the depth of the Titanic wreck. Rush reportedly misrepresented the ability to determine if a problem was occurring with the acrylic, as well as the sub crew's ability to react to that problem safely.

One expert on acrylics told US media that Rush had misunderstood how acrylics are rated for depth safety - a system in which the depth number doesn't represent the safe depth to which one could dive using such a window, but rather the pressure at which the acrylic would fail. For safety, operators are only supposed to dive to one-sixth of that, which was given as its depth rating.

"It's specifically not called a safety factor, because the acrylic is not safe" to that depth, John Ramsay, a submarine designer who built the submarines used in the Five Deeps Expedition, explained.

'Capricious' Carbon Fiber Hull

Experts also warned about the Cyclops II/Titan's carbon fiber hull. Patrick Lahey, the CEO of Triton Submarines, told a US magazine that the reason submarines don't use carbon fiber hulls is that "it's a capricious f*cking material, which is the last f*cking thing you want to associate with a pressure boundary."

Ramsay explained that "with titanium, there's a purpose to a pressure test that goes beyond just seeing whether it will survive." Titanium, he said, gradually strengthens as it's repeatedly exposed to incredible stresses, but carbon fiber slowly weakens with repeated exposures.

"If you're repeatedly nearing the threshold of the material, then there's just no way of knowing how many cycles it will survive," he said.

After they raised their concerns with Rush, the OceanGate CEO said he took their worries as a "serious personal insult." After they informed the US Department of Labor's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) about the issues, Rush threatened them with massive lawsuits until they withdrew their reports from OSHA.

At one point, Lahey's business partner mused that "It doesn't get more sensational than dead people in a sub on the way to Titanic."

David Lochridge, a submersible pilot with three decades of experience in submarines in both the UK Royal Navy and private industry, worked for Rush for several years and raised his safety concerns repeatedly. After Lochridge discovered fractures in the Titan's carbon fiber hull, he pressed Rush for a detailed study of the hull for further fractures - pressure Rush resisted and ultimately fired Lochridge for.

"I would consider myself pretty ballsy when it comes to doing things that are dangerous, but that sub is an accident waiting to happen," Lochridge wrote to McCallum, two weeks after being terminated. "There's no way on earth you could have paid me to dive the thing." Of Rush, he added, "I don't want to be seen as a tattle-tale, but I'm so worried he kills himself and others in the quest to boost his ego."

Disaster in the Deep

During the June 18 dive, the Titan [disappeared from contact](#) about 90 minutes into its two-hour descent to the Titanic wreck, which sits at 3,800 meters (12,500 feet) of depth, and a US Navy submarine detection system nearby registered a sound that could have been an implosion. After four days of searching, wreckage from the Titan was discovered not far from the Titanic, and it was determined that the submersible had [imploded due to the intense water pressure](#), instantly killing all five passengers on board, including Rush.

Although investigators have said returning the bodies of the dead is unlikely to be possible and that the true cause of the implosion may never be determined due to the violence of the crush, the US and Canadian governments have pushed ahead with their probe. Whether it will lead to lawsuits is unclear, especially given the [complex question](#) of legal jurisdiction.

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Eight Reported Dead in Jenin Amid IDF Raid that PNA Condemns as 'War Crime'

Amid reports of corruption and factional infighting, the Palestinian National Authority has steadily lost support in the West Bank as a new generation of "resistance fighters" forms militant groups to attack Israeli forces and Jewish settlers in the region.

At least eight people are dead in the West Bank city of Jenin after the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) launched a massive counterterrorism operation in the city.

At least eight Palestinians have been killed, including two children, according to Defense for Children International – Palestine (DCI-P), an international NGO. Another two dozen people are reported as injured, and at least 500 families have evacuated the refugee camp.

The US State Department said it supports Israel's right to defend itself against "terrorist groups," but urged Jerusalem to "take all possible precautions to prevent the loss of civilian lives."

UN Spokesperson Farhan Hag told reporters that Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is "deeply concerned about the developments in Jenin. He affirms that all military operations must be conducted with full respect for international humanitarian law."

The PNA has protested the IDF operation, calling it "a war crime" and severed its security cooperation with the IDF.

Jenin Mayor Nidal Obeidi says the Israeli attack is a “real massacre and an attempt to wipe out all aspects of life inside the city and the camp.”

“Those being targeted now are not just the resistance fighters, but civilians are being killed and civilians wounded as well,” he told Arab media.

“What is happening now is the complete destruction of the camp’s infrastructure. What’s being targeted includes the water networks’ main lines, the sewage system as well as water tanks on the roofs,” Obeidi said.

