

**7/18/23 Tuesday**

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Presumed North Korean Ballistic Missile Test Lands Outside Japanese Waters - Tokyo

Military authorities in South Korea and Japan said on Wednesday morning they were tracking a projectile as it flew from the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) into the Sea of Japan.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said it was still analyzing the type of missile that was launched. The Japanese Coast Guard said it believed two missiles had been launched, although Seoul only mentioned one device. Tokyo also said the missiles landed outside its exclusive economic zone (EEZ), a 200-mile-wide strip of water off its coast over which it exercises sovereignty.

The missile launch came a day after the US and South Korea held the inaugural meeting of the Nuclear Consultative Group (NCG), at which the two nations discussed ways to strengthen "extended deterrence" against a potential attack by the DPRK. The US and DPRK have nuclear weapons; South Korea does not.

The meeting coincided with the arrival of the USS Kentucky, an Ohio-class ballistic missile submarine capable of carrying dozens of nuclear weapons, at the South Korea port of Busan. It was the first visit to South Korea by such a vessel in nearly 40 years, and was [sharply denounced by Pyongyang](#) along with the NCG summit as "push[ing] the peninsula to the brink of nuclear war."

The launch also comes a week after [the DPRK test-fired](#) a new intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which it dubbed the [Hwasong-18](#) and called a "core weapon system of the strategic force" of the country.

The socialist state has launched 12 ballistic missiles so far this year. Although it has faced international pressure to give up its missile and nuclear weapons programs, Pyongyang has said it needs the weapons to ensure its safety so long as US forces remain in South Korea and no permanent peace treaty between the three states exists.

[The 1950-53 war](#), which killed more than 3 million Koreans, only ended in a ceasefire and the establishment of a demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating the two Koreas.

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Three Potential 'Dark Stars' Powered by Dark Matter Spotted Using Webb Telescope

Astronomers believe they have found three candidates for the first so-called "dark stars" ever spotted. The objects would theoretically be powered by dark matter, a substance never before directly observed by humans.

According to the scientists, the three potential dark stars were mis-identified as galaxies when first spotted using imagery from the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), a powerful orbital telescope used to peer into the early universe, which in space appears as objects further and further away.

The three objects were formed between 320 million and 420 million years after the Big Bang, making them among the oldest objects ever discovered by humans.

According to the theory, mistaking a dark star for a galaxy would be rather easy.

Dark stars are supposedly made up of mostly hydrogen and helium, like regular fusion-powered stars, but would also have a sizable portion of dark matter inside them - a theoretical type of matter that doesn't interact with light.

Scientists believe that when two dark matter particles collide, they annihilate each other, releasing a huge amount of gamma-wave radiation. Such a process would create colossal amounts of energy inside a star - far greater than nuclear fusion could achieve by itself.

What's more, such clouds wouldn't even have to follow the same rules as regular fusion stars: they could be less compact and even add more matter as time goes on, rather than blasting it away from its surface as fusion stars do. That means they could reach huge proportions, up to 100 times the width of the sun.

"These things are atomic matter that is powered by dark matter, and one supermassive dark star could be as bright as an entire galaxy containing normal fusion-powered stars," said Katherine Freese, an astrophysicist at the University of Texas at Austin and lead author of the study.

However, according to the theory, dark matter stars were limited to the environment of the early universe, before big galaxies had formed. Such massive objects were destined to become the cores of protogalaxies, which as they formed into proper galaxies, began depriving them of their fuel. Instead, such clouds of matter would begin collapsing to condense into fusion-powered stars, although the end of some dark matter stars might have resulted in black holes as well. The JWST hit headlines recently for observing some of these early black holes for the first time, including [one supermassive black hole](#) that formed just 570 million years after the Big Bang. Such large black holes typically form the center of galaxies, meaning this one might have once been a dark star.

However, it's far from certain that Freese's crew have found dark stars, and they have been careful to describe the candidates as merely "consistent" with being dark stars.

"Proposing something entirely new is always less probable," said Freese. "But if some of these objects that look like early galaxies are actually dark stars, the simulations of galaxy formation agree better with observations."

The find is explained in an article [published recently](#) in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS).

Scientists have never directly observed dark matter, only theorized that it must exist and account for as much as 85% of matter in the universe, in order to account for the observed movements of galaxies that cannot be explained by quantities of observable matter.

Earlier this month, the European Space Agency (ESA) [launched its Euclid satellite](#) as part of a mission to study the observable effects of dark matter, such as how the gravity of galaxies bends the light from objects behind them, making them observable to humans on Earth from the opposite side of the galaxy.

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US 'No Longer Israel's Closest Ally' Amid Judicial Reform Push - Ex-PM Lapid

Knesset Opposition leader Yair Lapid blasted the ruling coalition of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Monday, saying his right-wing government had alienated Jerusalem from Washington, its primary benefactor. His comments came as President Isaac Herzog arrived in The States to meet with US President Joe Biden.

"The Israeli government is leading us into this crisis, making the biggest and most dramatic changes to the regime in our history, without holding a single discussion - not even one - about the economic, security, social and political consequences of the move," Lapid told a meeting of his centrist Yesh Atid party in Jerusalem.

Lapid was referring to the so-called "reasonableness bill" presently being argued in the Knesset, Israel's unicameral legislature. The bill would block Israeli courts from applying a "reasonableness standard" to decisions made by the country's elected officials.

The principle is a common law doctrine allowing for judicial review of administrative decisions by senior officials judged to be beyond the scope of a "reasonable and responsible" exercise of their authority.

The bill has not yet entered its final form, but could include protections for the prime minister, the entire cabinet, or any specific minister, according to Israeli media.

Popular opposition to the proposed change has been massive, provoking some of the largest [civil demonstrations](#) by Jews in Israeli history since it was first proposed by Justice Minister Yariv Levin in January.

Speaking to Yesh Atid members on Monday, Lapid said the country was sliding toward "dictatorship" with the proposed changes.

"The difference between democracy and dictatorship is not complicated. In a dictatorship, the government can do whatever it wants. In a democracy it cannot. In a democratic country, the government has to take the law into account, it has to take the facts into account," said Lapid.

"The Israeli government doesn't want to listen to the facts, so it's changing the law."

Across the Atlantic, the judicial reform bill has provoked criticism from both the Biden administration and the American Jewish community. US President Joe Biden has urged Netanyahu to "walk away" from the push, saying he was "very concerned" about the health of Israeli democracy. The Jewish Federations of North America, an umbrella group that represents nearly 400 Jewish communities, sent an open letter to Netanyahu in February urging him to protect minority rights and halt the reform effort.

That criticism has [come amid wider opposition](#) to Netanyahu's ruling coalition, which includes several hardline figures who have made disparaging remarks about Arabs, and non-Orthodox Jews.

Noting the tension, Lapid said on Monday the result had been that "the United States is no longer our closest ally."

The former prime minister was especially critical of news last month that the US and Iran were closing in on a deal over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. Even though the rumored deal would fall well short of reviving the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that the US unilaterally shredded in 2018, Lapid nonetheless called it a "colossal failure" of Israeli foreign policy, suggesting Netanyahu's cabinet had made Washington wary of tacking so close to the winds from Jerusalem.

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US Sends Troops to Canada to Fight Unstoppable 'Gigafire' - Videos

Tens of millions of Americans are bracing themselves for another round of smoky days thanks to an unprecedented wildfire outbreak across Canada that forestry experts say is effectively impossible to stop at the moment.

On Tuesday, nearly 70 million people in a vast stretch of territory across 32 US states from Montana to Maine and Georgia were under some kind of warning about air quality thanks to fine particulate matter in the air, which has worsened since winds changed over the weekend. By Monday night, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was recording some of the worst air quality in the country in Midwest cities like Billings, Montana, and For Wayne, Indiana, and Cleveland, Ohio, where the agency issued ["red" air quality alerts](#) indicating unhealthy air for everyone, not just the most vulnerable.

"We are acutely aware that the recent weather events prominently impacting our City this summer are the direct result of the climate crisis," Chicago Mayor Mayor Brandon Johnson said on Monday. Air quality in the midwestern city was so bad that alerts were sounded warning children, elderly residents, and those with asthma or heart or lung vulnerabilities to limit their time outdoors.

The smoke is being blown south and east from more than 900 wildfires raging across Canada, which have together consumed more than 25 million acres of land - an area nearly the size of the US state of Ohio.

"It's no understatement to say that the 2023 fire season is and will continue to be record-breaking in a number of ways," Michael Norton, a director general with Canada's Northern Forestry Center, told reporters earlier this month.

"The total area burned now exceeds any year on record since we started measuring and keeping accurate records," he said.

Most of the fires are concentrated in northern Quebec, northern Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and the southern Northwest Territories, according to government maps.

The region has been struck by its worst-ever heat, with the thermometer in the Northwest Territories reacting 100 degrees Fahrenheit near the Arctic Circle on Saturday. According to experts, it is the hottest temperature ever recorded north of 65 degrees latitude in the Western Hemisphere.

“In the scope for us, in the states, this would be one of the largest fires to occur – ever ... It’s a gigafire,” Zac Krohn, a division supervisor with the US Forest Service, told firefighting crews in northern Quebec.

According to the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Center, some 580 of those fires are “out of control.” Ottawa has sought international help taming the blazes, with fire crews coming from the US, South Korea, South Africa, Portugal and several other countries.

