

7/20/23 Thursday

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BFFs? Astronomers Spot Two Planets Appearing to Share Same Orbit

In what may be the ultimate “match made in heaven,” two planets in a distant star system might be sharing the same orbit. However, another theory is much darker.

A Spanish-led team of astronomers believe they have spotted evidence of a second planet sharing the orbit of PDS 70b, a gas giant orbiting a star 370 light-years away.

The PDS 70 system is fascinating to astronomers for a number of reasons, including that it’s an extremely young star with a protoplanetary disk surrounding it, indicating several planets are in the process of formation.

One, PDS-70b, is several times the size of Jupiter and orbits about 21.5 astronomical units (au) away from the star - further than the distance of Uranus from our sun.

It was the first protoplanet to be directly imaged by humans, being spotted in 2018 by a group of astronomers at the Max Planck Institute for Astronomy in Heidelberg, Germany, who were using the European Southern Observatory (ESO) in northern Chile.

Now, astronomers believe they’ve made another discovery using the telescope: a cloud of debris in the same orbit as PDS 70b.

At the moment it’s being called a Trojan, which is a term used for asteroids that [“follow” planets in their orbit](#) around their host star, typically at the Lagrangian Points, where gravity between the planet and star is at equilibrium. However, the scientists aren’t dismissing the possibility that the object is either a planet still in formation or perhaps the remnants of one already torn apart.

“We can imagine that a planet can share its orbit with thousands of asteroids as in the case of Jupiter, but it is mind-blowing to me that planets could share the same orbit,” lead author Olga Balsalobre-Ruza of the Center for Astrobiology in Madrid said in a statement.

According to co-author Jorge Lillo-Box of Madrid’s Center for Astrobiology, planets sharing an orbit “have so far been like unicorns: they are allowed to exist by theory, but no one has ever detected them.”

For two planets to share the same orbit, they would have to orbit at exactly the same speed; otherwise, one would eventually catch up with the other and they would collide. Sometimes, planets can cross paths, but if their orbit is in resonance, then they will never find themselves at the same place at the same time. Pluto’s orbit crosses that of Neptune, although Pluto has not been considered a planet since 2006, when it was downgraded by the International Astronomical Union to a Kuiper Belt Object or Minor Planet following the discovery of other similar objects beyond Neptune’s orbit.

In order for the scientists to confirm their find, they will have to wait until 2026 because the objects orbit their host star so slowly: PDS 70b takes 119 years to complete a single orbit. The group’s findings are summarized in an article published in the journal [Astronomy and Astrophysics](#).

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Commercial Pilots' Union: House Bill Raising Retirement Age to 67 Would 'Introduce New Risk'

On Thursday, the US House of Representatives voted to reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), adding controversial new provisions that include raising the retirement age for pilots. As it heads to the Senate, it faces additional obstacles as lawmakers have more changes planned.

The bill, called [HR 3935](#) or the "Securing Growth and Robust Leadership in American Aviation Act," passed overwhelmingly by 351-69. It sets aside \$103 billion for the FAA to operate for another five years.

The changes introduced to FAA policy include: directing the agency to hire more air traffic controllers; requiring the US Department of Transportation (DOT) to eliminate fees for parents traveling with young children who need their own seat; banning Covid-related mandates for either air carrier employees or passengers; and most controversially, raising the retirement age for commercial airline pilots from 65 to 67.

The effort to raise the age to 67 began last year with an effort by US Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) and won the support of industry associations, but was strongly opposed by the Air Line Pilots Association (ALPA), the world's largest airline pilots' union.

ALPA denounced the bill, saying on Thursday that it would "introduce new risk by raising the mandatory pilot retirement age."

"The retirement age increase will upend union collective bargaining agreements, create training backlogs, and complicate airline flight operations. This is bad for unions, airlines, and passengers who will see additional delays and costs," [ALPA said in a statement](#).

"Raising the retirement age is not only a solution in search of a problem, but it is also a proposal that has not been studied or vetted by aviation safety experts - those upon whom we all rely to keep flying safe, including the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Department of Transportation, both of whom oppose a change for exactly this reason," the union added.

"As the Senate continues its FAA reauthorization deliberations, ALPA pilots and supporters will continue to push back against raising the airline pilot retirement age and similarly fight any attempts to weaken current pilot training requirements," ALPA further said.

Before 2007, the pilot retirement age was 60, when pilots' groups pressed for it to be raised to 65, following rule changes by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). At least one pilot below the age of 60 is required to be on board.

According to one consulting firm, North America will be 12,000 pilots short this year and over the next five years - 14,000 pilots will be forced to retire by leaving the retirement age at 65. The Regional Airline Association ([RAA said the change](#)) allows retention of more experienced captains, who can in turn fly alongside and mentor new first officers, helping to stabilize attrition."

Senate Version Seeks Reduced Training Hours

Now, as the bill heads to the Senate, it faces a new challenge: a highly contentious passage allowing 150 more flight simulator hours to be counted towards the 1,500-hour minimum required of pilots before they can begin piloting planes with passengers on them.

The House stripped the bill of the language in the hours before the vote, but the amendment adding the language to the Senate markup of the bill is championed by Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (I-AZ), a Democratic Party scion whose support will be necessary for Democrats to pass their preferred version of the bill, which doesn't include the amendment.

The minimum training hours standard was set after the crash of Colgan Air Flight 3407 in 2009, the United States' most recent air disaster. The Bombardier Q400 stalled and crashed into a home outside Buffalo, New York, killing 49 people.

An FAA investigation found the pilot responded improperly to stall conditions and Congress followed the agency's recommendations in raising the minimum training hours from 250 to 1,500.

American Airlines Workers Consider Striking

Unrelatedly, the union for American Airlines flight attendants announced earlier this week it would hold a vote on authorizing a strike, saying the airline has not met their demands for a 35% one-time wage increase, a 6% annual raise, and increased benefits.

"Flight Attendants are ready for an agreement that respects our contributions to the success of this carrier," Association of Professional Flight Attendants President Julie Hedrick [said in a statement](#).

"Our contract became amendable in 2019, and American's Flight Attendants have not received cost-of-living increases or any other quality-of-life improvements, even as they played an essential part in keeping American in the skies both during and after the pandemic," she added. Pilots for the air carrier - the world's largest when measured by scheduled passengers carried and revenue passenger mile - also authorized a strike amid tense negotiations with the company in May of this year, but reached a tentative agreement on a new contract shortly afterward.

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Europe Brain Drain: 30,000 Tech Specialists Move to China

Experts told Sputnik that Western policies have created a "toxic" work environment for many researchers who are more interested in science than in politics, helping drive their migration to China. Beijing could capitalize big on this with more incentives to relocate, but it could bring China and Europe closer together, too.

A recently released report by the US-based company Strider Technologies accused the People's Republic of China (PRC) of infiltrating Western technology firms and institutions as part of "a machine that facilitates the transfer of European technology and talent to the PRC."

The report notes that over the past 20 years, more than 30,000 senior employees at European technology companies have moved to China, in some cases starting up their own firms to compete with their Western counterparts.

Strider CEO Greg Levesque told US media that China "sees leadership in the semiconductor sector as vital to its military and commercial goals and nothing will deter it from pursuing those efforts. Legal and trade barriers in the US will only push them to ramp up operations elsewhere." The Chinese Foreign Ministry rejected the report, telling a US newspaper that Strider "has previously published a series of reports full of false information smearing and attacking China. China's exchange of talent with foreign countries is no different from other countries."

Jeff J. Brown, author of [The China Trilogy](#), editor at [China Rising Radio Sinoland](#), co-founder and curator of the [Bioweapon Truth Commission](#), told Sputnik on Thursday that about 40 years ago, "western research became pay-to-play, for-profit and still is."

"Before the 1980s, most research grant money in the West came from government sources - agencies and foundations - so there were fewer commercial and ideological strings attached. With Reagan/Thatcher neoliberalism starting in the 1980s, those grants dried up, thus big corporations filled the breach offering funding, but now with, 'We are paying you and these are the results we want,'" he said.

Brown said that a "venal, toxic and revolting work environment" arose in the years since as a result, adding that "is it any wonder Western professors, researchers and scientists are flocking to China, where science is still pure science, the search for truth lives large, and the sociopolitical ambiance is collegial and relaxed?"

The steady migration of researchers into China makes sense, given the sociopolitical environment and atmosphere in which grants are given. But despite the fears about a Western "brain drain," Brown noted that "The halls of Western academia and research are still full of professors and scientists."

"Most of them are not adventurous enough to pull up stakes and move to China. Nevertheless, there is a feeling that those who do so are among the best and the brightest, more interested in the pursuit of pure science, rather than cranking out papers paid for by Wall Street and Big Pharma."

"China pays very well, it is a safe, clean and modern country, with no garbage and transport strikes, no riots; inflation is low and the sky's the limit in terms of basic and applied research, with plenty of a-political, non-commercial grant money," he noted. "Therefore, where would you like to do your R&D? It's an easy question to answer."

"Given the aforementioned dichotomy between Western and Chinese R&D, Beijing has already won the race. China Tech is unstoppable. It does not need Westerners in their universities and laboratories to achieve 'Made in China 2025', but they are nice leavening in the invention and innovation cake."

Thomas W. Pauken II, the author of "US vs China: From Trade War to Reciprocal Deal," a consultant on Asia-Pacific affairs and a geopolitical commentator, told Sputnik that more Europeans moving to China could be highly beneficial for both regions and lead to greater ties between them at a time that Europe is suffering from its proximity to the United States.

However, he noted that in order to coax more European talent to relocate to China, "they have to make it where the Europeans are going to feel comfortable coming and moving to China."

"It's not as easy as some might think it is. What the Chinese government should first focus on is to create some preferential tax treatment and find ways to get companies to offer very rewarding contracts to people who are talented in science and technology. But, we should also be aware that many Chinese are also very good at science and technology and that when the Europeans

come here [to China], they could be surprised by the stiff competition they'll have against their Chinese peers," he said.

"However, it is important to have European scientists and talents come to China because they have a different cultural mindset and that different cultural mindset can also help Chinese people and Chinese companies have a better understanding of the global markets, as well as the science and tech world outside of China and outside of Asia," Pauken asserted.

"But in order to attract them, they're going to have to find ways of preferential tax treatment, some type of subsidies, easy visa procedures. For example, international schools here in China are very expensive. I know that for sure, because my son goes to an international school. Hopefully the Chinese government can perhaps either allow companies that hire to maybe get tax free treatment on offering education grants to Europeans who have children who could attend international schools here."

Pauken noted the southern province of Hainan has a High-Tech National Industrial Development Zone "where they're trying to encourage a lot of foreigners to work."

"Another benefit they have is a lot of duty-free products go through Hainan, and when they do spend in Hainan, they can get tax rebates as well," he explained. "Europeans don't claim they're interested in money, but you'll be surprised how often the Europeans are the first to ask for special [tax] treatment. Maybe it's because in Europe the taxes are so high, they might be looking for other places to go to improve their living standards and living conditions."

Pauken said that while the migration of high-tech specialists to China could have a big impact on the global tech race, there are still significant obstacles to the kind of exchange that Strider claimed was imminent, especially in the field of proprietary information.