At least 10 airstrikes were reported in the northern West Bank city on Monday as dozens of armored vehicles swarmed the city and refugee camp, bringing in total more than 1,000 Israeli troops into the city. It is the largest IDF operation in the West Bank in two decades, since the region was engulfed in the Second Palestinian Intifada (uprising).

The IDF said it was attacking a “joint operation center” used by the Jenin Brigades, a Palestinian militant group that had been formed after several smaller groups united. According to the IDF, the site was an “advanced observation and reconnaissance center,” communications hub, and storage site for weapons and explosives.

The IDF said it has seized an improvised missile launcher, weapons and ammunition from several caches in the refugee camp. It said late on Monday that the operation requires at least another 24 hours, but that it would take as long as was necessary.

Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), a militant group in Gaza and the West Bank, said it will continue to fight in Jenin and that “all options” are available to “strike the enemy and respond to its barbaric aggression.”

Most of the West Bank is formally administered by the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) in Ramallah, which was formed in the 1990s as a precursor to the government of a future Palestinian state that has never materialized. However, the West Bank is ultimately under the authority of the Israeli Ministry of Defense, which directly controls large portions of the territory and handles relations between the PNA and the Israeli Jewish settlers who live there in defiance of United Nations Security Council resolutions.

The IDF previously carried out a major operation in Jenin in January, when it raided the Jenin refugee camp and killed 10 Palestinians, including children and elderly. The PNA also severed its security cooperation with the IDF in the aftermath, but when US Secretary of State Antony Blinken met with both Israeli and PNA leaders afterward, his security team [effectively told the PNA](#) that it should seek to reestablish its control over Jenin and Nablus using a US-made security plan.

The plan called for training a special Palestinian response force that would fight the Palestinian militias that have won increasing local support in both cities, and which have also been the target of Israeli attacks.

According to US media reports, the PNA told Blinken’s team they already lack the legitimacy to operate during the day in those areas. The PNA was also cool to the suggestion since it required nothing from Israel, including reducing IDF raids into Palestinian cities.

Blinken’s team warned the PNA that if they failed, it could mean the rise of a Third Palestinian Intifada. Two previous uprisings dubbed “intifadas” (uprising, or shrugging off) occurred from 1987 to 1993 and 2000 to 2005, both resulting in major Israeli concessions, including the creation of the PNA, the pledge to work toward the creation of a Palestinian state, and the evacuation of all Jewish settlers from the Gaza Strip.

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Canada, Allies Take Iran to International Court of Justice Over Downing of Ukraine Plane

WASHINGTON, July 5 (Sputnik) - Canada, Sweden, Ukraine and the United Kingdom have collectively filed a lawsuit against Iran at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) over the 2020 downing of the Ukraine International Airlines Flight PS752, according to a joint statement.

"Iran failed to respond to our request for arbitration sent on December 28, 2022. As a result, this week in The Hague we have jointly filed an application with the International Court of Justice instituting proceedings against Iran in relation to their breaches of the Convention for the Suppression of Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Civil Aviation of 1971," the statement said.

The application accuses Iran of having failed to prevent the destruction of the plane by its armed forces and to establish an impartial and transparent criminal investigation and prosecution in accordance with international norms, the statement added.

On January 8, 2020, flight PS752 crashed shortly after takeoff from Tehran's international airport. It claimed the lives of all 167 passengers on board the airplane — mostly Canadian and Iranian citizens — and nine Ukrainian crew members.

The Iranian government admitted that the plane had been mistakenly shot down by its armed forces, who mistook it for a hostile cruise missile. It happened as air defenses were active following strikes on a US military base in Iraq in retaliation for the US killing of Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad.

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Suspected Cocaine Discovered at White House Was Found at Storage Facility - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 5 (Sputnik) - The white powder discovered at the White House over the weekend was found in a storage facility in a cubby used by White House staff and guests to store cell phones, CBS News reported, citing a senior law enforcement official.

The Secret Service will examine consulting cameras and entrance logs to determine who had access to the space, the report said on Tuesday.

A suspicious substance was discovered at the White House on Sunday evening, sparking a brief evacuation. The white powder tested positive for cocaine in a preliminary test, media reported.

US President Joe Biden's son Hunter, involved in several drugs and corruption scandals, was in the White House grounds not long before the white powdery substance was found in the West Wing, the New York Post reported.

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Meta's Rival to Twitter Drops on App Store, Expected to Launch July 6

WASHINGTON, July 4 (Sputnik) - Meta (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) appears ready to launch Threads, a micro-blogging application designed to rival Twitter, on July 6, according to its App Store listing.