However, the hot, dry summer has created conditions in which taming the fires is nearly impossible, forcing firefighting teams to concentrate on delaying tactics to give residents time to escape the flames.

“When it’s the year to burn and the conditions are right, it’s just going to continue to burn. The best thing we can do as an incident management team is to focus on protection of people and communities,” said Matt Rau, an incident commander with the US’ Southwest Area Incident Management Team.

The smoke has come to the northern US just as a heat wave is baking the country’s central and southern regions in near-deadly heat. A “heat dome” of stagnant high pressure has brought record highs to infamously hot locales such as Death Valley, California, which reached 128 degrees Fahrenheit on Saturday and Las Vegas, Nevada, which reached 117 Fahrenheit that same day.

The lengthy heat and humidity has helped heat the Gulf of Mexico up to near-jacuzzi temperatures, which [meteorologists have warned](#) could easily become fertile fuel for hurricanes passing overhead. Fortunately, the US National Hurricane Center is only tracking one tropical disturbance at the moment: [Tropical Storm Don](#), located in the mid-Atlantic Ocean west of the Azores.

Worldwide, record-high temperatures have been shattered, and the planet recently [experienced its hottest days](#) in the last 120,000 years.

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US Soldier Who Crossed Into North Korea Served Jail Time, Was Facing Disciplinary Action

Six US soldiers have defected to North Korea since the armistice agreement was signed in 1953 to end hostilities on the Korean Peninsula - not counting the latest incident. The sixth was Pvt. Joseph T. White, who reportedly walked across a minefield in the Demilitarized Zone in 1982 with a duffle bag of documents while shouting: “I am coming.”

A US soldier who was just released from a South Korean jail and was facing additional military discipline and discharge from the service fled across the South Korean border into North Korea on Tuesday afternoon local time.

Private 2nd Class Travis King, 23, was released from South Korean jail on July 10 after serving nearly two months for an assault charge. He was being sent back to Fort Bliss, Texas, and military personnel escorted him as far as customs; however, before boarding the plane he left the airport and traveled to Panmunjom, a Korean border city located within the 150-mile Joint Security Area, where forces from both sides face each other in relative proximity.

King reportedly joined a tour group and then sprinted across the border before being apprehended by North Korean authorities. He is the first American to be detained by North Korea in nearly five years.

It is not known if King intends to defect to North Korea, but if that is his intention, Sean Timmons, a military law expert, told a Canadian outlet that decision will likely be left up to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un.

"It's going to be up to the whims of their leadership, what they want to do," Timmons said.

According to a US Army spokesperson, King served in the military branch since 2021 and was in South Korea as part of the 1st Armored Division of the United States Forces Korea.

The United States Forces Korea seemingly confirmed King planned to defect to North Korea, saying in a statement to US media that King "willfully and without authorization crossed the Military Demarcation Line into the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)."

A Facebook\* post by a Swedish woman who claimed to be on the same tour as King said that he could be heard laughing as he ran across the border.

"To our right, we hear a loud HA-HA-HA and one guy from OUR GROUP that has been with us all day- runs in between two of the buildings and over to the other side!!" she wrote. "It took everybody a second to react and grasp what had actually happened, then we were ordered into and through Freedom House and running back to our military bus."

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin confirmed the US military is aware of the situation. "This will develop in the next several days and hours, and we'll keep you posted," he said, noting that his primary concern is King's wellbeing.

A UN Command spokesperson confirmed they are in contact with the DPRK about the incident: "We believe he is currently in DPRK custody and are working with our KPA [Korean People's Army] counterparts to resolve this incident."

Panmunjom is also known as "Truce Village" because the armistice that ended active hostilities in the Korean War was signed there. A peace treaty was never signed and South and North Korea technically remain at war.

Tensions have been increasing in the Korean peninsula, with South Korea, Japan and the United States running large military drills in the area, while North Korea has responded with missile launches.

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Report: Texas Agents Told Not to Give Migrants Water, Push Them Back Into Rio Grande

In 2021, Texas Governor Greg Abbott declared a border emergency in 34 counties, giving him millions in funding for building border barriers and the use of private property unauthorized by the landowner. Abbott renewed the order in May.

An internal email sent by a Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) trooper detailed that officers were ordered to push migrants back into the Rio Grande River and withhold water as part of Texas Governor Greg Abbott's Operation Lone Star initiative.

The email which was provided to the Houston Chronicle, details previously unreported incidents the trooper witnessed at Eagle Pass, where the state has erected barriers, including razor wire and a wall of buoys. It also says officers have been directed not to give water to migrants, even while temperatures reach record levels in the southwest.

The email describes a 19-year-old pregnant woman who was entangled in the wire while having a miscarriage. It's detailed the officers found her in obvious pain and had to cut her out and provide medical attention, which is when they discovered she was having a miscarriage. The woman was later transferred to emergency personnel.

Another incident described by the trooper involved a four-year-old girl who passed out from heat exhaustion after being "pushed back" by the Texas Guards. The trooper indicated it was well over 100 degrees Fahrenheit when the incident occurred.

The trooper's email also recounted an experience where officers had found a man with a "significant laceration" in his leg that was sustained when the individual was trying to help his son, who had gotten trapped on a razor-wrapped buoy in the water. Around the same time, the trooper treated a 15-year-old boy who broke his leg trying to go around the wire, which had forced him into an unsafe area of the river.

The owner of a farm just south of Eagle Pass, who leased some land to the state of Texas for the purpose of processing migrants there, has since given interviews in the media stating he told the DPS not to set up the razor wire on his property, and has demanded they take it down, but have so far refused. He is threatening to bring charges of trespassing and destruction of property, but DPS officials claim their actions are legal under a border-related disaster declaration signed by Abbott in 2021.

There also appears to be some pushback among troopers about the orders they are being given, according to the new findings.

The trooper described an incident where officers encountered a group of 120 people camped alongside a fence near the river, and which included small children and nursing babies. The email notes the officer in command told troopers to "push the people back into the water to go to Mexico."

It was further described in the correspondence that the troopers didn't agree with the order and called high command to express their concerns. They were then told to tell the migrants to go back to Mexico and leave in their cars. The email stated that other troopers worked with the Border Patrol to provide aid for the migrants.

"Due to the extreme heat, the order to not give people water needs to be immediately reversed as well," the trooper wrote. He later added, "I believe we have stepped over a line into the inhumane."

At the same time, according to the same Texas outlet, the Federal Border Patrol has issued internal warnings about the razor wire, noting that their agents have had trouble reaching migrants in need of assistance and have increased the rate of drowning.

The email also sheds light on a previously reported incident of a mother and at least one of her children drowning in the river after trying to go around the razor wire. In fact, the email described how troopers pulled the mother and one child from the river after they went under the surface for a short time. Although the two individuals were later given medical attention, they ultimately succumbed to their injuries. The woman's other child was never found.

Travis Considine, a spokesperson for the DPS, would not comment on all the contents of the trooper's email but did say the department does not have a policy against providing migrants with water.

He did provide an email from DPS Director Steven McCraw, who called for an audit to determine if more can be done to ensure the safety of migrants. In the email, he reportedly tells officers to warn migrants from attempting to cross the wire, redirect them to legitimate ports of entry and to search for migrants who need medical care.

"The purpose of the wire is to deter smuggling between the ports of entry and not to injure migrants," McCraw wrote. "The smugglers care not if the migrants are injured, but we do, and we must take all necessary measures to mitigate the risk to them including injuries from trying to cross over the concertina wire, drownings and dehydration."

Meanwhile, the governor's office has stated it is trying to secure the border and put the onus for the issue on the Biden administration.

"Texas is deploying every tool and strategy to deter and repel illegal crossings between ports of entry as President Biden's dangerous open border policies entice migrants from over 150 countries to risk their lives entering the country illegally," Andrew Mahaleris, Abbott's press secretary, said. "President Biden has unleashed a chaos on the border that's unsustainable, and we have a constitutional duty to respond to this unprecedented crisis."

Texas Democrats have called on the White House to intervene against Abbott's barriers.

"I read him the title and first paragraph of the [Chronicle] article and urged the administration to intervene — and to remove the death traps Abbott has installed for the sake of human rights," Representative Castro (D-TX) said late Monday.

The name of the trooper has not been released by the Chronicle, which added that it is unclear if he received a response from his superiors.

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Michigan AG Hits 16 People With Felony Charges Over 'False Elector' Scheme

Fake electors allegedly trying to overturn the 2020 election were reported in Michigan, Arizona, Nevada, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, New Mexico and Georgia. However, in Pennsylvania and New Mexico the documents included a clause that they would only be valid if Donald Trump's court challenges to the election results were approved by the courts.

Just hours after former US President Donald Trump was informed by special counsel Jack Smith that he is the target of a grand jury investigation looking into his alleged attempts to overturn the 2020 election, a Michigan Attorney General charged 16 fake electors for their alleged attempt to overturn election results in that state.

Dana Nessel, a Democrat, announced the charges on Tuesday, listing 16 Michigan residents, including the national committeewoman of the Republican Party of Michigan Kathy Berden and the former co-chair of the Republican Party of Michigan, Meshawn Maddock.

They, along with 14 other fake electors are charged with one count of conspiracy to commit forgery, two counts of forgery, one count of conspiracy to commit uttering and publishing, one

count of uttering and publishing, one count of conspiracy to commit election law forgery and two counts of election law forgery.

All charges are felonies and carry a sentence of five to 14 years each. Uttering and publishing is a charge related to forging documents and attempting to pass them off as legitimate.