"If it succeeds, it's going to be amazing for China because they will have a lot more progress and developments in their technologies. And this also could improve trade ties between Europe and China, which right at this very moment is going through some hard times, because the Europeans are too closely aligned with Washington. However, maybe if a lot of Europeans are coming here, this may encourage and inspire Europe to find ways of having deeper cooperation with China."

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Rediscovered Greenland Soil Sample 'Suggests Warm, Wet & Largely Ice-Free Future for Planet Earth'

A sample from Greenland's vast ice sheet that was collected several decades ago has been rediscovered, overturning long-held assumptions about the northerly island that could have disastrous implications for life on our planet in the coming decades.

Scientists had long believed Greenland has been covered by ice for millions of years, but the soil sample shows the island was ice-free just 400,000 years ago, during a period in Earth's history when the climate was comparably warm to the present day.

That could mean much more of Greenland's ice sheet can be expected to melt in the coming years - a catastrophic scenario that scientists previously believed was unlikely this early into

man-made climate change. With an ice sheet of 660,000 square miles and an average depth of 0.9 miles, the island holds enough water ice to increase global sea levels by 23 feet if totally melted, although even moderate warming could melt enough ice to increase sea levels by 4.6 feet, the scientists warned.

Paul Bierman, a scientist at the University of Vermont and a lead author of the study, told US media the conclusion is “frightening.”

“Geologists don’t usually get very upset about what we find,” he said, “but this is really upsetting.”

“It’s really the first bulletproof evidence that much of the Greenland ice sheet vanished when it got warm,” Bierman added. “Greenland’s past, preserved in 12 feet of frozen soil, suggests a warm, wet, and largely ice-free future for planet Earth.”

Their startling findings were [published in the journal Science](#) on Thursday.

The core was originally collected nearly 60 years ago in 1966, when the US Army occupied the [Camp Century](#) military base on the island’s northwest. The Pentagon had planned to install a network of nuclear missile silos deep underneath the ice, where it was assumed they would be protected from Soviet strikes, but after the science behind the assumption was overturned and the Danish government refused to consent, the base was abandoned in 1967.

The 12-foot-long soil sample was collected after drilling through 4,500 feet of ice and was lost for decades until turning up in Denmark in 2017.

Bierman’s team brought back two samples from the core to the University of Vermont for study, and were startled to find as they broke it apart and found twigs, mosses, leaves and seeds.

“We have a fossilized frozen ecosystem here,” Bierman said, “And what that meant, of course, is the ice sheet had gone away because you can’t grow plants under a mile of ice.”

The sediment was deposited some 416,000 years ago, but the scientists have sent the samples to another team at Utah State University that will be able to tell the last time the sediment was exposed to sunlight, indicating when it became entombed in the ice that covers Greenland today.

Earlier this month, the Earth shattered a [record average temperature](#) not seen in 120,000 years. At the present rate of global warming and polar ice melt, present estimates say that rising sea levels could threaten as many as 630 million people by 2100, including 340 million of whom live on land expected to fall below the high tide line by then.

The warming global climate is blamed for the present outbreak of heat waves across much of the northern hemisphere, which has included wildfires. The [blazes in northern Canada](#) have been fanned by the hottest-ever recorded temperatures there, including nearly 100 degrees Fahrenheit near the Arctic Circle.

Although the world’s nations have agreed on paper to actions that will limit the planet to 3.5-degree Fahrenheit increase in average global temperature, in practice essentially no country is on-target to meet those goals. However, even if they were, still-more-aggressive action might be needed, as many scientists say even that amount of climate change will still be catastrophic.

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UK By-Elections: How Did Tories, Liberal Dems & Labour Fare?

The UK's set of three by-elections in west London, North Yorkshire and the Somerset are expected to give insight into how voters are adjusting to the ruling Conservative Party as the nation battles labor uproar, inflation and increasing interest rates.

Initial predictions suggested the Conservative Party would experience straight losses on Thursday; however, final results proved that forecast wasn't entirely off base.

With Tories only winning one out of three by-elections, the results saw the Conservative Party lose a 19,000-vote majority in Somerton and Frome and another 20,137 in Selby and Ainsty.

Tories Grasp BoJo's Uxbridge Seat

When it came down to the Uxbridge and South Ruislip constituency, the UK's ruling Conservative Party successfully managed to gain control of the parliamentary seat once maintained by former UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

The final vote count came down 13,470 ballots in favor of the Labour Party's Danny Beales and another 13,965 to give the winning ticket to Tory candidate Steve Tuckwell. The results came shortly after a recount was called.

"This message from the Uxbridge and South Ruislip residents is clear," Tuckwell said after his win. "Sadiq Khan has lost Labour this election, and we know that it was his damaging and costly ULEZ policy which lost them this election."

The ULEZ policy referenced by Tuckwell is the Ultra Low Emission Zone scheme, which dictates that non-eco-friendly vehicles are charged a fee for driving in certain parts of London. It was earlier reported that the initiative is intended to be expanded into outer London, a move that has largely been condemned. The policy was backed by London Mayor Sadiq Khan. Shadow Business Secretary Jonathan Reynolds relayed to UK media that the ULEZ initiative was only ever going to dampen Labour's chances as the nation was already struggling to stay above economic difficulties.

"You've got a situation where things are very tough for people right now – the mortgages they're paying, the energy bills that they have got," the official said. "And of course then when they are faced with a potential additional charge, that is going to be a difficult thing."

He further indicated that the next election cycle would see the Labour Party re-strategize and focus their attention on the "national story."

Liberal Dems Win in Somerton and Frome

Beating the Tories out, the Liberal Democrats clinched a win with the Somerton and Frome by-election after candidate Sarah Dyke took home the majority of votes with some 21,187 ballots.

The final count for the Conservative Party came down to 10,179 and just 1,009 votes for the Labour Party. The Thursday win came after the seat with previously firmly held by conservatives.

"Tonight has been a stunning and historic victory for the Liberal Democrats, and it shows once and for all, the Liberal Democrats are back in the West Country," Dyke said after the win was declared.

"Lifelong conservative voters have today voted Liberal Democrat for the first time. Thank you for putting your trust in me to deliver for you. I will not let you down."

The Somerton and Frome seat was previously held down by David Warburton, who maintained the seat through three elections until he resigned in June over sexual misconduct allegations.

Labour Clinches Selby and Ainsty

Overtuning a majority of just over 20,000 votes, the Labour Party managed to come out on top in the Selby and Ainsty by-election after the constituency recorded a voter turnout of 35,866.

The final tally saw Labour winner Keir Mather nab 16,456 ballots while Tory contender Claire Holmes gained 12,295. Liberal Dems' Matt Walker took home just 1,188 votes.

Mather's Thursday win marks him the youngest member of Parliament at just 25 years of age, and documents one of the more shocking wins as the constituency was seen as a safe seat for Conservatives.

Shortly after the by-election was called in his favor, Mather told reporters the win was "re-writing" the rules on where Labour could record positive voter outcomes.

"I want to begin my time as your MP by being very clear: I understand the enormity of what has just happened, I know what an honour this is, and I am humbled by this opportunity to serve," he said.

"We have re-written the rules on where Labour can win. Thousands of the votes cast yesterday were in Labour's box for the very first time. For those of you who have put your faith in our party: thank you."

Labour leader Keir Starmer subsequently issued a statement underscoring how Mather's historic win proves the public is looking at a "changed party, focused entirely on the priorities of working people."

UK media has highlighted Mather's victory as the largest flip since the landslide of February 1997, by former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair.

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Fed Up With Biden & Trump, Half of US Voters Consider Backing Third-Party Candidate

As voter fatigue over a potential Trump-Biden 2024 rematch comes underway, a polling analyst for Quinnipiac University recently determined that for many voters "the status quo is a no-go." A Quinnipiac University poll recently revealed that 47% of US voters were either "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to consider voting for a third-party candidate for president in next year's election.

As US President Joe Biden currently shows no opposition in his party's group, and former US President Donald Trump continues to lead in perspective polls, the survey's data could be a signal that American voters are fed up with the idea of a Biden-Trump rematch for next year's presidential election.

However, it was determined those who are more likely to choose a third-party candidate tend to lean Democrat, spelling bad news for Biden, who would lose much of his voting base to an independent choice. The poll also found that voters who are younger - at least 61% between ages 18 and 34, as well as those who are non-white are more likely to consider a third-party candidate for president.

A recent poll by [YouGov](#), taken between July 15 and 18, shows a majority (58%) of Americans have an unfavorable view of Trump, while 40% have a favorable view of the former president. Meanwhile, Biden's favorability stands at 41%, and those who dislike Biden stand at 56%.

"With neither President Biden nor former President Trump knocking it out of the park on favorability, almost half of the country would consider another option. No specific name for the candidate, no specific designation for the party, but it is a vivid indication that for many voters, the status quo is a no-go," said [Tim Malloy](#), a Quinnipiac University polling analyst.

Those who were [polled](#) were then asked who, exactly, they might choose as their third-party candidate.

At least 20% said Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), 10% said Rep. Liz Cheney (R-WY), 7% said Sen. Joe Manchin (D-WV), while 5% of respondents showed interest in former Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema (I-AR), and Andrew Yang, a 2020 Democratic presidential candidate. At least 4% also said Jo Jorgensen, the Libertarian Party's 2020 presidential nominee.

At least 17% of respondents said they would like to see former first lady Michelle Obama run for president, while at least 8% also said they would favor Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, 7% who would back California Gov. Gavin Newsom, and 6% who chose Texas Gov. Greg Abbott as a hypothetical choice.

However, 43% of respondents said they would pick someone else as their third-party candidate. When asked which domestic issues would be a focal point in their presidential selection, respondents ranked in order the economy (31%), preserving US democracy (29%), abortion (7%), gun violence (7%), immigration (6%), health care (6%), racial inequality (6%) and climate change (5%).

However, at least two-thirds of Americans (67%) said they are either "very concerned" or "somewhat concerned" about climate change. Just 20% said they are not concerned about climate change at all.

The survey results were published Wednesday by the Quinnipiac University polling database.

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Tornado Tears Apart Pfizer Plant, Threatens Medical Stockpiles for US Hospitals

The North Carolina plant produces nearly a quarter of all sterile injectable medications used in hospitals across the US, as well as anesthesia and other drugs.

A tornado in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, caused severe damage on Wednesday to a Pfizer manufacturing plant responsible for producing at least 25% of sterile injectable medications to US hospitals.

The facility is also known for producing low-cost generic products which include IV antibiotics, anti-seizure drugs used for brain surgery, and even antidote for snake venom.

A [health official](#) has warned that the destruction will "likely lead to long-term shortages while Pfizer works to either move production to other sites or rebuilds." The damage could further exacerbate existing drug shortages, which have reached a [10-year high](#).

Additionally, Pfizer reported 130 products that were “depleted” and 100 more that were “[limited supply](#)” even before the tornado destroyed their plant.

The twister that ripped through the area along a 16-mile strip was issued an EF3 grade, which stipulates the “severe” tornado maintained wind speeds between 136 and 165 miles per hour.

“I’ve got reports of 50,000 pallets of medicine that are strewn across the facility and damaged through the rain and the wind,” said Keith Stone, the Nash County Sheriff.