Threads appeared for pre-order on Monday in the Apple App Store, where it indicates users will be able to begin downloading on July 6.

"Say more with Threads - Instagram's text-based conversation app," the text on the app store says. "Threads is where communities come together to discuss everything from the topics you care about today to what'll be trending tomorrow. Whatever it is you're interested in, you can follow and connect directly with your favorite creators and others who love the same things - or build a loyal following of your own to share your ideas, opinions and creativity with the world."

The move comes the same day Elon Musk's Twitter announced that all users must be "Verified" to access TweetDeck.

Over the weekend, Musk outraged many Twitter users by imposing limits on the number of posts that can be read per day. In order to address extreme levels of data scraping and system manipulation, Musk said verified accounts are limited to reading 6,000 posts per day and unverified accounts 600 posts per day.

Meanwhile, talks are underway for Musk to engage in a mixed martial arts "cage" match with Meta chief Mark Zuckerberg, The New York Times reported, citing Dana White, president of the Ultimate Fighting Championship sports franchise.

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Yellen, Chinese Envoy Hold 'Productive' Talks Ahead of Secretary's Beijing Trip - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 4 (Sputnik) - Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen held frank and productive discussions with Chinese ambassador to the US Xie Feng while underscoring the importance of open lines of communication and cooperation on global financial issues, Treasury said in a readout of their meeting.

"The frank and productive discussion supported ongoing efforts to maintain open lines of communication and responsibly manage the US-China bilateral relationship, in line with Secretary Yellen's upcoming trip to Beijing. Secretary Yellen raised issues of concern while also conveying the importance of the two largest economies working together on global challenges, including on macroeconomic and financial issues," the release said on Monday.

Yellen will travel to Beijing from July 6-9 for meetings with senior Chinese officials.

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Iraq War Contractor KBR to Pay \$143Mln to Settle Fraud Claims - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 4 (Sputnik) - Former Halliburton subsidiary KBR said it will pay more than \$143 million to settle fraud allegations related to contracts the company won during the Iraq war. "KBR announced today that it has settled a legacy lawsuit pending in federal court, USA ex rel Howard v. KBR," the company said on Monday. "KBR will pay \$108.75 million, approximately half of which in restitution damages, plus interest to the US government and will pay \$34.95 million to the relators as attorney's fees."

KBR said the lawsuit concerns the "cross-leveling" of materials and equipment procurement under the LOGCAP III contract in Iraq in the 2007-2011 time period. KBR said it continues to deny any liability or wrongful conduct.

Under the Logistics Civil Augmentation Program (LOGCAP), the military tapped the private sector to handle logistics and support services to US and allied forces including during combat operations.

In 2011, whistle-blowers Geoffrey Howard, and Zella Hemphill in a lawsuit accused KBR of violating the False Claims Act by purchasing new materials instead of cross-leveling, which means drawing from existing stockpiles. According to court documents, the plaintiffs said as a result KBR knowingly billed for "unreasonable and unallowable costs" that the government would not have paid for otherwise.

KBR President and CEO Stuart Bradie applauded the settlement, saying it marked another milestone in its bid to resolve legacy legal matters to help reduce uncertainty and liquidity risk.

"We are proud of our work on LOGCAP III and of our broader, strong record of serving the armed forces," Bradie said in the statement. "This settlement is yet another milestone in our commitment to resolve legacy legal matters and it helps reduce uncertainty and liquidity risk."

Between 2003-2013, KBR received almost \$40 billion in contracts related to the Iraq war, according to an analysis by The Financial Times.

KBR spun off from Halliburton in 2006. Former vice president Dick Cheney was the chairman and CEO of Halliburton from 1995 to 2000.

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US, UK Have Lowest Confidence in Leadership Among G7 Countries - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 4 (Sputnik) - The residents of the United States and the United Kingdom have reported the lowest confidence in their governments' leadership among Group of Seven (G7) countries in 2022, a Gallup poll revealed.

Only 31% of respondents expressed confidence in the US government and 33% in the UK government, the poll, released Monday, said.

Germany and Canada scored the highest government confidence ratings, with 61% and 51% confidence, respectively, the poll said.

Confidence in the US and UK governments has dropped since 2006, while the rest of the G7's scores have risen in the same time period, the poll said.

The US government fell from 56% confidence reported in 2006 and the UK government from 49% confidence, while by contrast, the confidence in the German government rose from 32% and in the Canadian government from 44% since then, the poll added.

The G7 comprises the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Canada, France, Italy and Japan.

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US Condemns Hong Kong's Bounty for Information on 8 Democracy Activists – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 4 (Sputnik) - The United States has condemned the issuance by Hong Kong police of an international bounty for information leading to an arrest of eight alleged pro-democracy activists who currently reside outside of the city, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a statement.