Some readers may be surprised to learn that individual votes are not officially counted by the federal government in presidential elections. Instead, each state selects "electors" that are decided by voting on the state level. These electors then submit their choice to Congress which tallies their votes to determine who won the election in a process known as the Electoral College.

The alleged fake elector plan consisted of sending impostor electors in an attempt to get the electoral college votes switched to Trump in crucial swing states that President Joe Biden won. "The false electors' actions undermined the public's faith in the integrity of our elections and, we believe, also plainly violated the laws by which we administer our elections in Michigan," said Nessel, adding that "the evidence will demonstrate there was no legal authority for the false electors to purport to act as 'duly elected presidential electors' and execute the false electoral documents."

The statement by Nessel says each defendant has been notified and will soon be told when to appear in court.

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Trump Admits He Received Target Letter From Special Counsel Over Next Possible Indictment

Former US President Donald Trump is facing multiple cases at the moment, the most significant of which are focused on his alleged efforts to overturn the 2020 election, his handling of classified documents after leaving the White House and hush payments made to an adult film star.

Special counsel Jack Smith reportedly issued a letter to former President Donald Trump, informing him that he is a target in Smith's investigation into efforts to overturn the 2020 election. The letter would all but confirm Trump's indictment in the case.

Smith took over the investigation in November of last year and has since interviewed dozens of witnesses, focusing on a scheme to send fake electors to Washington, DC, in an attempt to have them cast their electoral college votes for Trump in states that President Joe Biden won. The investigation is also looking into Trump's actions and mindset in the days and hours before the January 6, 2021 riots, when thousands of Trump supporters flooded the US Capitol and delayed the electoral certification process.

Trump received a similar target letter from Smith shortly before he was indicted on 37 charges related to his mishandling of classified documents. Trump is also facing 34 charges of falsifying business records from a New York district attorney related to hush money payments made to adult film star Stormy Daniels shortly before the 2016 election.

In both cases, Trump pleaded not guilty to all charges.

Posting on his social media site [Truth Social](#), Trump confirmed the charges while decrying it as a “witch hunt.”

“So now Joe Biden’s Attorney General, Merrick Garland [...] together with Joe Biden’s Department of Injustice, have effectively issues a third Indictment and Arrest of Joe Biden’s NUMBER ONE POLITICAL OPPONENT, who is largely dominating him in the race for the Presidency. Nothing like this has ever happened in our Country before, or even close.”

Trump is also facing a potential indictment in Georgia, where an Atlanta-area district attorney is looking into possible election interference in that state by Trump and his allies.

Recent polling has Trump beating Biden by two to seven points.

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POTUS Mugshot Fever - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall

On Tuesday, former US President Donald Trump confirmed on Truth Social that he received a letter telling him he is a target in special counsel Jack Smith’s grand jury investigation into attempts to overturn the 2020 election.

The target letter is the biggest sign yet that a fourth indictment of the former president is imminent. This will be the fourth time Trump has been indicted on federal charges. However, the former president would not be subjected to the indignity of a booking photo, commonly called a mugshot.

Trump attorney and spokesperson Alina Habba told US media at the time that Trump was in a “unique position” and didn’t need a mugshot.

“He is not a flight risk. He is the leading candidate of the GOP at the moment. He is going through a process that has been coordinated with [the] Secret Service and it will all be handled seamlessly,” she said while Trump was inside a Miami courthouse for a case relating to his handling of classified documents.

Officials reportedly downloaded a photo of the former president instead.

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Canada Updates Emergency Protocols Over Fears of Nuclear Incident in Europe - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government is updating its emergency protocols over concerns about a possible tactical nuclear exchange in Europe or a power plant explosion in the Ukraine conflict zone, CTV News reported on Wednesday.

Ottawa is reviewing its nuclear fallout emergency protocols due to the Ukraine conflict, the report said citing Internal Public Safety Canada notes obtained through the Access to Information Act.

Canada fears that Russia's ongoing special military operation in Ukraine could lead to a tactical nuclear exchange between Moscow and European states, or to an incident at a power plant that would spread radiation throughout the continent and across the Atlantic Ocean, the report added.

Steps are being taken to update the highly secretive protocol that would ensure the survival of Canada's federal government and its proper functioning if a major crisis was to unfold, notably by relocating the key institutions outside of Ottawa.

Moreover, the report added that Ottawa was finalizing a protocol to inform Canadians of a ballistic missile strike targeting the country, and another for addressing a major surge in requests for consular assistance in the event of a power plant disaster.

The notes were reportedly made for a meeting of senior emergency management bureaucrats that was held in August 2022, over concerns that the Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant (ZNPP) could be damaged by shelling, causing a radioactive disaster.

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#### IMF Says Euro Area Needs Further Monetary Tightening to Curb Inflation

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - Countries in the euro area should continue monetary tightening to rein in inflation, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said on Wednesday.

"Directors noted the need to maintain a tight monetary policy stance to ensure that inflation returns to target in a timely manner, with most Directors stressing that further monetary policy tightening is needed," the IMF said in a statement upon conclusion of discussions between the Executive Board and euro area countries.

The IMF executive directors also agreed that the Eurosystem's bond holdings should continue to be reduced in a gradual and predictable manner, according to the statement.

The fund pointed out that a tighter fiscal stance would help contain inflationary pressures. It also noted that a reduction in deficits is essential to safeguard fiscal sustainability in many high-debt countries. That includes such steps as phasing out energy relief measures and saving any revenue windfalls.

"Directors emphasized the importance of protecting investment as public finances are consolidated. They supported the ongoing reform of the European economic governance framework and encouraged reaching an agreement swiftly to anchor medium-term fiscal policy making," the statement said.

The IMF also said that a swift policy response and a strong rebound from the pandemic allowed the euro area economy to show remarkable resilience. Despite the weakening economic activity in early 2023, growth is expected to pick up gradually throughout this year and 2024, it added.

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### Americans Say Religion Less Important – Poll

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) – Fewer American adults see religion as highly important, compared to 20 years ago, according to a Gallup poll released Wednesday.

The latest poll, conducted June 1-22, found that 58% of Americans rated religion as “extremely important” or “very important,” seven percentage points down from the 65% who said the same in the poll held in 2002.

Religion was the only element among eight surveyed (community activities, hobbies, money, work, friends, health and family) that saw a drop in high importance.

This decline was most pronounced among the 18-34 age group, which saw a 15-percentage-point drop to 42%. In comparison, the 35-54 age group saw a 3-percentage-point drop and the 55-and-older group saw an 8 percentage point drop.

The value of religion also fell 12 percentage points among Democrats, while it increased 3 percentage points among Republicans.

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### Termination of Grain Deal Risks Adding to Global Food Inflation - IMF

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - The termination of the Black Sea Grain Initiative risks pushing up already soaring global food prices, particularly in low-income countries that rely on grain exports from Ukraine, an IMF spokesperson told Sputnik.

"The discontinuation of the initiative impacts the food supply to countries that rely heavily on shipments from Ukraine, in particular in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. It worsens the food security outlook and risks adding to global food inflation, especially for low-income countries," the IMF spokesperson said.

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### IMF Says Monitoring Impact of Black Sea Grain Deal's Termination on Global Food Insecurity

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund is monitoring impact of the Black Sea grain deal's termination on global food insecurity, an IMF spokesperson told Sputnik.

On Monday, the Black Sea Grain Initiative expired as Russia did not extend its participation in the agreement for another period. Moscow said that the deal's provisions pertaining to Russia's grain and fertilizer exports had not been fulfilled due to Western sanctions.

"The Fund will continue to carefully monitor ongoing developments and their impact on global food insecurity," the spokesperson said.

The grain initiative has contributed to taming pressures on international food prices, the IMF

official noted.

"Most specifically, the agreement has allowed Ukraine to export around 33 mt of grain by sea and turned out to be an important factor for global food security," the official added.

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#### Trump Reveals How He Would End Ukraine Conflict in 24 Hours

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump outlined to Fox News how he intends to end the Ukraine conflict in 24 hours if reelected.

"As you know I get along very well with Putin. I would tell Putin 'You've got to settle.' I would tell Zelenskyy 'You've got to settle,'" Trump said. "I would tell one 'You're gonna load up with money.' I'd tell the other 'You are not gonna get any money.' I would get a settlement in 24 hours," Trump said in an interview aired late on Tuesday.

He reiterated that the conflict should have never happened.

"You have hundreds of thousands of dead people right now, hundreds of thousands. You have cities that are obliterated. I don't think you've ever seen the cities after they're finished with rockets. You have cities with no buildings standing, it looks like it's just a demolition zone. It's so horrible," he said.

Trump said his stance on the Ukraine conflict is "very simple."

"I wanna stop people from getting killed and I have to stop this," the former president stated.

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#### Pratt & Whitney Wins \$256Mln F-35 Engine Upkeep Contract - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - Pratt and Whitney won a US military contract worth more than \$256 million to provide depot level maintenance and repair for engines used in all three variants of the F-35 fighter jet, the Defense Department said in a press release..

"Raytheon Technologies Corp., Pratt and Whitney Military Engines, East Hartford, Connecticut, is awarded a \$256,315,686 [contract modification]... to provide depot level maintenance and repair for all fielded F135 propulsion systems at the F-35 production sites and operational locations," the release said on Tuesday.

The contract extension also includes training in support of the F-35 Lightning II aircraft for the Air Force, Marine Corps, Navy, Foreign Military Sales (FMS) customers, the Defense Department said.