At least three people were injured in the tornado, with two sustaining life-threatening injuries, according to the Edgecombe County Sheriff’s Office. Meanwhile, the neighboring Nash County, reported 13 injured and 89 structures damaged.

“We are assessing the situation to determine the impact on production. Our thoughts are with our colleagues, our patients, and the community as we rebuild from this weather incident,” Pfizer [tweeted](#) on Wednesday.

The company, according to a [New York outlet](#), declined to comment on which drugs were affected as well as the amount of drugs that were destroyed. “We are following the situation closely as it evolves and are working with the company to understand the extent of the damage and any potential impact to the nation’s drug supply,” Chanapa Tantibanchachai, a spokeswoman for Pfizer, added.

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Unexploded WWII Bombs Found in US Navy Shipwreck Off Canadian Coast

The World War II shipwreck saw more than 200 people die, with just 180 making it to land safely on February 18, 1942; its legacy now holds more than a dozen unexploded bombs.

The Royal Canadian Navy announced on Thursday that divers discovered more than a dozen unexploded bombs and artillery projectiles in a US Navy shipwreck off the coast of Newfoundland.

The US Navy ships that make up the wreckage are the USS Pollux and the USS Truxtun, which ran aground during a heavy storm on February 18, 1942 in St. Lawrence Harbor.

Those who were aboard the ship attempted to haul their lines ashore and were unable to do so after the lines became “oil-soaked,” [US military records](#) said. Crew members who attempted to swim ashore were unsuccessful.

The records reveal that at some point during the storm, lines from a boatswain’s chair were “rigged to a ledge” and some of those who were still aboard were finally able to get to shore.

“The more than 180 survivors owed their rescue in large part to the tireless, and in many cases, heroic actions of the people of St. Lawrence,” the records state.

Officials from the Maritime Explosive Ordnance Disposal and the Port Inspection units have surveyed the wreck, the Royal Canadian Navy said.

“A comprehensive examination is ongoing to assess the presence and potential risk of explosive materials,” the Royal Canadian Navy said. “Safety is our paramount concern - we spare no effort in our mission to safeguard the public.”

The practice of disposing of military munitions at sea was first banned by the Department of Defense in 1970. Congress then passed the Marine Protection, Research, and Sanctuaries Act ([MPRSA](#)), also known as the Ocean Dumping Act, which regulates and prohibits disposal of material in to the ocean that would “unreasonably degrade or endanger human health, welfare, or amenities, or the marine environment, ecological systems, or economic potentialities.”

The Canadian government has warned that unexploded ordinances can be more ubiquitous than what is found amongst a World War II shipwreck.

“Unexploded Explosive Ordinances (UXO) can also move or be exposed over time. Freeze-thaw cycles, flooding, forest fires, and storms can uncover buried ordnance or move it from place to place. It can also become more unstable and more dangerous over time. It doesn’t matter how old a UXO is, whether it’s 20 or 100 years old, it can still be very dangerous,” the [Canadian government](#) explained.

“A simple rule of thumb is to not touch or disturb any rusted metal that you find on the ground or in the water. This is a good idea even if you are not in an area that was previously used for military training, as any unknown rusted metal can be hazardous,” they add, urging anyone who comes across an UXO to call 9-1-1 or the local police as soon as possible.

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Truel for Democracy - Cartoon

By - Ted Rall

With a majority of US voters considering casting their ballot for a third-party candidate being Democrats or Democratic-leaning voters, the pool of support for Biden's 2024 election bid may wind up shrinking.

A new [poll](#) released by Quinnipiac University revealed a majority of US voters would consider voting for a third-party candidate in the 2024 presidential election. At least 47% said they would consider voting for a third-party candidate, and another 57% said they would not consider doing so.

The poll shows a clear dissatisfaction among American voters with the two projected frontrunners: President Joe Biden who is receiving support from 71% of Democratic and Democratic-leaning voters and former President Donald Trump, who is polling with support from 54% of Republican and Republican-leaning voters. Biden also leads Trump with 49% to 44% of votes in a hypothetical general election.

"With neither President Biden nor former President Trump knocking it out of the park on favorability, almost half of the country would consider another option. No specific name for the candidate, no specific designation for the party, but it is a vivid indication that for many voters, the status quo is a no-go," said Tim Malloy, a Quinnipiac University polling analyst.

The poll also determined that a majority of voters saw the economy, preserving democracy, abortion, gun violence, immigration, and health care as the top five factors taking centerstage in their 2024 selection.

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Iran Detains Fourth US National - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Iran has detained a fourth US national, Semafor reported Friday, citing three unnamed sources.

One of the sources, citing senior State Department officials, said the US and Iran had agreed that the fourth detainee would be part of any prisoner exchange between the countries and would not delay any such deal.

The identities of the first three Americans are publicly known – Siamak Namazi, Emad Shargi, Morad Tahbaz – while Semafor said it was withholding that of the most recent detainee to avoid jeopardizing negotiations over their release.

Semafor reported that the negotiations also involved the issue of Iran's frozen dollar assets in overseas banks.

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Chinese Embassy Slams US Claims China-Linked Hackers Breached Envoy Burns' Email Account

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Chinese Embassy Spokesperson Liu Pengyu in a statement to Sputnik rejected US accusations that Chinese-backed hackers breached the email account of US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns recently.

Earlier in the day, The Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported, citing sources, that Chinese-linked hackers allegedly accessed the email account of Burns, compromising hundreds of thousands of government emails.

"China firmly opposes and combats cyber attacks and cyber theft in all forms," Liu said in a statement on Thursday. "This position is consistent and clear. Given the virtual nature of cyberspace and the fact that there are all kinds of online actors who are difficult to trace, identifying the source of cyber attacks is a complex technical issue."

Liu further highlighted the importance of having enough evidence when identifying cyber-related incidents, rather than make groundless speculations and allegations.

According to the WSJ report, the alleged spying campaign that resulted in the hacking of Burns' email account was disclosed last week. The report said certain unclassified emails targeted in the cyber intrusion may have provided hackers information about several visits to China by US officials and international conversations about US policies with China.

The report said Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his inner circle of top advisers were not targeted during the hacking event, it was limited to a small group of senior US officials responsible for managing the US-China relationship.

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US Senator Markey Tells Actors, Writers on Strike Near White House 'Stay Strong'

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - More than 100 protesters from the Screen Actors Guild and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) are rallying not too far from the White House where Senator Ed Markey came out to tell them to stay strong, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

The strike against studios and streamers, announced by SAG-AFTRA started last week. The union has said the other side is unwilling to offer workers a fair deal and to protect their livelihoods. The workers are striking for better pay and protections against artificial intelligence.

"It is absolutely imperative that the workers stay out here until they get a fair deal," Markey said on Thursday to the demonstrators gathered at the Black Lives Matter plaza. "Stay strong!"

The protest is peaceful and there is not an enhanced police presence in sight.

Ten participants are holding banners reading "Union Strong," "Solidarity," and "Stay strong."

The participants are greeting passer byes with cheering while passing cars are beeping.

SAG-AFTRA on its website says companies represented by the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) - which include Amazon, Apple, Disney, Fox, Netflix, among others - are more committed to making Wall Street happy than protecting workers.

The union said it wants an 11% general wage increase in year one so workers can recover from record inflation.

SAG-AFTRA also said performers need the protection of their images and performances to prevent replacement of human performances by artificial intelligence technology.

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Republican 2024 Presidential Candidate Ramaswamy Vows to Abolish FBI, Transfer Functions

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - Republican 2024 presidential candidate Vivek Ramaswamy said in a statement that he would abolish the FBI and transfer its authorities to other government agencies, including the US Secret Service and Defense Intelligence Agency.

"SHUT DOWN THE FBI. I'll do it. Here's how," Ramaswamy said on Thursday via social media, sharing graphics with his plan to abolish the agency.

The FBI currently suffers from redundancy and waste, mission creep and political weaponization, Ramaswamy said. More than 20,000 FBI employees are in non-essential roles and investigate matters already pursued by other agencies, Ramaswamy said.

The FBI has also been turned into a "political weapon" to serve whichever political actors are willing to sponsor its bureaucracy and protect it from accountability, Ramaswamy said.

Ramaswamy said he would eliminate the FBI, which falls under the US Justice Department, and transfer its responsibilities to other federal agencies who already cover those areas.

Ramaswamy would move the FBI's anti-corruption work to the US Secret Service, its counterintelligence work to the Defense Intelligence Agency and its white-collar crime work to the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, the candidate said.

The restructuring would simplify the mission of federal law enforcement agencies and improve specialization, Ramaswamy said. The move would also save taxpayers \$1.4 billion and increase oversight and transparency, Ramaswamy said.

The proposal comes amid investigations by US lawmakers into the weaponization of the federal government, including its law enforcement agencies, for political purposes.

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UN Agenda Does Not Address Creation of Military Blocs as Main Reason of Present Crisis

UNITED NATIONS, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United Nations strategy New Agenda for Peace does not address the creation of military-political blocs, which is main driver of the present geopolitical crisis, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the world body Anna Evstigneeva said.

"We would like to particularly highlight those parts of the agenda that speak of collective and therefore, indivisible security. The security of some states within military-political blocs cannot come at the expense of others ... This dilemma is also at the heart of the large-scale crisis we are facing now," Evstigneeva said on Thursday. "We regret, however, that there was no place in the New Agenda for Peace to analyze the reasons that led to it."

Evstigneeva said that diplomacy should be the main driving force in international relations.

The New Agenda for Peace was formulated to address a number of challenges facing the world and focuses on the underlying forces and influencing parties that drive conflict in order to achieve peace.

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US to Deploy Portion of Marine Unit to CENTCOM Area Amid Iran Threats - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States will deploy a portion of a Marine expeditionary unit to the Central Command area of responsibility amid Iran's threats to trade routes in the Strait of Hormuz, the Pentagon said in a press release.

"In response to recent attempts by Iran to threaten the free flow of commerce in the Strait of Hormuz and its surrounding waters, the Secretary of Defense has ordered the deployment of a portion of the BATAAN Amphibious Readiness Group/Marine Expeditionary Unit (ARG/MEU) comprised of the USS Bataan, USS Carter Hall, and its associated personnel and equipment into the US CENTCOM area of responsibility," the release said on Thursday.

The United States recently approved the deployment of several F-35 and F-16 fighters jets

along with a US guided missile destroyer due to the same Iran-related concerns.

The United States has repeatedly accused Iran of violating international standards of professional maritime behavior and increasing the risk of miscalculation in the region.

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

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US Judge Rejects 'QAnon Shaman' Request to Withdraw Guilty Plea

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - A US court on Thursday rejected the request of Jacob Chansley, known as the "QAnon Shaman," to withdraw his guilty plea.

"Defendant Jacob Anthony Chansley has filed a motion to vacate, set aside, or correct his sentence... For the reasons in the corresponding Memorandum Opinion issued this date, the Court hereby ORDERS that the motion be DENIED," US District Judge Royce Lamberth said in an order.

The judge also denied the government's motion for an order to disclose materials protected by the Federal Rules of Criminal Procedure.

Chansley, 34, was among the crowd that entered the US Capitol building on January 6, 2021, and proceeded to the Upper West Terrace where election certification proceedings were underway. Initially, he faced up to 20 years in prison and a period of supervised release, but in September, he pleaded guilty to obstruction of an official proceeding.