"The United States condemns the Hong Kong Police Force's issuance of an international bounty for information leading to the arrest of eight pro-democracy activists who no longer live in Hong Kong," the statement said on Monday.

The State Department believes that the extraterritorial application of the Hong Kong National Security Law creates a "dangerous precedent" threatening human rights and fundamental freedoms around the world, the statement said.

The United States is calling on the Hong Kong government to immediately withdraw the reward and "respect other countries' sovereignty," the statement added.

Earlier in the day, CNN reported that Hong Kong police offered HK\$1 million (\$127,603) rewards for each of seven men and one woman who reside today in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 4 (Sputnik) -

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

* The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) said on Monday that they had launched more than ten airstrikes at "terrorist infrastructure" in the Jenin refugee camp in the West Bank.

* The IDF said they had uncovered explosives, weapons and ammunition in the basement of a

mosque in the refugee camp in Jenin.

* The operation in Jenin will continue until its goals are achieved, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said.

* The United States calls for precautions to prevent the loss of civilian lives amid Israel's military operation, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

SYRIA DEVELOPMENTS

* The US-led international coalition in Syria has committed 14 violations of uncoordinated drone flights in the past day, Rear Adm. Oleg Gurinov, the deputy head of the Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria, said on Monday.

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Syrian Foreign Minister Faysal Mikdad discussed in a telephone conversation the situation in Syria and the coordination of positions of both countries in the UN, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

* The US administration is doing everything to disrupt the process of normalization between Syria and other Arab nations, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Ukraine has lost up to 260 soldiers in the Donetsk area over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Monday.

* Kiev requires the command of the Ukrainian army to continue offensive operations at the request of the West, despite significant losses, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said.

* The Russian military is reducing the offensive potential of the Ukrainian armed forces by conducting effective strikes, Shoigu said.

GLOBAL ENERGY

* Russia will voluntarily reduce oil exports in August by 500,000 barrels per day to ensure the balance of the oil market, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said on Monday.

* Saudi Arabia will extend July's voluntary cut in oil production by 1 million barrels per day until August, the Saudi Press Agency reported.

SHOOTING IN BALTIMORE

* The White House urged Congress on Monday to improve the national gun safety legislation after the shooting in Baltimore, Maryland, left two people dead and several dozens injured.

* US federal and local authorities announced up to \$20,000 in reward for information about the suspects of the Baltimore shooting.

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First US Island-Class Patrol Ships Arrive in Greece - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) - The first two Island-class patrol boats transferred by the United States to Greece have arrived in the recipient country, with two more set for delivery

soon, Naval News reported on Monday.

Two of the four Island-class cutters transferred to the Greek navy by the US Coast Guard arrived in Perama on Sunday afternoon, making Greece the sixth country to acquire such vessels, the report said.

The United States is expected to deliver two more of the ships to Greece in the coming weeks, the report said.

The four ships will replace aging Greek coastal patrol vessels, with Athens likely to try and purchase two more to complete the transition from its old fleet, the report added.

Island-class patrol boats are 110 feet (34 meters) in length and have been used by the US Coast Guard for surveillance, search-and-rescue and law enforcement missions.

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UK Disappointed Not to See Israel in UN Report on Children in Armed Conflict - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 3 (Sputnik) - The United Kingdom is disappointed that Israel was not listed in the United Nations report on Children in Armed Conflict (CAC) for its attacks against children, UK Ambassador to the world body Barbara Woodward said on Monday.

"I could say that bilaterally, from the UK point of view, we were disappointed not to see Israel listed in the CAC report," Woodward said. "We have been concerned about the Israeli attacks on children."

However, the United Nations does have a "strict criteria" in its reporting and the fact that Russia is on the list is important.

Earlier on Monday, the Israeli military began operations on the territory of the West Bank by utilizing drone strikes. Eight Palestinians have so far been killed and 80 injured in the attacks.

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Downgrading UK-Russia Relations in Response to Medvedev 'Would Be a Pity'- Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 3 (Sputnik) - Downgrading relations between the United Kingdom and Russia in response to statements made by Russian Security Council Deputy Chairman Dmitry Medvedev "would be a pity," UK Ambassador to the United Nations Barbara Woodward said on Monday.

"I saw the British Ambassador to Moscow who is doing an extraordinary job in the face of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and flagrant breach of the UN Charter," Woodward said. "So, I think it would be a pity to downgrade relations because when Russia finally takes its boots off the grounds of Ukraine, it will be very important to rebuild the situation using diplomatic relations."