Work will be performed in the US, Norway, The Netherlands, Japan, Australia, Italy and the United Kingdom, the release said.

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Biden Met With Cardinal Zuppi to Discuss Pope's Ministry, Ukraine - White House

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden met with Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi at the White House to discuss several matters, including Ukraine, the White House said in a press release.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. met today with Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi, Archbishop of Bologna and President of the Italian Episcopal Conference," the release said on Tuesday.

Biden gave his wishes for Pope Francis's continued ministry and global leadership, the release said.

The release added that Biden and the Cardinal also discussed the Holy See's efforts providing humanitarian aid to address issues in the Ukraine conflict.

Moreover, Biden praised the recent nomination of a US archbishop as cardinal.

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US Commander Says 'Confident' US Capable of Defending Taiwan Against China

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - US Indo-Pacific Command Commander Admiral John Aquilino said during a think-tank event that he is confident the American military is currently capable of defending Taiwan against a Chinese invasion.

"With what we have today, I'm confident that they [China] would fail," Aquilino said on Tuesday during a discussion hosted by the Aspen Institute.

However, Aquilino noted that China is building up all of its military capabilities at a rate that is "second to none."

Taiwan has been governed independently from mainland China since 1949. Beijing regards the island as its province, while Taiwan maintains that it is an autonomous entity but stops short of declaring independence.

Beijing opposes any official foreign contacts with Taipei and regards Chinese sovereignty over the island as indisputable.

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Pentagon's Indo-Pacific Command Chief Says North Korea Has Missiles That Can Reach US

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - North Korea has developed intercontinental ballistic missiles that can reach the United States, but it's still questionable they can carry a nuclear payload, US

Indo-Pacific Command Commander Admiral John Aquilino said during a think-tank event. "The capability that they've delivered and demonstrated the other day we assess could reach the United States," Aquilino said during a discussion hosted by the Aspen Institute on Tuesday. Aquilino said the United States is still reviewing North Korea's nuclear capability. Earlier in the day, media reported that North Korea fired two possible ballistic missiles. According to sources, the projectiles likely have fallen into the Sea of Japan but outside of Japan's exclusive economic zone. The broadcaster added that missiles flew 550-600 kilometers (340-370 miles), reaching an altitude of 50 kilometers.

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US Suspends Wuhan Institute of Virology Funding for Failing to Provide Docs - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - The White House halted the Wuhan Institute of Virology's federal funding for allegedly failing to provide documents, Bloomberg said, citing a memorandum.

The Department of Health and Human Services, after a review that began in September, told the lab that it found the facility to be noncompliant with federal regulations and is seeking to debar it completely, the report said Tuesday, citing a memo sent from the Department to the lab. The Wuhan lab has been the focus of an investigation by the Biden administration into the origins of the virus, and has been accused by the United States of refusing to cooperate with the investigation.

Representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services said in the report that the move will prevent the lab from receiving any more federal funding, which last occurred in June of 2020.

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US Senate Advances to Consideration of \$886Bln Defense Authorization Bill for FY2024

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - The US Senate voted to advance to consideration of the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), which authorizes approximately \$886 billion in defense-related funding and outlines policies for its spending.

The US Senate invoked cloture on a motion to proceed to the legislation on Tuesday in a vote of 72-25.

Last week, the US Senate Armed Services Committee released its version of the FY2024 NDAA as the House considered and ultimately passed its own amended variation of the bill. Both versions authorize approximately \$886 billion.

Senate leadership has expressed a desire to pass the legislation before lawmakers leave

Washington for their August recess. However, the Senate and House versions will need to be reconciled before finalization.

The House considered hundreds of amendments to its version of the NDAA, while the Senate is set to consider several dozen, according to Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. Amendments in the Senate cover areas including artificial intelligence (AI) technology and unidentified aerial phenomena (UAP) disclosure.

The White House Office of Management and Budget on Tuesday released a statement expressing gratitude to the Senate for its bipartisan work on the bill. The Biden administration looks forward to working with lawmakers to set "appropriate and responsible" levels of defense and non-defense spending, the statement said.

Given the short timeframe between public release of the Senate's bill and their action on it, the administration is not providing a detailed view of the legislation at this time, the statement added.

Earlier this month, the White House released a statement broadly supporting enactment of the FY2024 NDAA, while urging lawmakers to reconsider certain provisions.

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US House Passes Resolution Affirming Support for Israel, Rejecting 'Apartheid State' Label

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a resolution affirming the United States' support for Israel and rejecting claims that it is a racist or apartheid state, with the vote coinciding with a visit by Israeli President Isaac Herzog to Washington.

The US House on Tuesday passed the concurrent resolution in a vote of 412-9, with all votes in opposition coming from Democrats.

The resolution expresses the sense of Congress that "the state of Israel is not a racist or apartheid state" as well as that lawmakers reject all forms of anti-Semitism and xenophobia.

The resolution also affirms that the United States will always be a staunch partner and supporter of Israel.

On Monday, US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy called on Democratic Party members to condemn a statement by Congresswoman Pramila Jayapal, who called Israel a racist state. Jayapal's statement has been characterized as anti-Semitic.

The concurrent resolution will now head to the US Senate for consideration. Concurrent resolutions do not require the signature of the president, but they also do not have the force of law.

The House passed the resolution on the same day that Herzog arrived in Washington for meetings with US President Joe Biden at the White House. Herzog and Biden are set to discuss ways to deepen regional integration and counter Iran.

Herzog will hold meetings on Tuesday and Wednesday with a range of US government officials and address a joint meeting of Congress on the second day of his trip.

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US House Rejects Resolutions to End 5 National Emergencies Declared by Previous Presidents

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives rejected five joint resolutions to end national emergencies declared by presidents over the past two decades related to situations in foreign countries.

House lawmakers on Tuesday rejected joint resolutions to end national emergencies related to situations in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Libya, Yemen, Iraq and Syria.

The national emergencies up for termination by the House were initially declared between 2003 and 2012, spanning the administrations of former US Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

The joint resolutions to terminate the national emergencies were sponsored by Representatives Lauren Boebert, Matt Gaetz, Paul Gosar and Eli Crane.

"The people of Libya deserve to live without the prospect of US bombings, attacks, or color revolutions thrust upon them by corrupt American agencies," Gosar said in a statement on his resolution.

The "real emergency" in Syria is the United States' presence there, Congressman Matt Gaetz also said in a statement on his bill. The conflict in Syria is tragic but does not threaten the US homeland or warrant use of unchecked executive authority, the statement said.

The National Emergencies Act grants the US president the power to declare national emergencies in order to invoke emergency powers, which can be renewed indefinitely. There are 148 statutory provisions available to a president through declaration of a national emergency, although 13 require declarations from Congress, according to the Brennan Center for Justice.

Such powers available to the president under a national emergency declaration include suspending the testing of chemical and biological weapons, utilizing public lands for military use, imposing trade restrictions and bolstering the Select Service military draft system.

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Michigan Attorney General Charges 16 People Linked to Election Fraud Scheme - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel charged 16 people in connection to an alleged election fraud scheme in the 2020 US presidential election, her office said in a press release.

"Today, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel announced felony charges against 16 Michigan residents for their role in the alleged false electors scheme following the 2020 US presidential election," the release said on Tuesday.

Each of the individuals faces a total of eight charges, including conspiracy to commit forgery,

forgery, conspiracy to commit uttering and publishing, conspiracy to commit election law forgery and election law forgery, the release said.

If convicted, the 16 individuals face a sentence of more than 50 years in prison each.

Nessel said they allegedly met covertly in the basement of the Michigan Republican Party headquarters on December 14 and signed their names to multiple certificates stating they were the duly elected and qualified electors for President and Vice President of the United States of America for the State of Michigan.

The documents were then sent to the US Senate and National Archives in a coordinated effort to award the state's electoral votes to the candidate of their choosing instead of the candidates actually elected by the people of Michigan, Nessel added.

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Biden, Herzog Discuss Iran's Partnership With Russia, Two-State Solution - White House

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joseph Biden and his Israeli counterpart Isaac Herzog have discussed Iran's increasing partnership with Russia and the two-state solution to the Middle East conflict among other matters, the White House revealed in a readout.

"The two consulted on key issues of mutual concern, including enhanced coordination to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and Iran's growing defense partnership with Russia," the readout said after the meeting between the two leaders on Tuesday. "They noted the strength of the US-Israel relationship, based on the bedrock of shared democratic values, and discussed the need for a consensus-based approach to the judicial reform package."

Biden and Herzog also spoke about the situation in the region, and particularly, the need to improve security in the West Bank.

"President Biden reiterated his commitment to maintaining a path for a negotiated two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the best avenue to a lasting and just peace, and to providing Israelis and Palestinians equal measures of freedom, prosperity and security," the readout said. "The President stressed the need to take additional measures to improve the security and economic situation in the West Bank and prevent acts of terrorism."

Herzog is currently in Washington where he will be on Tuesday and Wednesday for meetings with a range of interagency officials. Tomorrow, Herzog will address a joint meeting of the US Congress.

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Austin to Visit Papua New Guinea, Australia to Meet With Officials Next Week - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will head to Papua New Guinea and Australia next week for meetings with high-ranking government officials, the

Defense Department said in a release.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III will depart next week for a trip to Papua New Guinea and Australia," the release said on Tuesday. "As part of his eighth official visit to the Indo-Pacific region, Secretary Austin will travel to Papua New Guinea to meet with Prime Minister Marape, along with Minister for Defense Win Bakri Daki, Secretary for Defense Hari John Akiye and Chief of Defense Force Major General Mark Goina."