In November 2021, the US District Court for the District of Columbia sentenced Chansley to 41 months in prison.

In a Memorandum Opinion on Thursday, Lamberth called Chansley "the face of the riot" at the US Capitol on January 6. He also noted that Chansley "is now face challenging the prosecutions" of the criminal conduct that occurred that day.

"The Court concludes that Mr. Chansley's motion and the record in his case do not show his entitlement to relief. No evidentiary hearing is warranted, see 28 U.S.C. § 2255(b), and the Court will DENY Mr. Chansley's motion," the judge said.

On January 6, 2021, a group of Trump supporters entered the Capitol to protest lawmakers certifying the 2020 election results. Trump claimed the results in several US states were invalid due to election and voter fraud, which robbed him of victory.

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US 'Very Close' to New Funding Deal With Marshall Islands Before Sept. 30 - Envoy

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is very close to reaching a new funding agreement with the Marshall Islands that can be approved by Congress before the end of the current fiscal year on September 30, Presidential Envoy Joseph Yun said on Thursday.

"We are very close to an agreement with the Republic of the Marshall Islands," Yun told a meeting at the Heritage Foundation. "I am hopeful."

The Biden administration was currently in negotiations with the Marshall Islands, Palau, and Micronesia for a renewed \$7.1 billion package of US financial support to the three island nations over the next 20 years, of which \$6.5 billion would go to social and economic development, Yun explained.

"The current funding arrangement ends at the end of September ...[and] we do want the funding not to stop. It is very important that we get this done within this fiscal year," he said.

The funding for economic aid, education, health care, infrastructure, and other issues would work out to about \$100 million per year, Yun said.

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US Doubles Domestic Production of 155mm Artillery Munitions - Former Pentagon Official

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States has doubled the domestic production of 155mm artillery shells and will triple it over the course of the next 12 to 18 months, former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl said during an event hosted by the Aspen Institute.

"[W]e have already doubled the domestic production of 155-millimeter ammunition. We will double and triple it over the course of the next 12 to 18 months," Kahl said on Thursday.

Kahl pointed out that the United States over multiple administrations has overinvested in platforms and systems and underinvested in munitions production.

"It's also the case that the Ukrainians are spending artillery munitions at a rate that our services would never intend to expand, you know, 90,000 rounds of 155-millimeter ammunition a month in steady state conditions, and when you go on the counteroffensive that goes up to three acts, it's just not a scenario that we planned against and were resourced against," Kahl added.

Earlier in July, the United States announced its decision to send cluster munitions to Ukraine so as not to reduce the supply of artillery shells to Kiev while US industry ramps up output against the backdrop of low stockpiles among NATO members.

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US Still Morally Legally Bound For Health Issues from Pacific H-Bomb Tests - Envoy

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States still has a moral obligation to support health care, clean-up efforts and environmental restoration across the islands of the Central Pacific where it carried out more than three score nuclear tests after World War II and further

compensation is still being discussed, US Presidential Envoy Joseph Yun said on Thursday. "We have tested 67 nuclear devices between the late 1940s and the late 1950s," Yun told a meeting at the Heritage Foundation. "Radiation, I believe, is still there. Damages, I believe, are still there. And I believe there are lingering health effects too. I also believe we have a legal responsibility as well for what we did."

Further, US compensation for the health problems and environmental damage caused by the tests are currently being negotiated as part of the current compact talks with the Marshall Islands, Yun noted.

"That is part of the compact package that we have discussed with the Marshall Islands," he said.

Between 1946 and 1958, the United States conducted 67 nuclear tests including many ultra-powerful thermonuclear ones in the Marshall Islands. Some 23 of the tests were carried out at Bikini Atoll, and 44 near Enewetak Atoll, but the radioactive fallout from them spread throughout the island chain.

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Afghan Resistance Leader Says US Diverted Attention From Afghanistan to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) - The United States diverted its attention from Afghanistan to Ukraine and other places after the Taliban takeover in 2021 just like it did after September 11 when it reallocated resources to invade Iraq, National Resistance Front (NRF) of Afghanistan Leader Ahmad Massoud said during a virtual panel hosted by the Aspen Institute.

"Unfortunately, once again, the attention from Afghanistan has been diverted to Ukraine and different areas," Massoud said on Thursday.

Massoud compared the issue to the United States diverting most of its attention to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 after toppling the Taliban in Afghanistan following the events of September 11, 2001.

The Afghan resistance leader said they feel betrayed and left alone after the United States' chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.

Afghanistan, under the control of the Taliban, is now a safe haven for many terrorist groups that are "active," Massoud added.

The NRF is a military alliance of former Northern Alliance members and other anti-Taliban figures founded by Massoud, the son of legendary mujahideen commander Ahmad Shah Massoud.

After Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's administration agreed to the Doha pact, Massoud began building up forces and by the summer of 2021 had assembled a coalition of militias in northern Afghanistan that he referred to as the "Second Resistance."

On October 12, 2021, about two months after the Taliban retook power, the NRF issued an official declaration condemning the new government in Kabul and denouncing Ghani for fleeing the country in a "national betrayal."

The NRF a month later registered as an official foreign lobbying group in the United States.

However, the Biden administration has so far refused to entertain demands by some US lawmakers to recognize the NRF as the legitimate government of Afghanistan. The Taliban, for their part, have said any US support for the NRF would constitute a breach of the 2020 Doha agreement.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 21 (Sputnik) -

GRAIN EXPORTS AGREEMENT

- * Members of the UN Security Council will meet on July 21 to talk about the aftermath of Russia's decision not to extend the Black Sea Grain Initiative, the U Mission to the United Nations announced on Thursday.
- * The United Nations delegation remains at the Istanbul-based Joint Coordination Center for the grain exports agreement after the departure of Russia and is available for consultations, Ismini Palla from the office of the UN Coordinator for the Black Sea Grain Initiative told Sputnik.
- * The statement of the Russian Defense Ministry on tankers and unsafe zones in the Black Sea is connected with the termination of the grain exports agreement, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.
- * The Istanbul-based JCC has completed its work, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

WESTERN MILITARY SUPPORT FOR UKRAINE

- * The United States will provide an additional aid package to Ukraine in the coming days, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.
- * The cluster munitions that the United States provided to Ukraine have already been deployed in the field, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.
- * The EU foreign ministers have failed to agree on a new defense package for Ukraine and they will discuss this issue against in August, EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell said.

NEW US SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- * The latest sanctions against Russia over Ukraine are not final as Washington will continue to explore more designations, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.
- * The US Department of State announced Thursday that it was imposing sanctions on additional Russian individuals and entities, including eight senior government officials, according to a factsheet.
- * The United States has imposed new sanctions on Kalashnikov Concern and its General Director Vladimir Lepin, the State Department said.
- * The United States has imposed sanctions on Sakhalin Shipping Company, its affiliated

companies and 14 vessels as part of a new package of restrictive economic measures against Russia, the US Treasury Department said.

* The United States has targeted Rosatom's subsidiaries AEM Propulsion and NPO KIS in its latest round of sanctions, the State Department said.

* The United States has imposed sanctions on Petersburg Social Commercial Bank, Locko Bank, and Unistream Commercial Bank as part of new economic measures against Russia, the Treasury Department said.

PROTESTS IN BAGHDAD AGAINST QURAN BURNING IN SWEDEN

* Hundreds of Iraqi citizens gathered in the center of Baghdad on Thursday to protest against acts of Quran burning in Sweden, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

* Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani has demanded that the Swedish ambassador in Baghdad leave the country because of the Swedish government's repeated authorizations for the Quran burning, the Iraqi prime minister's office said.

* The United States condemns the attack on the embassy of Sweden in Iraq and has offered support support to Swedish officials in the aftermath of the incident, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said.

UKRAINE CONFLICT

* Navigation in the areas of the northeastern part of the Black Sea and the Kerch-Yenikale Strait is prohibited as dangerous since Thursday, and the relevant navigation information has already been made public, the Ukrainian Defense Ministry announced.

* The air defense systems took down a drone in the central part of Crimea, there were no casualties and no damage, Crimean leader Sergey Aksenov said.

* Ukraine has lost more than 210 military in the Donetsk area over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* The Russian military inflicted new retaliation strikes on Thursday night on the areas of production and storage of unmanned boats of Ukraine military, the Defense Ministry said.

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Realtors Say Real Estate Prices in US Capital Area to Rise Modestly, Demand to Remain Soft

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Real estate prices in Washington and the surrounding areas of the US capital would increase modestly in the near future, accompanied by soft demand and a decline in unit sales, US realtors told Sputnik.

"Prices will remain stable with general expectations of modest rises. This reflects the conflicting effects of affordability and lessening demand with continuing tight availability of homes and a resilient labor market," Northern Virginia Association of Realtors (NVAR) Communications and Public Affairs Manager Christopher Barranco told Sputnik.

Barranco said a price increase from 1% to 2% with notable variances in specific market segments should be expected.

"Well-priced units will still sell quickly at or near the original list price," Barranco said.

At the same time, demand is expected to remain soft as some households are priced out of the market due to elevated mortgage rates and others recover from the shock of missing out on 3% - or lower - 30-year fixed rates, Barranco said.

"Unit sales will decline, on average, though the drop-off will not be as sharp as what we saw in the third quarter of 2022. These unit sales declines will impact Realtor and broker revenues," Barranco said.

On average, unit sales for 2023 would decline in the 10% to 15% range compared to 2022, he also said.

Speaking of the general situation on the market, Barranco said the prices have remained high because inventory is very low and there still is much demand from buyers.

"Many sellers are not looking to sell because mortgage rates are higher than they were the past few years. Due to limited inventory and high demand, sellers have the upper hand, and their homes are holding in value. Prices are, therefore, not dropping, and buyers have to meet sellers' prices if they want to purchase a home," he said.

The Greater Capital Area Association of Realtors said in its survey, shared with Sputnik, that the median sold price for residential properties in Washington and its neighborhoods for June was \$625,000, representing a decrease of 0.2% compared to last month and a decrease of 1.6% from June 2022.

"The average days on market for units sold in June was 21 days, 2% below the five-year June average of 21 days. There was a 12% month over month decrease in new contract activity with 1,633 New Pendings," it said.

Earlier on Thursday, the National Association of Realtors (NAR) said in a statement that existing-home sales dropped 3.3% in June to a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 4.16 million.

"At \$410,200, the median existing-home sales price for June was the second-highest price ever recorded - since January 1999 when NAR began tracking the data - and 0.9% less than the all-time high from one year ago of \$413,800."

The monthly median sales price exceeded \$400,000 for the third time after June 2022 and May 2022, when it was \$408,600, the statement added.

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US Embassy in Tonga Not Set Up to Counter Chinese Influence - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is opening an embassy on the island nation of Tonga but not in an attempt to counter Chinese influence, a US State Department official said on Thursday.

"On Tonga, our embassy is not being set up to counter China," the State Department official told reporters.

However, strategic competition is a reality in the Indo-Pacific region, the official also said.

The US presence in Tonga will expand in the future, but the expansion is not linked to China's activities there, the official added.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is set to visit Tonga later this month as part of a trip to the region, which also includes stops in Australia and New Zealand.

Blinken will dedicate the new US Embassy in Nuku'alofa and will hold talks with Tongan officials, according to the State Department.