On Sunday, Medvedev said in an article that it would be better to temporarily suspend diplomatic relations between Russia and the United Kingdom or at least lower the level of diplomatic relations.

Woodward said that the United Kingdom will continue to urge Russia to end the war in Ukraine. The United Kingdom is presiding over the UN Security Council during the month of July.

Some diplomats have characterized the United Kingdom's relations with Russia as being worse than the soured relations between the United States and Russia.

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UN Chief is Concerned Over Situation in Jenin - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, July 3 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is worried about the situation in Jenin, Israel and calls for military operations to abide by international humanitarian law, the UN Spokesperson Farhan Hag said on Monday.

"The Secretary-General is deeply concerned about the developments in Jenin. He affirms that all military operations must be conducted with full respect for international humanitarian law," the statement said.

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State Dept. Urges Steps to Prevent Loss of Civilian Lives as Israel Mounts Jenin Operation

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) – The United States calls for precautions to prevent the loss of civilian lives as Israel launches a massive military operation in the West Bank city of Jenin, a State Department spokesperson told Sputnik.

"Today's events further underscore the urgent need for Israeli and Palestinian security forces to work together to improve the security situation in the West Bank. It is imperative to take all possible precautions to prevent the loss of civilian lives," the spokesperson said.

The US is closely tracking the situation, and supports "Israel's security and right to defend its people against Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and other terrorist groups," the official said.

Early on Monday, Israel began its largest air-and-ground offensive in the West Bank in years. The Israel Defense Forces aviation launched more than 10 strikes at what it described as "terrorist infrastructure" in the Jenin refugee camp. The Israeli military said it had seized an improvised missile launcher, weapons and ammunition.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said on Monday that the counter-terrorism operation in Jenin will continue until its goals are achieved.

The Palestinian Health Ministry said that eight Palestinians had been killed in Israel's military raid.

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Authorities Announce \$20,000 Reward For Information About Baltimore Shooting Suspects

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) –US federal and local authorities announced on Monday up to \$20,000 reward for information about suspects of the Baltimore shooting that left two people killed and 28 injured.

“I am pleased to announce that the reward is up to \$20,000,” Acting Baltimore Police Commissioner Richard Worley told reporters.

The incident occurred on Sunday during a block party in one of Baltimore’s neighborhoods. Worley said two males, 18 and 20 years old, were killed.

“The other victims include 15 victims between ages of 13 and 17, 13 victims between ages 18 and 32,” he said about those injured.

Baltimore Mayor Brandon Scott clarified that seven people remain in the hospital, including four in critical condition.

“All others have been released,” he added.

The police know that there were multiple weapons at the scene, Worley said. “Anyone who had a weapon at the scene will be one of our suspects,” he added.

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US Senator J.D. Vance Vows to Block Confirmation of 30 Diplomatic Nominees - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) - US Sen. J.D. Vance intends to block confirmation efforts for approximately 30 Biden administration ambassador nominees amid concerns about their so-called “woke” ideological positions, The Wall Street Journal reported on Monday.

Vance placed holds on approximately 30 nominees, the lawmaker reportedly said. However, a spokesperson for Vance declined to provide further comment on the motivations behind the holds, the report said.

Vance previously criticized nominee for US Representative to the African Union Stephanie Sullivan for holding “woke” positions that would make her an unsuitable representative of the United States, the report said.

The US has empty ambassador posts for the African Union, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and other countries across the Middle East and Africa, according to the report.

Vance has met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and is working with the department to address his concerns, the report said.

Vance’s holds come alongside efforts by Sen. Rand Paul to block State Department nominees over the department’s refusal to provide assistance on obtaining COVID-19 origins records, the report said.

Although neither Senator can single handedly block the nominations, they can impede the process by requiring Democrats to go through procedural hurdles that are normally skipped through unanimous consent of the chamber.

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UK to Raise Issue of Artificial Intelligence at UN Security Council for First Time - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 3 (Sputnik) - The UK mission to the United Nations will raise the issue of Artificial intelligence (AI) in the UN Security Council for the first time to shed light on AI's potential, United Kingdom Ambassador to the world body Barbara Woodward said on Monday.

"It could support humanitarian aid, it could support peacekeeping. It could support conflict prevention when you look at the way in which it can collect and analyze data, so there's an enormous potential," Woodward said during a press briefing.

The ambassador explained that AI could also potentially help to close the gap between developing and developed countries.

However, Woodward also mentioned the possible risks pertaining to the use of AI, including use as an autonomous weapon if not regulated.

The meeting will be first such discussion on AI at the UN Security Council, which usually centers its attention on topics directly linked to possible threats to peace.