The Defense Department noted that Austin's visit to Papua New Guinea will be the first-ever by a sitting US defense secretary.

While in Papua New Guinea, Austin will discuss the "next steps" with respect to the recently signed defense cooperation agreement between the two countries.

Austin will then travel to Australia to meet with Deputy Prime Minister of Australia and Defense Minister Richard Marles and other government leaders.

"Austin and Marles will join Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong to participate in the 33rd annual Australia-United States Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) to advance our unprecedented cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region and globally," the release said. "This year's AUSMIN will highlight, among numerous other topics, the historic progress our nations are making together on force posture modernization, defense industrial base cooperation, and regional security integration."

Austin will visit US and Australian service members who are taking part in Exercise Talisman Sabre, the release added.

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DeSantis Says Will Pursue Aggressive Energy Policy With Russia, Hook Europe on US Supply

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor and 2024 Republican presidential candidate Ron DeSantis said during an interview with CNN that he would pursue an aggressive energy policy against Russia, seeking to hook Europe on the United States' energy supply instead of Russia's.

"We will pull some levers against Russia. We're going to be much more aggressive on energy and export, because I think that's been [Russian President Vladimir] Putin's lifeline. I want the Europeans dependent on the United States for that, not him," DeSantis said on Tuesday.

DeSantis said he would seek a sustainable resolution to the conflict in Ukraine that does not "reward" Russia for its special military operation.

However, nobody wants to see US troops deployed on the ground in Ukraine, DeSantis added.

The US ought to shift its primary security focus away from Europe and toward the Indo-Pacific region in preparation for competition with China, DeSantis said.

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UPDATE: US National in DPRK Custody After Crossing Border From South Korea – UN

(Updates with additional details in paras 5-7)

UNITED NATIONS, July 18 (Sputnik) - A US national has been detained by North Korea after illegally crossing the border from South Korea, the United Nations said on Tuesday.

"A U.S. National on a JSA orientation tour crossed, without authorization, the Military Demarcation Line into the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). We believe he is currently in DPRK custody and are working with our KPA [the Korean People's Army] counterparts to resolve this incident," the UN Command wrote on social media.

The Joint Security Area (JSA) is a border village in the Korean demilitarized zone where forces from both countries stand face-to-face.

Several private companies are authorized to organize tours of the JSA.

Later in the day, US Secretary of State Lloyd Austin confirmed the detention of a US soldier by North Korea, while the State Department added that the Pentagon has reached out to their counterparts in Pyongyang regarding the incident.

US media reported that the soldier was set to face disciplinary action in the military prior to the incident and identified him as 23-year-old Private Travis King, citing US officials.

King was detained at a South Korean prison on assault charges and was released from it right before crossing the border into North Korea and was facing additional military disciplinary actions in the United States, according to an Associate Press report.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 19 (Sputnik) -

#### BLACK SEA GRAIN AGREEMENT

\* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov discussed with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan alternatives for grain supplies to countries in need after the termination of the grain exports agreement, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday.

\* Poland will not open its market for Ukrainian grain after the termination of the grain exports agreement, Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki said.

\* Alternative options exist to transfer grain from Ukraine to the world but they have to be discussed with all interested parties, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

\* There are security risks for the grain agreement without Russia's participation and this should be taken into account, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

#### WESTERN MILITARY AID FOR UKRAINE

\* The United States and other countries backing Kiev are working on developing bilateral deals to guarantee the security of Ukraine separate from the NATO alliance, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Tuesday.

\* The Ukraine Defense Contact Group heard from the leaders of the F-16 training coalition as the team continues to develop a plan to train Ukrainian pilots on the modern fighter jets, Austin said.

\* The Biden administration plans to announce a new \$1.3 billion package in military aid for Ukraine, Reuters reported, citing two US officials.

#### G20 FINANCE MINISTERS MEETING

\* The finance ministers and the central bank governors of the Group of 20 (G20) have failed to agree on a joint statement over disagreements regarding the conflict in Ukraine following their third meeting under the Indian presidency on Tuesday.

\* G20 finance ministers and central bank governors said they had approved the Financial Stability Board's recommendations for the regulation of crypto-assets activities.

#### NORTH KOREA'S BALLISTIC MISSILE TESTS

\* North Korea possibly test-launched a ballistic missile on Tuesday, Japan's Kyodo news agency reported.

\* North Korea presumably test-launched another ballistic missile, Japan's NHK broadcaster reported, citing the country's Coast Guard.

\* Ballistic missiles seem to have fallen outside Japan's exclusive economic zone, NHK reported, citing Japanese officials.

#### UKRAINE CONFLICT

\* Five civilians were injured from Ukraine shells in the village of Shamino in Russia's Belgorod Region, Region Governor Vyacheslav Gladkov said on Tuesday.

\* Moscow does not have any doubts that the terrorist attack on the Crimean Bridge was conducted by Ukraine, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said, commenting on Kiev's statements that Russia was allegedly behind the incident.

\* The Ukrainian armed forces lost up to 400 military in the Donetsk direction in the past day, with Russia repelling 12 attacks, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

\* The Russian military used high-precision sea-based weapons to hit facilities where terrorist acts with the use of unmanned boats were being prepared against Russia, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

#### US SOLDIER IN NORTH KOREA

\* A US national has been detained by North Korea after illegally crossing the border from South Korea, the United Nations said on Tuesday.

\* The US national - an active duty soldier awaiting disciplinary action - was taken into custody by North Korea, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said.

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## DeSantis Says Hopes US Government Does Not Indict Trump, Would Harm Country

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor and 2024 Republican presidential candidate Ron DeSantis said on Tuesday that he hopes former US President and primary opponent Donald Trump does not get indicted as part of the US government' January 6 Capitol riot probe.

"I hope he doesn't get charged. I don't think it would be good for the country," DeSantis said during an interview with CNN.

The United States is headed down the path toward criminalizing differences in political opinion, DeSantis added.

Earlier on Tuesday, Trump said he was informed by Special Counsel Jack Smith that he was a target of the January 6 investigation. Trump said he was given four days to report to a grand jury, which "almost always means" arrest and indictment, according to the former president.

The White House is "always prepared" for contingencies such as potential violence in case of a Trump indictment, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday, when asked about the situation.

Jean-Pierre also reaffirmed US President Joe Biden's commitment to an independent judiciary, when asked about accusations of the federal government being weaponized against political opponents.

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## Rep. McCaul Says Issued Subpoena to Blinken Related to US Botched Afghanistan Withdrawal

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul announced on Tuesday that he issued another subpoena to Secretary of State Antony Blinken requesting documents related to the Biden administration's botched withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 and the tragic death of 13 American service members in Kabul.

"I have repeatedly asked for documents from the Biden administration's chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal. The department's continued refusal to produce files relating to the After-Action Review is another blatant attempt to hide the Biden administration's culpability in the chaotic and deadly evacuation from Afghanistan. I have no choice but to issue a subpoena," McCaul's office cited him as saying.

The congressman has requested Blinken to provide the documents in a week or by 10:00 am ET on Tuesday, July 25.

Earlier in the day, McCaul accused the State Department of violating another subpoena to provide documents related to China and promised to take further action.

The United States withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, following a rapid takeover of the country by the Taliban (under UN sanctions). The US military led the chaotic evacuation of thousands of people from Afghanistan via the airport in Kabul, where a terrorist attack killed 13 US troops and 170 Afghans.

In April, Blinken said that more could and should have been done by the US government to

prepare for the fall of Kabul.

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Las Vegas Police Say Executed Search Warrant in Connection With Murder of Tupac Shakur

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) said in a statement on Tuesday that it executed a search warrant in connection with the unsolved 1996 murder of rapper Tupac Shakur.

"LVMPD can confirm a search warrant was served in Henderson, Nevada on July 17, 2023, as part of the ongoing Tupac Shakur homicide investigation," the statement said.

LVMPD has nothing further to say on the matter at this time, the statement added.

Shakur was shot and eventually died as a result of a drive-by shooting in the Las Vegas Valley in September 1996. He was nominated for several Grammy Awards and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2017.

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Canadian National Arrested in the UK Over Suspicion of Terrorism – Metropolitan Police

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) – The London Metropolitan Police informed that they obtained a warrant allowing for the extended detention of a Canadian national arrested on suspicion of terrorism-related offenses upon his arrival in the UK.

On Monday, a 28-year-old Canadian national and a man aged 56 from East London were arrested by counter-terrorism detectives of the London Metropolitan Police for allegedly being part of a proscribed terrorist organisation.

The Canadian national was detained upon his arrival on a flight inbound from Canada to Heathrow International Airport, the statement said, whereas the second individual was arrested nearby his residence in East London.

"Counter-terrorism detectives have obtained warrants of further detention allowing them to keep in custody two men they arrested on suspicion of terrorism offenses," the police statement said.

With the extended detention warrants, UK law enforcement will be allowed to further detain the two men until July 24, the statement added.

Both individuals have allegedly violated section 11 of the Terrorism Act 2000 and are being held in custody under section 41 of the same Act, the statement continued.

Police said that two addresses in the city remain under investigation.

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White House Says 'Always Prepared' for Potential Violence in Case of Trump Indictment

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday that the White House is always prepared for contingencies, amid concerns about the possibility of violence if former US President Donald Trump is indicted on charges related to the January 6 US Capitol riot.