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China-Linked Hackers Accessed Email Account of US Ambassador Burns - Reports
(Updates with details in paras 4,5)

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Chinese-linked hackers allegedly accessed the email account of US Ambassador in Beijing Nicholas Burns, compromising hundreds of thousands of government emails, the Wall Street Journal reported on Thursday.

The report said US Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Daniel Kritenbrink was also allegedly hacked in the cyber attack.

The alleged spying campaign that resulted in the hacking of Burns' email account was disclosed last week.

According to the report, certain unclassified emails targeted in the cyber intrusion may have provided hackers information about several visits to China by US officials and international conversations about US policies with China.

The report said Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his inner circle of top advisers were not targeted during the hacking event, it was limited to a small group of senior US officials responsible for managing the US-China relationship.

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US Senate Rejects NDAA Amendment to Limit Aid to Ukraine Unless NATO Allies Raise Spending

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday rejected an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to limit the United States' aid to Ukraine until other NATO allies increase their defense spending.

Senators rejected the measure in a vote of 13 in favor and 71 opposed.

The amendment, backed by Senator Mike Lee, limits US aid to Ukraine to 2% of authorized funds until all NATO member countries meet the alliance's standard of spending 2% of GDP on defense.

"Our NATO allies need to honor their commitment to spend 2% of GDP on defense," Lee said in a statement. "My amendment would incentivize NATO members to do what they said they'd do."

The Senate has been considering a number of amendments to the NDAA in recent days, after the House passed their version of the \$886 billion defense policy bill earlier this month.

Congress will need to reconcile their versions of the bill prior to finalization by US President Joe Biden, who has broadly expressed support for passing the legislation.

The Senate leadership has expressed a desire to pass the bill before lawmakers depart for their August recess.

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UN Chief Calls on States to Reduce Military Spending in Line With New Agenda for Peace

UNITED NATIONS, July 20 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday urged member states to reduce military spending as per the United Nations strategy New Agenda for Peace.

"The New Agenda for Peace also calls on member states to reduce military spending and ban inhumane and indiscriminate weapons," Guterres said during a briefing.

The United Nations has said the New Agenda for Peace was formulated to address a number of challenges facing the world and focuses on the underlying drivers and influencing parties that drive conflict in order to achieve peace.

Global military expenditure increased by 3.7 % in 2022 and reached a new record high of \$2,240 billion, with the three largest spenders being the United States, China and Russia, according to data by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.

The United States remains the world's biggest military spender, with its military expenditure reaching \$877 billion last year, which is 39% of total global military spending.

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UN Chief: There is Lack of Consent About How International Law Applies in Cyberspace

UNITED NATIONS, July 20 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Thursday urged member states to reduce military spending as per the United Nations strategy New Agenda for Peace.

"The New Agenda for Peace also calls on member states to reduce military spending and ban inhumane and indiscriminate weapons," Guterres said.

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China-Linked Hackers Accessed Email Account of US Ambassador Burns - Reports

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The alleged spying campaign that resulted in the hacking of Burns' email account was disclosed last week.

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White House'S Kirby On F-16s For Ukraine: We'll Get There, Probably By End Of Year

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday when commenting on the F-16s for Ukraine that Washington "will get there," and it will likely happen before the end of the year.

"Now, with F-16s, we'll get there, probably towards the end of the year," Kirby said in an interview with Fox News. "But it's not our assessment that the F-16s alone would be enough to turn the tide here. What they really need more than anything of all those four As is artillery. And that's why the President made a difficult decision to provide cluster munitions as a bridging solution as we build up our production capacity of normal conventional artillery rounds."

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US, EU Hold 'Candid Talks' on Meeting October Deadline on Steel, Aluminum Accord - USTR

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States and Europe discussed on Thursday steps needed to fulfill their commitments to an accord on steel and aluminum ahead of its October deadline, the Office of the US Trade Representative (USTR) said Thursday.

US Trade Representative Katherine Tai met with European Commission Executive Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis at the USTR office in Washington to appraise each other on the progress made towards the accord, which seeks to address excess capacity in global steel and aluminum, and the threat from those market distortions to workers, producers and the climate.

"Today's meeting largely focused on the negotiations related to the Global Arrangement on Sustainable Steel and Aluminum. Ambassador Tai and Executive Vice President Dombrovskis had a direct and candid exchange about the work that must be completed in order to fulfill the previously agreed deadline of October 2023," the USTR said in a statement.

Tai stressed the importance of both sides generating proposals that would adequately address concerns on carbon intensity and non-market excess capacity in the two metals, the statement said.

"Ambassador Tai underscored that, with the October deadline approaching, the United States and European Union need to deliver a high-standard agreement worthy of the two years that both sides will have spent in negotiations," the USTR said, adding that the outcome must be one reflecting the trust, commitment and confidence that characterizes the best of US-EU partnership.

The accord, among others, stipulates that the EU will suspend additional duties imposed on US steel and aluminum, and that the United States and the EU suspend disputes they have initiated against each other with regard to those.

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Kirby Says White House Was Aware of Kissinger's Trip to China, Seeks Similar Connections

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The White House was aware of former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's trip to China for talks with the country's leadership and wishes it were able to establish the same sort of diplomatic connections, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We did know he was going, and we look forward to hearing from Secretary Kissinger when he returns," Kirby said during a press briefing, when asked about Kissinger's trip. "It's unfortunate that a private citizen can meet with the defense minister and have a communication and the United States can't."

The US is attempting to resolve the lack of communication and resume military-to-military lines, Kirby said.

Kissinger, who helped normalize US-China relations under the Nixon administration, is on a private trip to China to better understand the mindset of Chinese leadership, regional media reported on Thursday.

Kissinger has met with Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu and Chinese President Xi Jinping as part of his visit.

Xi reportedly noted that China will never forget Kissinger's contributions to US-China relations and expressed hope that he could play a constructive role in mending current ties.

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Kirby Confirms US Cluster Munitions for Ukraine Deployed in Field

(Update: adds details in paras 3-4)

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The cluster munitions that the United States provided to Ukraine have already been deployed in the field, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.

When asked whether the US-made cluster munitions have been deployed in the field, Kirby said, "Yes."

The US has received feedback from Ukraine regarding their initial use on the battlefield, Kirby said.

Ukrainians have utilized cluster munitions appropriately and effectively, according to Kirby.

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UN Chief Condemns Russian Attacks on Port Facilities in Odesa - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, July 20 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres condemns Russian attacks on port facilities in Odesa, spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"The secretary-general strongly condemns the Russian attacks against port facilities in Odesa and other Ukrainian Black Sea ports," Dujarric told a briefing.

Guterres recalls that the destruction of civilian infrastructure may constitute a violation of international humanitarian law, the spokesman added.

Early on Tuesday, Russian armed forces carried out a group retaliation strike with high-precision sea-based weapons on facilities where terrorist acts against Russia were being prepared with the use of unmanned boats, as well as the site where those boats were manufactured at a shipyard near Odesa, the Russian defense ministry said. Near Mykolaiv and Odesa, Russian forces also destroyed fuel storage facilities with a total volume of about 70,000 tonnes that provided Ukraine's military with fuel, the ministry said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that the night airstrikes on the port facilities in Odesa are retribution for Monday's deadly attack on the Crimean Bridge with the use of underwater vehicles. The attack killed a woman and a man and wounded their teenage daughter.

The Russian military continued what it said were retribution strikes early on Thursday, targeting production workshops and storage sites of unmanned boats in the Odesa region, according to the ministry.

On Wednesday, the Russian Defense Ministry also warned that it will regard all ships in the Black Sea that are sailing to Ukrainian ports as potential carriers of military cargoes starting July 20, adding that the countries under whose flags the vessels are sailing will be considered involved in the conflict on Kiev's side.

The announcement came after the UN-mediated Black Sea grain deal expired as Russia refused to extend its participation in the agreement and withdrew guarantees for safe navigation in the area, citing the UN's failure to facilitate Russia's grain and fertilizer exports under the deal.

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US Senate Advances Measure to Block Strategic Petroleum Reserve Sales to China, Russia (Updates to add details in paras 2-7)

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The US Senate advanced an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) on Thursday to ban the sale of energy products from the United States' Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) to US adversaries including China and Russia.

Senators advanced the legislation in a vote of 85 in favor and 14 opposed.

The amendment was sponsored by US Senator Ted Cruz, who backed the bipartisan measure alongside US Senator Joe Manchin.

The measure prohibits the US Energy Department from selling SPR petroleum products to any entity under the ownership or control of the Chinese Communist Party, the Russian Federation, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea or the Islamic Republic of Iran.

"We are unnecessarily and dangerously undermining our national security in any instance that we sell any part of this stockpile to the Chinese Communist Party or any company under its control," Cruz said in a statement on the measure.

The measure also requires the US Energy Department to only sell SPR petroleum products on the condition that they not be exported to any of the aforementioned countries.

The measure provides a possible waiver to the restriction, issuable by the US energy secretary in the interest of national security.

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Kirby Says Expects Additional US Aid Package for Ukraine in Coming Days

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States will provide an additional aid package to Ukraine in the coming days, White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday.

"I have every expectation that in coming days you're going to see another round of support provided to Ukraine," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Recent aid packages have been designed to fill out the "shopping list" provided by the Ukrainians, Kirby said.

The Biden administration is willing to evolve US support for Ukraine as its offensive operations evolve, Kirby added.

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US Relayed Message to N. Korea That Private Crossed Border on His Own - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) – The United States has delivered a message to North Korean counterparts that Private Travis King had crossed the border on his own and asked to provide more info about his well-being, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

"We have relayed messages to the DPRK that Private King crossed on his own, and we want him to return safely. We have also asked for more info on his well-being," Miller said during a press briefing.

The State Department has no reason to believe that King was in contact with North Korea before crossing the border, Miller added.

On Tuesday, the United Nations said that a US national has been detained by North Korea after illegally crossing the border from South Korea.

Later on Tuesday, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin confirmed the detention of a US soldier by North Korea, while the State Department said the Defense Department has reached out to their counterparts in Pyongyang regarding the incident.

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

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Kirby Confirms US Cluster Munitions for Ukraine Deployed in Field

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The cluster munitions that the United States provided to Ukraine have already been deployed in the field, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.

When asked whether the US-made cluster munitions have been deployed in the field, Kirby said, "Yes."

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New Anti-Russia Sanctions 'Not The End of It,' US Exploring More Options - White House

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The latest sanctions against Russia over Ukraine are not final as Washington will continue to explore more designations, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.

The US State and Treasury Departments on Thursday announced Russia-related sanctions against nearly 120 individuals and entities aimed at restricting Russia's access to critical materials and capabilities.

"This won't be the end of it," Kirby said. "We'll continue to explore additional sanctions as

appropriate going forward."

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No Ships From Ukrainian Ports Cleared as Part of Grain Exports Deal - UN

*UNITED NATIONS, July 20 (Sputnik) - The Joint Coordination Center in Istanbul has not cleared any ships as part of the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"There are no ships having been cleared to go," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

To be cleared, the ships needed the green light from all parties to the grain exports agreement and Russia withdrew from the Joint Coordination Center's operations, Dujarric added.