The meeting will be held on July 18 at 10:00 a.m. EST. The United Kingdom presides over the UN Security Council during the month of July.

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DC Police Say Looking for Public's Help in Identifying Suspect Who Detonated Explosives

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) - The Washington, DC Metropolitan Police Department is seeking the public's help in identifying a suspect wanted on destruction of property charges for detonating two explosive devices and throwing a Molotov cocktail, the department said on Monday.

"Detectives from the Metropolitan Police Department's Criminal Investigations Division and Agents from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) Washington Field Division seek the public's assistance in identifying suspects and a vehicle in reference to Destruction of Property offenses that occurred on Sunday, July 2, 2023, in the District," the department said in a statement.

The suspect detonated one explosive device near an ATM machine at approximately 4:30 a.m. ET (8:30 GMT) before fleeing the scene, the statement said. The suspect detonated a second explosive device in front of a Nike Store before fleeing again at approximately 4:36 a.m.

At approximately 4:45 a.m., the suspect threw a "Molotov cocktail style object" at a Safeway store, the statement said. All incidents resulted in damage to the locations, the statement added.

It appears the suspect was targeting commercial establishments and not members of the

public, the statement said. The statement included surveillance footage of the suspect and their vehicle, which police identified as a gold or champagne color Acura TL with a Maryland license plate.

The Metropolitan Police Department is offering a reward of up to \$10,000 for information that leads to the arrest and conviction of the person responsible for the offenses, the statement said.

Moreover, the ATF Washington Field Division is also offering \$10,000, bringing the total possible reward amount to \$20,000, the statement said.

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US Factory Activity Down 8th Month in Row, Hits 3-Year Low - Manufacturing Data

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) - US factory activity fell for an eighth straight month, hitting three-year lows, according to manufacturing data on Monday that reignited talk of recession in the world's largest economy amid aggressive interest rate hikes to curb the worst inflation in four decades.

The Institute for Supply Management (ISM) said its widely-followed manufacturing gauge fell to 46 in June - the lowest since March 2020. The eighth straight month of readings at below 50, which indicates shrinking activity, is the longest stretch of its kind since 2008-2009.

"Demand remains weak, production is slowing due to lack of work, and suppliers have capacity," ISM Manufacturing Business Survey Committee Chair Timothy Fiore said in a statement. "Companies reduced production and began using layoffs to manage head counts, to a greater extent than in prior months, amid mixed sentiment about when significant growth will return."

The ISM also published select comments from industry to illustrate the data, with feedback from the "Computer and Electronic Products" sector particularly citing concerns over the US economy.

"The slowing US economy is causing the business forecast to be revised/reduced for the remainder of 2023. Customers are less inclined to purchase far in advance," the comment read.

GDP saw an annualized growth of 2% for the first quarter of this year, lower than the year-on-year expansion of 2.6% growth in the final quarter of 2022.

Another quarter with similar slower growth would technically place the United States in recession mode, something the Federal Reserve dreads would be looked upon as its fault following more than a year of aggressive rate hikes by the central bank to fight inflation.

The Fed has instead been aiming for a "soft landing" of the economy, which translates to slower but not negative GDP growth.

The ISM report also noted that many Americans were limiting their spending on merchandise, prioritizing services and experiences that mattered. Some indiscriminately slashed spending with inflation at twice above the Fed's comfort level despite more than a year of aggressive rate hikes.

Aside from the ISM, S&P Global said its Purchasing Managers Index (PMI) for June showed a reading of 46.3, indicating the biggest contraction in the US manufacturing sector since

December.

While the US service sector itself has been expanding, demand for US-made goods has slowed versus stickier-than-expected inflation.

The Personal Consumption Expenditures, or PCE, Index - an inflation indicator closely followed by the Fed - grew 3.8% in the year to May. Core PCE, a component of the index stripped of volatile food and energy prices, expanded by 4.6%.

The Fed's tolerance for inflation is 2% per year. The central bank has raised interest rates by 5% since the end of the coronavirus outbreak in March 2022, bringing them to a peak of 5.25% in an attempt to bring inflation back to its targeted level.

"[The] big picture [is] inflation is slowing, but it's still too high for the Fed," MarketWatch said in a commentary after the PCE report was published last week "Senior Fed officials worry that rising labor costs and price increases in major parts of the economy such as housing could keep inflation at elevated levels for a few more years."

The Fed's next decision on interest rates will be on July 26. Many economists predict the it will add another quarter percentage point at that meeting, lifting rates to a peak of 5.5%, as it tries to further tame inflation.