"We are always prepared, I don't have anything to share beyond that," Jean-Pierre said when asked if the White House is preparing for potential violence in the wake of a possible Trump indictment.

Earlier on Tuesday, Trump said he was informed by Special Counsel Jack Smith that he was a target of the January 6 investigation. Trump said he was given four days to report to a grand jury, which "almost always means" arrest and indictment, according to the former president.

US President Joe Biden respects the independence of the US Justice Department, Jean-Pierre also said, when asked about accusations of weaponizing federal law enforcement against political opponents.

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White House Says Reports of Texas Pushing Migrants in River 'Despicable' if True

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday that reports of Texas ordering its border security agents to push migrants into the Rio Grande river are despicable if true.

"We saw those reports. If they are true, it is abhorrent, it is despicable, it is dangerous," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing, when asked about the reports.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott ordered border security agents to push migrants into the Rio Grande and deny them access to water, even in high heat, The Houston Chronicle reported on Monday, citing an email from a Texas Department of Public Safety trooper.

The trooper alleges that Texas National Guard soldiers pushed back a four-year-old girl who passed out from heat exhaustion while trying to pass a razor-wire barrier in Eagle Pass. A pregnant woman was also found caught in the wire, and a teenager broke his leg trying to get around it, according to the report.

The trooper sent the email to a superior, requesting that Texas halt its use of barrels wrapped in razor-wire and revoke the order to withhold water, the report said.

The White House has not yet confirmed the reports, Jean-Pierre said. However, such orders would "not be surprising" coming from Abbott, Jean-Pierre added.

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It Would Take Years, Billions of Dollars for Ukraine to Match Russian Airpower - Milley

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) – It would take years and billions of dollars for the West to help Ukraine match the Russian fleet of fourth- and fifth-generation aircraft, train Ukrainian pilots and facilitate the necessary maintenance, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley said on Tuesday.

"Ten F-16s are \$2 billion. So, the Russians have hundreds of fourth and fifth-generation airframes. If they [the Ukrainians] are going to try to match the Russians, one for one or even two to one, you are talking about a large number of aircraft. That's going to take years to train the pilots, years to do the maintenance and sustainment, years to generate that degree of financial support to do that. You're talking way more billions of dollars than has already been generated," Milley said during a press briefing.

Instead of supplying Ukraine with expensive aircraft, Milley suggests focusing on air defenses, on the blocking and tackling sort of offensive combined arms maneuvers, i.e., artillery, as well as on long- and short-range artillery.

On Sunday, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that the United States will permit its European partners to begin training Ukrainian pilots to fly F-16 fighter jets and provide the necessary tools for that purpose, while the timeline for when the jets will reach Ukraine still remains unclear.

Earlier in July, Pentagon's Joint Staff Director for Operations Lt. Gen. Douglas Sims II said that the conditions on the battlefield in Ukraine were not "ideal" for using F-16 fighter jets given that Russia continues to possess air defense capabilities.

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Trump Says If Elected Will Ask Europe to Reimburse US For Stockpiles Sent to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said on Tuesday that if elected as president he will ask Europe to reimburse the United States for the cost of refilling US stockpiles sent to Ukraine.

"I will ask Europe to reimburse us for the cost of rebuilding the stockpiles sent to Ukraine, which they should be doing now but Joe Biden is too weak and too disrespected to even ask," Trump said in a press release.

Trump highlighted that Europe has spent just a tiny fraction of the amount the United States has spent assisting Ukraine.

Earlier in the day, Lockheed Martin President and CEO James Taiclet said the United States currently plans to spend \$44 billion of congressionally approved funding to refill US stockpiles of military assistance sent to Ukraine. He added that a lot of those munitions are going to be upgraded to the capability that the company can produce today.

Russia launched its special military operation in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, after the

Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics appealed for help in defending themselves against Ukrainian provocations. In response to Russia's operation, Western countries have rolled out a comprehensive sanctions campaign against Moscow and have been supplying weapons to Ukraine.

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US State Dept. Says Does Not Object Kissinger Meeting With Chinese Defense Minister

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The US State Department is aware of Henry Kissinger's visit to Beijing and meeting with the sanctioned Chinese defense minister, but has no objections since the former US top diplomat was not representing the Biden administration during his trip, spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

"We were aware that Henry Kissinger was traveling to China. It actually came up in the meetings that Secretary [of State Antony] Blinken had when we were in China. The Chinese officials mentioned that he [Kissinger] was planning to come as he has done a number of times over the years as a private citizen. I will say he was there under his own volition, not acting on behalf of the United States government," Miller said during a press briefing.

Miller explained that the meeting between Kissinger and Chinese defense minister Li Shangfu does not violate the existing sanctions.

The Chinese defense ministry said earlier in the day that both Kissinger and Li advocated for the two countries to work productively together.

Kissinger, seen as a friend to China since helping normalize US-China relations during the Nixon administration, last visited Beijing in 2019, when he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping.

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US, Int'l. Coalition Trained Over 63,000 Ukrainians for Counteroffensive - Milley

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The international coalition of countries, including the United States, have trained more than 63,000 Ukrainian troops for the ongoing counteroffensive, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley said on Tuesday.

"Collectively, the coalition has trained 17 brigade combat teams for this offensive and more than 63,000 troops, and the United States alone has trained 15,000 of those with more training ongoing," Milley said during a press briefing.

The training has included individual, noncommissioned officers and officers and staff training along with artillery, air defense artillery, engineers, logistics, medical and combined arms maneuver at night, Milley added.

On Sunday, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that the United States

will permit its European partners to begin training Ukrainian pilots to fly F-16 fighter jets and will provide necessary tools for that purpose. The timeline regarding when the F-16 jets will reach Ukraine still remains unclear.

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Top US General Says He 'Would Not Overstate' Recent Incidents With Russians Over Syria

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley said on Tuesday that he would not overstate the level of tensions in the skies over Syria between the Russian and American air forces, but the Pentagon stands ready to protect itself should the Russians pose any "challenge."

"On the Syria piece, there is a bit of an uptick [in incidents], but I wouldn't overstate it too much," Milley said during a press briefing. "If the [the Russians] act with hostile intent, or they're acting unsafely, or unprofessionally, then we'll work through that but we will protect ourselves if there's any sort of challenge in that regard."

In July, the US Defense Department reported alleged unprofessional behavior by Russian pilots in the skies over Syria, including unsafe maneuvers around American unmanned aerial vehicles.

The Russian Ministry of Defense refuted the claims and said on Thursday that the international coalition led by the United States breached deconfliction protocols 13 times in Syria in one day alone.

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US to Provide \$50Mln to Expand Fentanyl-Related Treatment - Harris

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will provide an additional \$50 million to expand treatment related to fentanyl intake, US Vice President Kamala Harris said on Tuesday.

"Today, we are announcing an additional \$50 million for treatment," Harris said during the meeting at the White House.

Harris pointed out that fentanyl is the leading cause of death among young Americans and the death rate from its intake has doubled from 2019 to 2021.

"We must address this issue and we must address it with a sense of urgency and seriousness," Harris said.

The vice president urged expanding access to life-saving treatment and making it more affordable.

Last week, the White House announced the release of a comprehensive government-wide response to combat the emerging threat of fentanyl and xylazine to the United States.

The White House said its plan focuses on testing, data collection, evidence-based prevention, harm reduction and treatment.

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US Looking at Other Ways to Get Grain Out of Ukraine, Discussing With Allies - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The United States is looking into other ways to get grain out of Ukraine, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller said on Tuesday.

On Monday, the Black Sea Initiative expired as Russia did not extend its participation in the agreement for another period.

"Yes, we are looking at other ways to get grain out of Ukraine, we're discussing options with our allies and partners," Miller said during a press briefing. "I will say these are not perfect solutions. In fact, they're far from perfect."

The United States is also in discussions with Ukrainian officials about a proposal it made to the United Nations to restore grain shipments, Miller added.

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Top US General Says Ukraine Offensive 'Far From Failure,' Lots of Fighting Still Ahead

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - It is too early to call the Ukrainian counteroffensive a failure because a lot of fighting is still ahead as Kiev progresses slower than anticipated against well-prepared Russian defenses, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley said on Tuesday.

"It [the counteroffensive] is far from a failure, in my view. I think that it's way too early to make that kind of call. I think there's a lot of fighting left to go and I'll stay with what we said before: this is going to be long, it's going to be hard, it's going to be bloody," Milley said during a press briefing.

According to Milley, minefields, not Russian air power, pose the biggest problem for the Ukrainians at the moment.

The Ukrainians still have a significant amount of combat power left and they are preserving it by slowly making their way through all the minefields set up by the Russians, Milley added.

Ukraine launched its much-touted counteroffensive in early June after multiple delays. The Russian Defense Ministry has said that Ukrainian troops are trying to advance in the South Donetsk, Bakhmut, and Zaporizhzhia directions, but without success. A number of Western media have noted the weak results of Kiev's counteroffensive, with Volodymyr Zelenskyy admitting that progress has been "slower than desired."

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Lockheed CEO Says 'Not Convinced' Duration of Ukraine Conflict Will Affect Company's Work

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin President and CEO James Taiclet said on Tuesday that he is not convinced the duration of the Ukraine conflict will affect the long-term prospects of its missiles and fire control (MSC) business.