On Wednesday, the Russian Defense Ministry said that it will consider all ships in the Black Sea that are sailing to Ukrainian ports as potential military cargo carriers effective July 20.

The statement of the Russian Defense Ministry is connected with the termination of the grain exports agreement, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

The agreement expired on Monday as Russia did not extend it. Moscow has repeatedly said that the agreement's provisions pertaining to Russia were not fulfilled. In addition, Moscow said most of the grain ended up in the countries of the collective West and only a small portion ended up in countries of the Global South facing food scarcity.

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Russian Embassy Says Canada's New Round of Sanctions 'Laughable'

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - New sanctions targeting Russia's economy and culture represent another round of absurd actions by Canada who appear capable of nothing else, Moscow's embassy in Ottawa said on Thursday.

Canada's latest round of Russia-related sanctions, unveiled earlier in the day, target the country's financial and military sectors as well as cultural icons and institutions.

"Yet another laughable round of pseudo sanctions... is this all you are capable of?" the embassy said on Twitter, retweeting a post from Foreign Policy CAN.

Canada said it was imposing sanctions on 39 individuals and 25 entities, including Tinkoff Bank, Russia's card payment system MIR and the country's major mobile network operators.

Sanctions notably targeted Russia's cultural sector - filmmakers, actors, singers, and museums - the private military company (PMC) Wagner, the nuclear, financial, telecoms, military, and nuclear sectors.

Since 2014, Canada has imposed sanctions on more than 2,600 individuals and entities in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova for allegedly facilitating Russia's special operation in

Ukraine.

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US Lawmakers Release FBI Form Alleging Biden Family Bribery Scheme in Ukraine - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US Senator Chuck Grassley and US Congressman James Comer on Thursday released an FBI record containing allegations of a bribery scheme involving then-Vice President Joe Biden's family and Ukraine.

The lawmakers said they obtained the partially redacted record via legally protected disclosures by Justice Department whistle-blowers.

"For the better part of a year, I've been pushing the Justice Department and FBI to provide details on its handling of very significant allegations from a trusted FBI informant implicating then-Vice President Biden in a criminal bribery scheme. While the FBI sought to obfuscate and redact, the American people can now read this document for themselves," Grassley said in the statement.

The FBI record, known as an FD-1023, contains allegations from a confidential human source (CHS) that lawmakers have previously touted as highly trusted.

The source's reporting alleges that executives with the Ukrainian energy company Burisma hired Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, to protect the businessmen through his father. Burisma was seeking to start operations in the United States, but was facing a corruption probe by then-Prosecutor General of Ukraine Viktor Shokin.

"Don't worry Hunter will take care of all of those issues through his dad," Burisma executive Mykola Zlochevsky purportedly told the source, who expressed concerns about the situation.

Zlochevsky also purportedly told the source that Burisma had to pay \$5 million to both Hunter and Joe Biden as part of the arrangement.

Following Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 US presidential election, Zlochevsky told the source that he was not happy about the election outcome. When asked about concerns regarding the deal with the Bidens, Zlochevsky said he was "pushed to pay" the family, according to the source.

However, Zlochevsky expressed confidence that nobody would find out about the deal, since Shokin had already been fired as chief prosecutor, the source said.

Zlochevsky also claimed that he had text messages and recordings to prove that he was coerced into paying the Bidens to get Shokin fired, the source said.

Moreover, Zlochevsky claimed it would take investigators years to trace the records of payment to the Bidens, having not sent funds directly to the "big guy," which the source said he understood to mean Joe Biden.

"The FBI's Biden Bribery Record tracks closely with the evidence uncovered by the Oversight Committee's Biden family influence peddling investigation," Comer said in the statement.

Internal Revenue Service whistle-blowers told the committee that they had never been made aware of the FBI record during their own investigation into the Biden family's conduct, despite

possibly having corroborating evidence, Comer added.

Joe Biden maintains that he and Hunter Biden never spoke about the latter's foreign business dealings.

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US Senate Advances Measure to Block Strategic Petroleum Reserve Sales to China, Russia

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The US Senate advanced an amendment to the Fiscal Year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) on Thursday to ban the sale of energy products from the United States' Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) to US adversaries including China and Russia.

Senators passed the 60 vote threshold needed to advance the amendment, although voting continues.

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Helicopter Pilot Dies in Canada While Fighting Wildfires - Emergency Preparedness Minister

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The Canadian Minister for Emergency Preparedness Bill Blair said on Thursday that a helicopter pilot had perished while fighting wildfires in the province of Alberta.

"Firefighters know the risks they face in the line of duty, but they serve our communities selflessly in spite of them. The loss of a helicopter pilot supporting firefighting effort in Alberta is a tragedy. His memory will be cherished and his sacrifices will not be forgotten," Blair said via Twitter.

Earlier, Canadian media reported, citing Transportation Safety Board (TSB) spokesperson Chris Krepski, that a helicopter involved in a firefighting operation in Alberta had crashed on Wednesday in the northwestern part of the province, killing the one individual on board.

Two TSB investigators are reportedly en-route to the crash site located in a marshy area 87 miles from Peace River, to collect information and assess the incident.

There are currently 117 active wildfires in Alberta of whom 17 are out of control, according to the Alberta Wildfire Status Dashboard. The province has recorded 870 fires since the beginning of the year.

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US Claims Russia May Attack Civilian Ships to Hide Its Own Destructive Actions - Antonov

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Washington's claims that Russia is preparing attacks on civilian ships in the Black sea is a falsification meant to disguise their own destructive activities, Moscow's Ambassador to the United States Anatoly Antonov said on Thursday.

On Wednesday, White House National Security Council spokesperson Adam Hodge claimed Russia may carry out attacks against civilian shipping in the Black Sea. He also said that US officials have information indicating Russia laid additional sea mines in the approaches to Ukrainian ports.

"Attempts to attribute to Russia the preparation of certain attacks on civilian ships are pure falsification," Antonov said. "We regard the US statements as a desire to disguise by any means its own destructive activities aimed at the actual sabotage of the implementation of the interrelated Istanbul agreements, discourage representatives of the Global South from cooperation with Russia, and to undermine confidence in our country, which, not in words but in deeds, helps developing countries with the supply of food and fertilizers, including on a gratuitous basis."

The ambassador said the US claims completely contradict Russia's approaches.

"Unlike the American authorities, who continue to turn a blind eye to the terrorist attacks of their charges in Kiev, we have always been at the forefront of the fight against such crimes," he said.

The US administration, Antonov added, is becoming more active with such insinuations on the eve of major international forums.

"And now a new round of false propaganda precedes the second Russia-Africa summit scheduled for the end of July in St. Petersburg and the upcoming meeting of the BRICS heads of state in August," he explained.

On Wednesday, the Russian Defense Ministry said that it will consider all ships in the Black Sea that are sailing to Ukrainian ports as potential military cargo carriers starting July 20, adding that flags of countries of such vessels will be considered involved in the conflict on Kiev's side.

The statement of the Russian Defense Ministry on tankers and unsafe zones in the Black Sea is connected with the termination of the grain deal, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

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 been repeatedly critical of the fact that the deal's provisions pertaining to Russia had not been fulfilled.

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US Army Chief Says Several Thousands More Americans Will Be Recruited in 2023

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The US Army is planning to recruit several thousand more soldiers in 2023 than last year as it grapples with low recruitment rates, US Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said on Thursday.

"We are going to recruit more young Americans into the Army than we did last year, I think by several thousand. We're going to do better than we did last year and that's positive," Wormuth said during an event hosted by the Aspen Institute.

According to Wormuth, the US Army this year will do "significantly" better than last year when the department could recruit 45,000 only.

In May, Wormuth stated that the US Army will fall short of its "ambitious" goal of 65,000 new recruits this year.

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US Army Secretary Says Not Sure if Soldier Who Defected to N. Korea to Face Jail Time

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said on Thursday that it remains to be seen whether the soldier who defected to North Korea will face a jail term, but he will definitely face additional disciplinary consequences in the United States.

"He absolutely would have faced additional consequences. Whether there would be jail time, I think, remains to be seen, but he would have certainly come before the United States Army to handle his misconduct," Wormuth said during an event hosted by the Aspen Institute.

She added that, so far, all attempts to contact North Korean counterparts about the escaped American soldier were unsuccessful.

Wormuth pointed out that it remains unclear why the soldier decided to go on a tour instead of flying back to the United States after being released from a South Korean prison.

On Tuesday, the United Nations said that a US national has been detained by North Korea after illegally crossing the border from South Korea.

Later on Tuesday, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin confirmed the detention of a US soldier by North Korea, while the State Department said the Defense Department has reached out to their counterparts in Pyongyang regarding the incident.

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

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US, UK Launch New Dialogue to Boost Economic Sanctions Policies - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States and the United Kingdom have held the first meeting of a new dialogue process to strengthen their joint use of economic sanctions against targeted countries, individuals and entities around the world, the US Department of

State announced in a press release on Thursday.

"[T]he US Department of State hosted a senior UK government delegation for the inaugural US-UK Strategic Sanctions Dialogue in Washington, DC on July 19," the release said.

The dialogue followed up on the two nations' 2023 Atlantic declaration commitment to strengthen joint cooperation on sanctions strategy, targeting and enforcement, by bringing together departments and agencies from both countries to discuss priorities across geographic and thematic sanctions regimes, the release said.

The United States, its allies and partners have imposed "unprecedented costs" on Russia for its special military operation in Ukraine, the release also said.

"Since the start of the war, we have designated over 2,500 individuals and entities, blocking billions of dollars in assets. Sanctions and export controls are starving Russia's military of key components and technology," the release added.

The United States and the United Kingdom were intensifying their coordination on United Nations and autonomous sanctions policies including efforts to promote accountability for human rights violations and abuses, counter terrorism and target cyber-criminal networks as well as address the situations in Sudan, Burma and Iran, according to the release.

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White Supremacist Violence Likely Has Not Plateaued – US Homeland Security Secretary

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) – US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said on Thursday that violence driven by white supremacist ideology likely has not plateaued.

"I don't think we have the confidence to say that it has plateaued and...there's a very important point to be made because while we speak of it in the domestic context, it is an international phenomenon," Mayorkas said at an Aspen Institute talk, in response to whether it has peaked, plateaued, or was on the rise.

Mayorkas added that his department saw "a great deal of connectivity" between individuals and small groups connecting with one another internationally.

He called the development a "convergence of homeland security and national security not just with respect to domestic violent extremism...but also with respect to cybersecurity" and many other aspects of the department's work.

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Trudeau Says Union Decision to Renew Port Strike 'Unacceptable'

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said on Thursday that he was dismayed upon learning that the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) had rejected a tentative settlement on wage increases and renewed the strikes at British

Columbian ports.

"We were all dismayed, to be honest, when we found out that a good deal that had been worked out at the table, that was agreed to both by union leadership and by the management had been suddenly rejected, and they were back in a strike position, and this was unacceptable," Trudeau said during a media scrum.

Trudeau said that workers, families, and businesses are suffering the consequences of the significantly lengthy strike on a nationwide scale, noting that it is becoming a major problem for those who operate on import-based industries, such as factories and others who work in jobs connecting the world.

The prime minister further noted that he believes the best deals are always found at the bargaining table, nonetheless adding that the situation could not continue.