The Fed has a dual mandate of ensuring "maximum employment" through a jobless rate of 4% or below, and keeping inflation "manageable."

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Lawyers File Complaint Against Harvard Over 'Mostly White' Legacy Admissions - Filing

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) - A group of organizations filed a civil rights complaint against Harvard College's legacy and donor admissions programs for primarily benefiting white applicants, according to a copy of the complaint released Monday by Lawyers for Civil Rights.

The complaint against Harvard under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was filed by Lawyers for Civil Rights on behalf of the Chica Project, the African Community Economic Development of New England and the Greater Boston Latino Network.

"Each year, Harvard College grants special preference in its admissions process to hundreds of mostly white students - not because of anything they have accomplished, but rather solely because of who their relatives are," the filing said.

Nearly 70% of both donor-related and legacy applicants are white, the filing said. Donor-related applicants were nearly seven times more likely to be admitted to Harvard and legacy applicants were six times as likely, the filing said.

Such preferential treatment violates federal law that forbids practices that have an unjustified, disparate impact on the basis of race in institutions receiving substantial federal funds, the filing said.

Donor and legacy preferences are not justified by any educational necessity and are derived without regard for merit, the filing added.

The filing comes following a US Supreme Court decision last week banning race-based college admissions practices, stemming from a lawsuit against Harvard.

"The need for the Department of Education to put a stop to this discriminatory practice is particularly acute now that the Supreme Court has severely limited the use of race as a factor in higher education admissions processes, which is expected to have a negative impact on campus diversity," the filing said.

The filing requests the US Department of Education take all measures necessary to enforce Title VI compliance at Harvard, investigate Harvard's use of donor and legacy admissions and its impact, and threaten to withhold federal funds if Harvard does not cease to consider relations to donors in admissions.

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UN Advocates for Reform of Financial System to Mitigate Climate Change - Guterres

UNITED NATIONS, July 3 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is "strongly advocating" for a reform of the global financial system in order to help developing countries mitigate climate change, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Monday.

"It is vital. We have been strongly advocating for the reform of the international financial architecture," Guterres told reporters during a visit to Trinidad and Tobago.

The UN chief noted that the current global financial system was created after World War II, when the majority of countries, including Trinidad and Tobago, were not members of the United Nations.

Guterres called for adapting the international financial system to the realities of today's economy to make it more fair and effective.

The UN chief also urged making the international financial system more oriented to issues related to climate change.

"Mitigation is essential. We must reduce emissions," Guterres said.

Regarding the importance of the multilateral development banks in this process, Guterres said they need to be more capitalized and change their business model, Guterres said.

Such changes are essential to leveraging private finance to respond to the climate crisis, particularly in the developing world, he added.

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US House Oversight Panel Chair Says Biden Family Engaged in 'Organized Crime'

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) - The criminal acts committed by US President Joe Biden and his family amount to organized crime, US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer said in an interview with The Cats Roundtable podcast.

"This is organized crime, there's no other way to define it," Comer said on Sunday. "This was an organized family crime unit, essentially, and the business model was to profit off of Joe Biden's

influence as vice president and future influence as president of the United States.”

The US House Oversight Committee is conducting a probe focused on President Biden and his son, Hunter, who the lawmakers allege engaged in an influence peddling scheme involving foreign nationals in Ukraine and China.

The Biden family may have received up to \$30 million as part of the alleged scheme, Comer said last month.

The allegations are based on claims from a confidential FBI informant, who purports that the Bidens received millions of dollars from a Ukrainian energy company as part of a deal to push for Kiev to fire a prosecutor investigating the business.

The probe continues despite the US Justice Department agreeing to a plea deal with Hunter Biden to resolve tax and firearms charges, Comer said.

Former US President and 2024 Republican presidential hopeful Donald Trump said last month that he would also appoint a special prosecutor to investigate alleged corruption by the Biden family if reelected next year.

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Majority of US Backs SCOTUS Decision to End Race-Based College Admissions - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) - A majority of people in the United States agree with the US Supreme Court's decision to end race-based college admissions, while its decisions on student loan forgiveness and free speech produced more divided public opinions, an Ipsos/ABC News poll said.

Just over half of respondents, 52%, said they approve of the Supreme Court's decision to end the use of race as a factor in college admissions, the poll, released Sunday, said. Approximately one-third of respondents said they disagree with the ruling, while another 16% said they were unsure.

Last week, the Supreme Court ruled that colleges in the United States could not use an applicant's race alone as a factor in their admissions process, effectively ending race-based affirmative action.

The court's decision to block the Biden administration's student loan forgiveness plan was met with less support, although a plurality of respondents, 45%, still backed the ruling, the poll said. Forty percent of respondents disapproved of the decision and 14% did not have an opinion, the poll said.