"I'm not convinced that the duration of that Ukraine war, which we hope is very short, will affect our long-term prospects for MSC," Taiclet said.

Taiclet further said that the lessons from the Ukraine war will remain for many years, including that great power conflict is not gone from the world.

Moreover, Taiclet said the Ukraine conflict has unveiled some issues and weaknesses for the US national defense enterprise more broadly.

Taiclet also noted that the United States currently plans to spend \$44 billion of congressionally approved funding to refill US stockpiles of military assistance sent to Ukraine.

Many of those munitions are going to be upgraded to capability that Lockheed Martin can produce today, Taiclet added.

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US Defense Chief Confirms Detention of US Soldier by North Korea After Crossing Border

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - A US soldier was taken into custody by North Korea after crossing into the country illegally from South Korea while on a tour, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin confirmed on Tuesday.

"What we do know is that one of our servicemembers who was on a tour willfully and without authorization crossed the military demarcation line. We believe he is in DPRK custody," Austin said during a press briefing, when asked about the incident.

The Pentagon is closely monitoring and investigating the situation, as well as working to notify the soldier's next of kin, Austin said.

The Pentagon, he added, is foremost concerned about the welfare of the US soldier.

Earlier on Tuesday, US media reported that the soldier was set to face disciplinary action in the military prior to the incident.

The United Nations has also confirmed their knowledge of the incident and efforts to work with North Korea to resolve the situation.

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### Canada's Minister of Finance Says 'Russia Has No Place at G20 Table'

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - Canada made clear that Russia has no place at the G20 table, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland said on Tuesday.

Earlier in the day, G20 finance ministers and central bank governors failed to agree on a joint statement over the members' disagreements on the conflict in Ukraine following their third meeting under the Indian presidency of the group.

Freeland was personally attending the G20 Ministers of Finance and Central Bank Governors meetings in Gandhinagar, India from July 16-18, where she addressed a series of global challenges in the economic and food sectors, as well as the conflict in Ukraine.

"I made clear in my comments at the G7 and the G20 ... that Russia has no place at the G20 table," Freeland said in a teleconference from Delhi's international airport.

Freeland claimed that Russia should immediately end its special military operation in Ukraine and fully withdraw from the territories it currently controls.

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### Pentagon Says US, Allies Working on Bilateral Security Guarantee Deals With Ukraine

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The United States and other countries backing Kiev are working on developing bilateral deals to guarantee the security of Ukraine separate from the NATO alliance, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Tuesday.

"We can expect that countries will execute bilateral agreements with Ukraine going forward, and certainly we will as well, and that's a work in progress," Austin said during a press briefing.

Austin said that he looks forward to working with foreign partners and other elements of the US government to develop the path ahead for Ukraine.

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### Canadian Inflation Down to 2.8% in June, Lowest Since 2021 - Statistics Agency

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - Inflation levels in Canada fell to 2.8% in June from 3.4% in May, reaching the lowest point for the past two years, Statistics Canada said on Tuesday.

"The Consumer Price Index (CPI) rose 2.8% year over year in June, following a 3.4% increase in May. While deceleration was fairly broad-based, another base-year effect in gasoline prices led the slowdown in the CPI. Excluding gasoline, headline inflation would have been 4.0% in June, following a 4.4% increase in May," the statement said.

The statistics agency also said despite lower inflationary levels, Canadians continue to observe elevated prices in some areas, notably in groceries and mortgage interest costs, respectively 9.1% and 30.1%.

Canadian Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland added during a teleconference from India that inflation numbers are back in the Bank of Canada target range of 2% after a reaching a high 8.1% in June 2022, noting that the current rate is the lowest amongst G7 members.

Freeland also acknowledged that grocery prices remained high, and that although the financial rebates distributed earlier this month of up to C\$500 (\$379) for families of four would not compensate all Canadian for the current costs, it would be a relief for many others.

The minister added that it was important for businesses to do their part in combating inflation, and to recognize that the prices of groceries need to come down, further adding that she counts on food retailers to behave responsibly and support Canadians with a better pricing approach.

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Elon Musk Says Wants Publicly Available Overview of How Ukraine Spends US Aid Money

UNITED NATIONS, July 18 (Sputnik) - Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk said on Tuesday that he would like to see a publicly available overview of how US aid funds to Ukraine are being spent.

"Would be nice for the public to have some clue how the money is spent," Musk said via Twitter on the latest aid the Biden administration provided to Ukraine.

Musk tweeted in response to a post - originally reported by Reuters - about the Biden administration being set to announce another \$1.3 billion in military aid for Ukraine.

Earlier on Tuesday, the administration announced \$250 million in aid for Ukraine's agriculture sector and \$500 million in humanitarian aid for Ukraine the day before.

The administration will announce the latest military aid package in the coming days, but it is said it will include air defense systems, counter-drone systems, attack drones and munitions, according to reports.

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UN Says 'Other Options' Exist After Hungary Proposes Transporting Grain Via Central Europe

UNITED NATIONS, July 18 (Sputnik) - Alternative options exist to transfer grain from Ukraine to the world but they have to be discussed with all interested parties, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"There are other options that can be looked at but they need to be discussed with all interested parties to create safe and practical pathways," Dujarric said during a press conference.

Dujarric made the comment in response to a question about Hungary's proposal to transfer grain from Ukraine through Central Europe to safe ports for further shipping to the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere.

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Pentagon Says Ukraine Aid Group Briefed by F-16 Training Coalition as Teaching Plan Forms

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The Ukraine Defense Contact Group heard from the leaders of the F-16 training coalition as the team continues to develop a plan to train Ukrainian pilots on the modern fighter jets, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said on Tuesday.

"We heard from the co-leads of the F-16 training coalition, Denmark and the Netherlands. They continue to make progress on a cohesive training plan to help some very eager Ukrainian pilots learn to fly fourth-generation aircraft," Austin said during a press briefing.

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Rep. McCaul Says State Department Violated His China Sanctions-Related Subpoena

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - US House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul said on Tuesday that the State Department has violated his subpoena to provide documents related to sanctions on China and that he will now prepare for further action on the issue.

"On July 11, I was forced to serve a subpoena for these documents, yet the deadline came and went. Last night, we received a response from the State with respect to the subpoena, but it's insufficient. Mr. Assistant Secretary [of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Daniel Kritenbrink], your department is in violation today of a congressional subpoena. This is unacceptable and I will have to prepare for further action," McCaul said during a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing.

Earlier in July, McCaul subpoenaed US Secretary of State Antony Blinken for documents related to sanctions on China amid media reports that the State Department held back on new measures on Beijing, including new export controls with respect to Huawei, in an effort to improve relations between the countries.

McCaul has been trying to get an answer from the State Department since May 19, when he sent his first letter asking for clarifications. He claims that he still has not received any definitive answer to his inquiries from the agency.

According to the lawmaker, the State Department has also repeatedly "killed" congressionally mandated sanctions against China under the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act.

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## White House Economic Adviser Says Not Time to Declare Victory Over Inflation in US

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The time is not yet appropriate for the Biden administration to declare victory over the threat of inflation to the US economy, White House Council of Economic Advisers Chair Jared Bernstein said on Tuesday.

"No victory laps, no mission accomplished, no declarations of that sort," Bernstein said in an interview with The Washington Post, when asked whether the Biden administration can declare victory on inflation. "We are definitely making real substantive progress in terms of providing households with more breathing room."

However, Bernstein said there is more work to be done to stabilize the economy while noting that there are more economic savings "in the pipeline."

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), hit a four-decade high of 9.1% in June 2022 as a result of the restrictive COVID-19 measures and the trillions of dollars of relief spending.

In response, the Federal Reserve raised interest rates to bring inflation down to 3% as of this month. The central bank, which aims for a 2% inflation target, is set to decide on interest rate changes again on July 26.

Americans may still not perceive the economy as performing as well as data may indicate due to the lingering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic measures and the conflict in Ukraine, Bernstein said.

Nevertheless, a recession is not based on "vibes" and there are no indications of a recession at this time, Bernstein added.

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## US Names Four Europe Spyware Firms as Hostile to National Security - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration has named four spyware firms or entities based in different European countries as being engaged in cyber activities harmful to US national security, the Department of State announced in a media note on Tuesday.

"Today, the US government added four foreign commercial spyware entities to the Entity List for engaging in activities contrary to the national security or foreign policy interests of the United States," the note said.

The State Department identified the four entities as Intellexa in Greece, Intellexa in Ireland, Cytrox AD in North Macedonia, and Cytrox Holdings Crt in Hungary, the State Department said.

The four organizations "were added to the Entity List based on a determination that the companies engaged in trafficking in cyber exploits used to gain access to information systems, threatening the privacy and security of individuals and organizations worldwide," the note explained.

The proliferation of commercial spyware poses distinct and growing counterintelligence and security risks to the United States, including to the safety and security of US government personnel and their families, the State Department said.

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NASA Confirms Next Cygnus Cargo Mission Will Launch to ISS on August 1

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - NASA is scheduling August 1 as the launch date for its next unmanned Cygnus cargo supply mission to the International Space Station (ISS), agency officials confirmed at a press conference on Tuesday.

"NASA and Northrop Grumman are targeting 8:31 pm on Tuesday, August 1, for the launch of a Cygnus spacecraft on an Antares rocket from NASA's Wallops Flight Facility in Virginia," NASA spokesperson Lora Bleacher told reporters.