On Tuesday, ILWU voted down the terms of a settlement to end the strike in BC ports agreed on July 13 after thirteen days of disruption, saying that the British Columbia Maritime Employers Association (BCMEA) affiliated companies had made record profits without addressing the rising living cost of their employees.

ILWU said that the recommendations made by the mediators failed to protect current and future jobs as the terms implementation timeline of four years were too long considering the current uncertainties in global financial markets.

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George Floyd Killer Derek Chauvin Will Appeal Case to US Supreme Court - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Derek Chauvin, the former Minneapolis police officer convicted of killing George Floyd, will attempt to appeal his conviction to the US Supreme Court, CNN reported, citing Chauvin's attorney.

Chauvin will petition the US Supreme Court and request they review his state-level murder conviction, attorney Gregory Erickson was reported as saying on Wednesday.

On Tuesday, the Minnesota Supreme Court denied Chauvin's request to consider his appeal. Chauvin is attempting to overturn the 2021 murder and manslaughter convictions based on a number of arguments, including that the state court deprived Chauvin of his right to a fair trial by refusing to change venues on the grounds of widespread negative publicity.

Following the state conviction and sentence of more than 22 years in prison, Chauvin also pleaded guilty to federal civil rights charges, for which he was given a 21-year concurrent sentence.

The murder of George Floyd in May 2020 sparked protests and riots across the United States, with a number of international demonstrations linked to the broader Black Lives Matter movement held as well.

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

Nominee for NSA Director Says China 'Most Capable Competitor' to US in Cyberspace

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - China is the "most capable competitor" to the United States in cyberspace, President Joe Biden's nominee to head the National Security Agency (NSA) and the Central Security Service at the US Cyber Command, Lt. Gen Timothy Haugh, said on Thursday.

"The most capable competitor that we have in cyber space is the PRC [People's Republic of China]. They use cyber to gain political, economic and military advantage," Haugh said during his confirmation hearing at the US Senate Armed Services Committee.

Haugh pointed out that China is focused on Artificial Intelligence, which allows Beijing to get control of information and exert dominance.

"As they consider exporting those technologies, as it has done in the past with the Great Firewall technology, it is an area from a threat perspective that we should continue to inform and understand what that means to any nation they would be considering partnering with, and the implications of that technology on that society," he said.

Haugh also said China has been stealing intellectual property for decades, adding that the theft has been persistent and is expected to continue.

Haugh vowed that the NSA and the US Cyber Command will continue their efforts to reduce the threat posed by China, especially by cooperating with the private sector.

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US Deeply Concerned by Situation in Black Sea - White House

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is deeply concerned by the situation in the Black Sea, Principal Deputy Press Secretary Olivia Dalton told reporters on Thursday.

"We are deeply concerned about what we are seeing in the Black Sea right now," Dalton said. "We are now seeing three straight days of Russia's missile and drone attacks on port cities on the Black Sea that are part of the continued attack on Ukraine in an effort to essentially reinstate its blockade of the Ukrainian Black Sea ports."

On Wednesday, the Russian Defense Ministry said that it will consider all ships in the Black Sea that are sailing to Ukrainian ports as potential military cargo carriers starting July 20, adding that flags of countries of such vessels will be considered involved in the conflict on Kiev's side.

The statement of the Russian Defense Ministry on tankers and unsafe zones in the Black Sea is connected with the termination of the grain deal, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday.

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 been repeatedly critical of the fact that the deal's provisions pertaining to Russia

had not been fulfilled.

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Encounters on US Southern Border Dropped 65% After Title 42 - Homeland Security Secretary

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas said Thursday that there has been about a 65% drop in migrants at the southern border since the end of Title 42.

"We have seen since the end of Title 42 an approximately 65% drop in the number of individuals we encounter at the southern border," Mayorkas said at an Aspen Institute talk.

He attributed the decrease to a two-pronged approach: building legal pathways for people seeking humanitarian relief - speeding up refugee processing, establishing family reunification programs, using discretionary authority with humanitarian parole - and disincentivizing people from journeying to the southern border by raising the evidentiary threshold for making an asylum claim there.

At the same time, Mayorkas conceded there was a unanimous consensus that system was "fundamentally broken" while no one could agree upon a solution. He also noted that there was an immigration backlog of more than 2 million cases.

The Title 42 public health order was enacted by the Trump administration in March 2020 under the premise of COVID-19 precautions. It enabled border control to immediately deport people illegally entering on the grounds of preventing the spread of covid.

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Sales of Pre-Owned US Homes Hit 14-Year Low as Prices Near Record Highs - Realtors

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Sales of pre-owned homes in the United States hit 14-year lows last month as demand continued to outstrip supply, sending prices to near-record highs, the National Association of Realtors said Thursday.

"There are simply not enough homes for sale," Lawrence Yun, chief economist at the association, said in a commentary accompanying June sales numbers for existing US homes. "The market can easily absorb a doubling of inventory."

Some 4.16 million homes were resold in June, 3.3% from May. Compared with June of last year, that was almost 19% lower and the slowest since June 2009, according to records maintained by the association.

Minus transactions, some 1.08 million homes were available for resale at the end of June, nearly 14% less than in June 2022. At the current pace of sales, that represents a 3.1-month supply. The realtors association considers a six-month supply as balanced between buyer and seller.

The tight supply is driving home prices higher. The median price of an existing home sold in June was \$410,200, the second-highest price ever recorded by realtors.

"Home sales fell, but home prices have held firm in most parts of the country," Yun said.

"Limited supply is still leading to multiple-offer situations, with one-third of homes getting sold above the list price in the latest month."

New home construction fell 8% last month as builders cooled off after rapidly expanding work in May to meet demand among first-time buyers, government data showed Wednesday.

Mortgage rates are also weighing heavily on buying decisions. Mortgage rates hung in the mid-6 % range between April and mid-May and then shot up over 7% at the very end of May. Rates stayed in the 7% range for all of June, as home prices rose.

Realtors say first-time buyers are struggling the most, with a 26% drop in their buying share in June and 30% from a year ago.

Buyers also increasingly use cash to win over sellers and fend off competition.

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US to Change Army Structure to Prepare for Potential War With China or Russia - Army Chief

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States Army is planning to change its structure to get ready for a potential war with China or with Russia, Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said on Thursday.

"We are going to be making some changes to the Army force structure and there are really two reasons for that. The first reason is we've got to bring in new capabilities to get ready for you know, again, a potential war with China or with Russia," Wormuth said during an event hosted by the Aspen Institute.

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Land Surface Burnt by Canada's Wildfires Surpasses Historic Record - Environment Minister

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The total surface of land lost to the 2023 wildfire season in Canada has exceeded the country's historical record, surpassing ten times the national average, Minister of Environment Steven Guilbeault said on Thursday.

"Eleven million hectares have burned so far this year, which is ten times the national average. Canada has now surpassed its historic record for total area burnt in one season," Guilbeault said in an update on the situation with wildfires.

The minister also said 885 active wildfires are burning across Canada, of which 600 are said to be out of control.

Guilbeault expressed gratitude to the 1779 firefighters from around the world who came to Canada to help fight the wildfires, including from the United States, Australia, Chile, Costa Rica,

Mexico, Portugal, South Africa, and South Korea. More firefighters are expected to arrive in Canada in the coming days.

The 2023 wildfire season in Canada has been declared to be the worst on record. The country has recorded 4,292 fires nationwide and two firefighters have died in the course of their duties.

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Canada Imposes Russia-Related Sanctions on 39 Individuals, 25 Entities - Global Affairs (Updates with more details, background in paras 6-10)

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Canada is announcing a new batch of Russia-related sanctions on 39 individuals and 25 entities, including Tinkoff Bank, Russia's card payment system MIR and its major mobile network operators, Global Affairs said on Thursday.

"The Honorable Melanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced that Canada is imposing sanctions against 20 individuals and 21 entities connected to Russia's military-industrial complex and against 19 individuals and 4 entities in the Russian cultural and education sectors. These sanctions are part of the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations and target persons who are complicit in Russia's ongoing violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," the ministry said in a statement.

The list of the sanctioned entities includes mobile network providers TELE2, MTS, Megafon and Beeline; as well as the payment systems Yandex Pay and MIR Card, the statement said.

Canada also sanctioned the Russian Culture Ministry and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, as well as their heads, Olga Lyubimova and Valery Falkov, respectively, the statement said.

In the cultural sector, Canada imposed sanctions on Oscar-winning filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov and his project Besogon, Hermitage Museum Director Mikhail Piotrovsky, singer Phillip Kirkorov, music producer Iosif Prigozhin and rapper Timati, among others, the statement said.

Canada's decision to sanctions renown filmmakers, singers, actor, and museums was made due to their support to Moscow's alleged attempts at the so-called "Russification" of Ukrainian culture, notably through music, concerts, and cultural events, the statement said.

Sanctions also targeted individuals and entities related to private military company (PMC) Wagner, Russia's nuclear energy sector and those involved in the development, production, and supply of the Orlan-10 unnamed aerial vehicle, the statement said.

Canada also imposed a prohibition to the import and export of arms and their related material to or from Russia, a separate statement said.

Exceptions have been made for non-lethal military equipment, and Canadian military members who are fulfilling their official duties in the country, the statement added.

Since 2014, Canada has imposed sanctions on more than 2,600 individuals and entities in Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Moldova who are alleged to have facilitated the violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

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US Issues Sanctions to Hinder Completion of Russian Energy Projects - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States issued a new package of sanctions designed to disrupt Russia's ability to complete certain ongoing energy projects, the State Department said on Thursday.

"The Department of State is designating multiple entities involved in expanding Russia's ability to finish construction of key future energy projects, as well as entities engaged in exploratory drilling throughout Russia," the State Department said in a press release.

In light of this US effort, the United States designated AO Nipigazpererabotka (Nipigaz) and its subsidiaries Obshestvo S Ogranichennoj Otvetstvennostyu Nipigaz IT and Obshestvo S Ogranichennoj Otvetstvennostyu Nipigaz Aktiv, according to the release.

Moreover, the United States also designated Burovaya Kompaniya Eurasia Limited Liability Company (BKE) and Joint Stock Company Siberian Service Company (Siberian Service Company) for their roles in Russian drilling.

The US State and Treasury Departments on Thursday announced Russia-related sanctions against nearly 120 individuals and entities aimed at restricting Russia's access to critical materials and capabilities.

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US Federal Reserve Says Launched 'FedNow' Instant Payment Service for Banks, Credit Unions

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve Board of Governors said in a statement on Thursday that they have officially launched its FedNow instant payment service, which will initially be open to banks and credit unions as the system expands.

"The Federal Reserve on Thursday announced that its new system for instant payments, the FedNow Service, is now live. Banks and credit unions of all sizes can sign up and use this tool to instantly transfer money for their customers, any time of the day, on any day of the year," the statement said.

As more banks adopt the system, more businesses and individuals will be able to instantly access funds or receive a paycheck, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said in the statement.

The service aims to make everyday payments faster and more convenient in the coming years, Powell said.

The system will start with 35 early-adopting banks and credit unions, as well as the US Treasury Department's Bureau of Fiscal Service, having instant payment capabilities through the service, the statement said.

Moreover, 16 service providers are prepared to support payment processing for banks and credit unions, the statement said.