In addition, the Supreme Court struck down a procedural challenge to the Biden administration's plan, which would forgive \$10,000-\$20,000 in student debt for eligible borrowers, and ruled that it did not have the authority to enact the plan under the legislation they cited.

Public opinion is further divided on the Supreme Court's decision last week to allow businesses to deny expressive goods or services based on rights granted by the First Amendment of the US Constitution, enabling businesses to decline wedding products for same-sex couples on grounds of moral conscience.

Forty-three percent of respondents said they agree with the ruling, while 42% said they disagree, the poll said.

The ruling was based on a case involving a graphic designer in Colorado who sought clarity on whether the state's anti-discrimination laws would force her to develop wedding websites for same-sex couples, even though she personally disagrees with such marriages.

The poll surveyed a sample of 937 adults between June 30 and July 1. The poll's margin of error is plus-or-minus 3.6 percentage points with a confidence level of 95%.

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Meta Seeks to Re-Enter Chinese Market With Quest VR Headset - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) - Meta (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) seeks to re-enter the Chinese market by selling its Quest VR headset in cooperation with the world's largest videogame publisher Tencent Holdings, the Wall Street Journal reported on Monday.

The idea, originally conceived in late 2021, was further developed in discussions with several Chinese companies, including Tencent, the report said, citing people in the know.

However, the implementation of the idea faced a number of challenges, including Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg's critical remarks about the Chinese authorities, the report said.

Chinese officials currently view Zuckerberg as an adversary businessman who has previously accused China of stealing technology and taken aim at ByteDance, the parent of social media company TikTok, the report said.

Another obstacle for Meta may also be China blocking the former social media platform Facebook after Zuckerberg refused to comply with Beijing's censorship rules in 2009. Meta's WhatsApp and Instagram also remain blocked in China, the report said.

Tencent head Pony Ma decided to continue negotiations with Meta to see what deals they could reach during discussions inside the company about whether to cooperate with Meta late in 2022, the report added.

If Tencent decides to join Meta, it would make the Chinese company the exclusive seller of Meta's virtual reality headsets, including the coming Quest 3, in the country, according to the report.

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US Sends Diplomat to Ireland to Boost Atlantic Ocean Research - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) - The US government is sending a senior diplomat on a mission to Ireland to advance cooperative scientific research about the Atlantic Ocean, the State Department announced in a press release on Monday.

"Ambassador Jessye Lapenn, Senior Coordinator for Atlantic Cooperation, will travel to Dublin,

Ireland on July 4, 2023," the release said.

Lapenn will lead the US delegation attending the celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Galway Statement on Atlantic Ocean Cooperation, hosted by Ireland's Department of Foreign Affairs, the European Commission and Ireland's Marine Institute, the release said.

"The statement launched a decade of marine research cooperation along and across the Atlantic Ocean that continues under the auspices of the All-Atlantic Ocean Research and Innovation Alliance (AAORIA) and now includes the European Union, Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Cabo Verde, Morocco, South Africa and the United States," the release added.

Cooperation on the project is continuing, according to the release.

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Blue Origin Rocket Company Seeks International Launch Site, Compete with SpaceX – Reports

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) – Rocket building company Blue Origin seeks to expand its operations overseas by acquiring a new international launch site, Financial Times reported on Monday.

Blue Origin would like to expand its operations outside of the United States by acquiring a new launching site abroad and is currently searching partnerships notably in Europe but also in other parts of the world, the report said, noting that the process is still in its early stages.

A potential acquisition in Europe could also help Blue Origin hire "new talent", the report said, as the continent is known for having a wide range of choice when it comes to competitive and skilled space professionals.

Moreover, the report added that although the company generates millions in revenue and billions in orders, it now must find ways of speeding up the launch progress to keep up with the demand.

Blue Origin, founded in 2008, was the first to successfully launch, land and reuse a rocket, seeks to pace up and scale up its operations to better serve the company's customers in a bid to compete with Elon Musk's SpaceX, the report said.

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White House Urges Action on Gun Laws After Baltimore Block Party Shooting

WASHINGTON, July 3 (Sputnik) – The White House urged Congress on Monday to improve the national gun safety legislation after the shooting in Baltimore, Maryland, left 2 people killed and several dozens injured.

"Our communities can't wait for action on common sense gun laws — Congress must act," White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Twitter.

She expressed condolences to all affected by the tragedy, adding that it left countless others

traumatized and grieving.

A mass shooting occurred on Sunday in Baltimore during a block party. Local media reported that police launched an investigation into the incident.