NASA ISS program scientist Heidi Parris said the Cygnus would carry more than 40 scientific studies to the space station. The projects will include studies of fire suppression, gene therapy and atmospheric monitoring, the space agency has said.

The Neuronix experiment, sponsored by the ISS National Lab, will demonstrate the formation of 3D neuron cell cultures in microgravity and test a neuron-specific gene therapy as a potential treatment for people with paralysis and neurological diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's, NASA said in an earlier blog.

The 3D models needed to test these therapies do not form in Earth's gravity, it said.

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Ukraine Foreign Minister Says Grain Deal Not Dead, Kiev Looking for Alternative

UNITED NATIONS, July 18 (Sputnik) - Ukraine is looking for an alternative to the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, after Russia decided to suspend participation in it, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said on Tuesday.

"We cannot just say okay, the Black Sea Grain Initiative is dead, Russia killed it and now we have to sit and see how it works. We have to find an alternative and there are very active discussions [about them]," Kuleba said.

The foreign minister pointed out that Ukraine is not negotiating with Russia on this issue, noting that the grain agreement was brokered by the United Nations and Turkey with Russia being on the other side.

"It is essential to keep the ports open," Kuleba also said.

The United Nations as well as the United States, Turkey and the European Union are all looking into other options, Kuleba added.

On Monday, the Black Sea Initiative expired as Russia did not extend its participation in the agreement for another period.

The agreement provided for a humanitarian maritime corridor in the Black Sea to allow exports of grain and fertilizer over the past year.

Moscow was repeatedly critical of the fact that the agreement's provisions pertaining to Russia were not fulfilled. Moscow also said that most of the exported grain ended up in the countries of the collective West rather than in the poorer countries where it is most needed.

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Canada Condemns Russia for Ending Grain Deal, Calls for Renewal - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - Canada condemns Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative and calls on Moscow to renew its participation, Global Affairs Canada said on Tuesday.

"Canada strongly condemns the decision of the Russian Federation to withdraw its participation in the Black Sea Grain Initiative (BSGI) brokered by the United Nations and Türkiye as part of the Istanbul Agreements in July 2022. This reimposes a de facto blockade of Ukraine's Black Sea ports, significantly affecting global food exports as well as security in the Black Sea," the ministry said in a statement.

The Canadian government further called on Moscow to renew its participation in the grain initiative to avoid negative consequences for the global food system already under strain from the conflict.

It also accused Russia of "weaponizing" hunger.

"The decision of the Russian Federation will lead to an increase of global food prices," the statement said, noting that emerging economies would be the first to feel its impact.

On Monday, the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which provided for a humanitarian corridor to allow exports of Ukrainian grain over the past year, expired as Russia did not extend its participation. Moscow has consistently said that the deal's provisions pertaining to Russia's grain and fertilizer exports were not fulfilled due to Western sanctions.

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US Soldier Held by North Korea After Crossing Border Faced Disciplinary Action - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The US national detained by North Korea after illegally entering the country from South Korea is a soldier in the US military who was set to face disciplinary action, Reuters reported on Tuesday.

The soldier was anticipating disciplinary action by the US military prior to crossing into North Korea during a civilian tour of the border zone, the report said, citing two US officials.

The soldier entered North Korea willfully and without authorization, the report cited another US official as saying.

It is unclear at present how the soldier managed to participate in the civilian tour group, the report said.

Earlier on Tuesday, the United Nations confirmed the detention of a US national by North Korea. The United Nations is working with the North Korean military to resolve the incident, the UN Command said.

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US Provides \$250Mln in Aid to Help Ukraine's Agriculture Sector - USAID

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The United States announced its decision to provide Ukraine with \$250 million to support its agriculture sector after the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, was terminated, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) said on Tuesday.

"The United States, through its Agriculture Resilience Initiative-Ukraine (AGRI-Ukraine), is providing an additional \$250 million to support Ukraine's agriculture sector," the statement said.

USAID Administrator Samantha Power announced the initiative in the Ukrainian port of Odesa, the statement said.

Power also denounced Russia's decision to suspend participation in the grain agreement, the statement added.

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Western Jets Would be Little Help for Kiev Over Russia's Extensive Air Defenses - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) – If supplied to Ukraine, Western fighter jets, including F-16s, would have little utility against Russia's extensive air defenses, The Washington Post reported on Tuesday, citing unnamed US officials.

The United States and allies are focusing instead on supplying Ukraine with a combination of arms to keep the pressure on Russian forces on, the officials said.

On Sunday, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said that the United States will permit its European partners to begin training Ukrainian pilots to fly F-16 fighter jets and will provide necessary tools for that purpose, while the timeline when the jets will reach Ukraine still remains unclear.

Earlier in July, Pentagon's Joint Staff Director for Operations Lt. Gen. Douglas Sims II that the conditions on the battlefield in Ukraine were not "ideal" for using F-16 fighter jets given that Russia continues to possess air defense capabilities.

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## US To Announce \$1.3Bln in Military Aid For Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) – The Biden administration plans to announce a new \$1.3 billion package in military aid for Ukraine, Reuters reported on Tuesday, citing two US officials. Washington will announce its support in the coming days, according to the report.

The package will include air defenses, counter-drone systems, exploding drones, and ammunition, it added.

The United States plans to provide Kiev with Vehicle-Agnostic Modular Palletized ISR Rocket Equipment (VAMPIRE) air defense systems and two different types of loitering munitions, the Phoenix Ghost drone made by AVEVEX, a private company in California, and the Switchblade, made by AeroVironment Inc, the report said.

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## UN Chief Warns AI Can Be Used With 'Malicious Intent,' Cause Harm on Massive Scale

UNITED NATIONS, July 18 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Tuesday said artificial intelligence (AI) poses long term global risks that can cause harm on a massive scale.

"AI tools can also be used by those with malicious intent. AI models can help people to harm themselves and each other, at massive scale," Guterres said in remarks to the Security Council debate on artificial intelligence.

Guterres further continued explaining why he thinks the UN is a suitable place for the establishment of the regulations.

"The [UN] Charter's emphasis on protecting succeeding generations gives us a clear mandate to bring all stakeholders together around the collective mitigation of long-term global risks. AI poses just such a risk," Guterres said.

The United Nations welcomes the calls from the member states to create a new UN entity to support the need for regulations, he added. According to him, the new UN organ could be inspired by such models as the International Atomic Energy Agency or the International Civil Aviation Organization.

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## Family of Convicted Spy Pail Whelan Says Fundraising to Help Him Buy Envelopes, Stamps

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - The family of Paul Whelan, a US citizen imprisoned in Russia on charges of espionage, said on Tuesday that they have launched a fundraising campaign to help him buy stamps, envelopes and paper to enable him to communicate more often and boost his morale.

"We use his GoFundMe funds to ensure he has money to buy paper and envelopes and

stamps to reply [letters]. This has been a huge boost and hopefully will help tide him through the long wait ahead to be released," the family said in a statement.

During recent calls to his family and the US embassy in Moscow, Whelan said he had received 305 letters and cards postmarked December 2022.

"They were given to him in batches of 140, 80 and 85 - all in the last two weeks. It has been a huge boost to Paul's morale," the statement said.

The reason for the delay in delivering the letters and postcards is unclear, the statement added.

Whelan was arrested in Moscow in December 2018 and subsequently sentenced to 16 years in prison on charges of espionage. Whelan, who is also a citizen of Canada, Ireland and the United Kingdom, has maintained that he is innocent and insisted that he arrived in Russia to attend a friend's wedding.

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Fearing Tehran Reprisal, US Companies Reluctant to Unload Seized Iranian Oil – Reports

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) – US companies are reluctant to proceed with the unloading of 800,000 barrels of seized Iranian oil sitting in a Greek tanker off the coast of Texas, fearing retaliation from Tehran, the Wall Street Journal reported on Tuesday.

US federal prosecutors are seemingly unable to auction 800,000 barrels of confiscated Iranian oil sitting in the Suez Rajan, a tanker belonging to Greece's Empire Navigation, the report said citing sources familiar with the issue.

This is despite the fact that the US Coast Guard has cleared the oil tanker for unloading, the report said, adding that several companies have refused to do it over concerns that Iran might take reprisal actions towards them.

The report further noted that the situation surrounding the unloading of seized Iranian oil shows the challenges the US government faces when it comes to enforcing the sanctions it has imposed against Iran.

Earlier this year, US prosecutors commandeered the Suez Rajan and charged the Greek company owner with sanction evasion. The vessel was then directed to the waters off the Texas coast.

In the past months, Iran has seized several oil tankers passing through the Strait of Ormuz in what many see as a form of retaliation for the seizure of Iranian oil by the US. The latest attempts which failed were made against Marshall Island and Bahamian-flagged tankers, on July 5.

On Monday, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ordered the deployment of guided-missile destroyer USS Thomas Hudner, as well as F-35 and F-16 fighter jets to the CENTCOM area of responsibility to address the events involving Iran in the Strait of Ormuz.

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Trump Says Special Counsel Informed Him He is Target in January 6 Probe

WASHINGTON, July 18 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said he was informed by Special Counsel Jack Smith on Sunday that he was a "target" of the January 6 investigation. "...Jack Smith, the prosecutor with Joe Biden's DOJ, sent a letter (again, it was Sunday night!) stating that I am a TARGET of the January 6th Grand Jury investigation, and giving me a very short 4 days to report to the Grand Jury, which almost always means an Arrest and Indictment," Trump said in a post on his Truth Social account on Tuesday.