In the future, bank and credit union customers that sign up for the service should be able to use their financial institutions' own apps and websites to securely send instant payments, the statement said.

The interbank payment system will operate alongside other Federal Reserve payment services, including Fedwire and FedACH, the statement added.

Initial participating financial institutions include branches of JPMorgan Chase, Wells Fargo and US Bank.

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UNSC to Meet Friday to Discuss Consequences of Russia's Termination of Grain Deal -Mission

UNITED NATIONS, July 20 (Sputnik) - Members of the United Nations Security Council will meet on Friday, July 21 to talk about the aftermath of Russia's termination of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, the UK Mission to the UN announced on Thursday.

"The UN Security Council will meet tomorrow at 10AM for a briefing on Ukraine. The Council will discuss the humanitarian consequences of Russia's interruption of the Black Sea Grain Initiative," the UK mission wrote on its Twitter profile.

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US Sanctions 8 Senior Russian Officials – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) – The US Department of State announced Thursday that it was imposing sanctions on additional Russian individuals and entities, including eight senior government officials, according to a factsheet.

The eight officials include Deputy Minister of Economic Development Ilya Torosov; Deputy Minister of Economic Development Aleksey Khersontsev; Deputy Minister of Industry and Trade Vasiliy Osmakov; Deputy Minister of Energy Pavel Snikkars; Deputy Finance Minister Leonid Gornin; Deputy Minister of Energy Pavel Sorokin; Federal Security Service First Deputy Director Sergey Korolev; and Smolensk Governor Vasiliy Anokhin.

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US Imposes New Sanctions On Kalashnikov Concern, Its General Director Lepin - State Dept

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed new sanctions on Kalashnikov Concern and its General Director Vladimir Lepin, the State Department announced

on Thursday

"The following entities are being designated pursuant to section 1(a)(i) for operating or having operated in the defense and related materiel sector of the Russian Federation economy: Joint Stock Company Concern Kalashnikov (Kalashnikov Concern) is Russia's leading manufacturer of automatic and sniper combat firearms, guided artillery munitions, and a wide range of weapons," it said. "It is the flagship company of Russia's weapons industry. Kalashnikov Concern was previously designated in 2015 pursuant to E.O. 13661."

Washington has also designated the company's General Director Vladimir Nikolaevich Lepin, the State Department added.

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US Sanctions Sakhalin Shipping Company, Affiliated Companies, 14 Vessels - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has imposed sanctions on Sakhalin Shipping Company, its affiliated companies and 14 vessels as part of a new package of restrictive economic measures against Russia, the US Treasury Department said on Thursday.

The United States has sanctioned AO Vostok Treid Invest and OOO Morskije Paromney Linii Vanino Sakhalin as companies linked to Sakhalin Shipping Company.

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US Sanctions Kyrgyz-Based Entities for Acquiring Dual-Use Technology for Russia - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States sanctioned several Kyrgyz-based entities for acquiring dual-use technology for Russia, the Treasury Department said on Thursday.

The US imposed sanctions on LLC RM Design and Development, ZAO GTME Tekhnologii, OSOO Kargolayn, the statement said.

"Entities based in the Kyrgyz Republic have been frequent exporters of controlled electronics components and other technology to Russia since Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Some of these shipments have subsequently supplied sensitive dual-use goods to entities in Russia's defense sector," the statement added.

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Florida Jury Awards \$800,000 in Damages to Girl Injured by Hot Chicken Nugget - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - A jury in the US state of Florida awarded a young girl \$800,000 for burn injuries she sustained from a hot McDonald's chicken nugget, an NBC affiliate reported.

A jury in Florida's Broward County awarded the young girl the damages after two hours of deliberation on Wednesday, the report said.

In May, a jury found that McDonald's was at fault for second-degree burns the then four-year-old girl sustained to her leg from a hot chicken nugget.

McDonald's and the franchisee both denied fault during court proceedings, but the jury found that their failure to provide warnings about the food's temperature led to the burns although they did not find the restaurant negligent for causing the burns, the report said.

Attorneys representing the girl's family characterized the outcome as fair and just, although they sought \$15 million in damages, the report said.

The legal victory comes despite efforts by McDonald's to undermine the extent of the girl's injuries and deny fault, the report quoted the attorneys as saying.

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US Sanctions Rosatom Subsidiaries AEM Propulsion, NPO KIS - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted Rosatom's subsidiaries AEM Propulsion and NPO KIS in its latest round of sanctions, the State Department announced in a fact sheet on Thursday.

"The following subsidiaries of Rosatom are being designated pursuant to section 1(a)(vii) for being owned or controlled by, or having acted or purported to act for or on behalf of, directly or indirectly, the Government of the Russian Federation: AEM Propulsion is involved in the production and supply of elements of propulsion systems for ships of various purposes and classes," the document said. "NPO KIS was established in October 2022, and is involved in the production and procurement of various microelectron."

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Delay in US Weapons Deliveries to Taiwan 'Not Backlog' - Pentagon Official

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The delay in weapons deliveries to Taiwan are a result of a systematic slowdown of the US industrial base rather than a backlog, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner said in a congressional hearing on Thursday.

"What we are facing is not a backlog as is sometimes described, but rather concerns and slowdowns within all of our industrial base that is affecting our military production and our defense industrial base systematically, not individually as it relates to Taiwan," Ratner told the

US House Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party.

Ratner called on Congress to put appropriations against the authorities that the legislative body has granted the Defense Department.

"That would go a long way in expediting capability for Taiwan far faster, far sooner and with more significant value than" speeding up foreign military sales, Ratner said.

At present, nearly \$19 billion worth of foreign military sales items have been approved but not delivered to Taiwan.

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US Sanctions Petersburg Social Commercial Bank, Locko Bank, Unistream Bank - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) – The United States has imposed sanctions on Petersburg Social Commercial Bank, Locko Bank, and Unistream Commercial Bank as part of new economic measures against Russia, the US Department of the Treasury said on Thursday.

The US Department of the Treasury also imposed sanctions on Tinkoff Bank and Commercial Bank Solidarnost among nearly 100 companies targeted by the new measures.

Separately, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued two general licenses. General License 71 authorizes the wind-down and rejection, rather than blockage, of transactions with the banks listed above through October 18.

General License 70 authorizes the wind-down of transactions involving Joint Stock Company Ural Mining and Metallurgical Company through October 18.

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Canada Imposes Russia-Related Sanctions on 39 Individuals, 25 Entities - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Canada is announcing a new batch of Russia-related sanctions on 39 individuals and 25 entities, including Tinkoff Bank, Russia's card payment system MIR and its major mobile network operators, Global Affairs said on Thursday.

"The Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced that Canada is imposing sanctions against 20 individuals and 21 entities connected to Russia's military-industrial complex and against 19 individuals and 4 entities in the Russian cultural and education sectors. These sanctions are part of the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations and target persons who are complicit in Russia's ongoing violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity," the ministry said in a statement.

The list of the sanctioned entities includes mobile network providers TELE2, MTS, Megafon and Beeline; as well as payment systems Yandex Pay and MIR Card.

Canada also sanctioned the Russian Culture Ministry and the Ministry of Science and Higher

Education, as well as their heads, Olga Lyubimova and Valery Falkov, respectively.

In the cultural sector, Canada put sanctions on Oscar-winning filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov and his project Besogon, Hermitage Museum Director Mikhail Piotrovsky, singer Phillip Kirkorov, music producer Iosif Prigozhin, rapper Timati, among many others.

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US Announces New Russia-Related Sanctions on 18 Individuals, 14 Vessels - Treasury

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States announced new Russia-related sanctions on multiple individuals, companies and vessels, the US Department of the Treasury said on Thursday.

The Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) announced that it has imposed sanctions on 18 individuals, nearly 100 companies and 14 vessels.

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US Enlists Panama in Semiconductor Supply Chain Expansion - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is creating a new partnership with Panama to expand and strengthen its supply of semiconductors, the US State Department announced in a press release on Thursday.

"The State Department will partner with the Government of Panama on exploring opportunities to grow and diversify the global semiconductor ecosystem under the International Technology Security and Innovation Fund (ITSI, created by the CHIPS Act of 2022," the release said.

This partnership will help create a more resilient, secure, and sustainable global semiconductor value chain and is part of an effort to expand the industry, the release said.

"This partnership will begin with a review of Panama's current semiconductor ecosystem, regulatory framework and workforce and infrastructure needs. The outcome of this review will inform potential future collaboration on developing this critical sector to ensure that both countries benefit from state-of-the-art technology," the release added.

In August 2022, US President Joe Biden signed the CHIPS Act of 2022 to create new funding to boost domestic manufacturing and research of semiconductors in the United States. The act created the ITSI Fund, which provides the State Department with \$500 million to expand global semiconductor manufacturing and secure semiconductor supply chains, according to the release.

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Kevin Mitnick, Most Famous US Cyber Criminal Turned Security Consultant, Dies at 59

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - Kevin Mitnick, who was once one of the most wanted cyber criminals in the United States, died aged 59, his security awareness training company said on Thursday.

"The Mitnick Family and KnowBe4 announce the passing of Kevin Mitnick, 59, following a 14-month valiant battle with pancreatic cancer. Kevin will always remain 'the world's most famous hacker'," KnowBe4 said.

Mitnick died on July 16 after more than a year-long battle with stage 4 pancreatic cancer, the company said. Mitnick is survived by his wife, who is pregnant with their first child.

Mitnick rose to national fame in the 1990s when he was subject to more than two-year-long manhunt by the FBI for breaking into the computer systems of companies such as Motorola, Nokia and Sun Microsystems and allegedly causing them millions of dollars in damage.

In 1995, Mitnick was arrested by the FBI in North Carolina. After pleading guilty to several counts of wire fraud and other cyber crimes, he was sentenced to five years in prison. He was released in 2000.

Later, he established Mitnick Security Consulting. In November 2011, he became the Chief Hacking Officer and part owner of security awareness training company KnowBe4, founded by his friend and business partner, Stu Sjouwerman.

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US Announces Over \$380Mln in Additional Humanitarian Aid for Africa - Blinken

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday announced an additional package of humanitarian assistance for Africa worth more than \$380 million.

"The United States will provide an additional \$380 million in humanitarian assistance for Africa. With this funding, the United States has provided more than \$4 billion in humanitarian assistance this fiscal year to respond to the needs of refugees, internally displaced persons, and people affected by conflict and crisis on the African continent," Blinken said in a statement.

The assistance will provide urgent, life-saving support, including shelter, safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene, healthcare and mental health and psycho-social services, education, and protection for vulnerable individuals such as children, survivors of gender-based violence, and persons with disabilities, the statement said.

On Tuesday, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Russia is in contact with partners from Africa on the issue of grain and fertilizer supply following the expiration of the Black Sea grain deal, and will continue the discussion during the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg later this month.

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US Condemns Attack on Swedish Embassy in Iraq, Offers Support – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 20 (Sputnik) – The United States condemns the attack on the embassy of Sweden in Iraq and has offered support support to Swedish officials in the aftermath of the incident, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

“The United States strongly condemns the attack on the Swedish Embassy in Baghdad in the early hours of July 20,” Miller said.

Officials in Washington remain in contact with their Swedish partners and have offered them support, he added.

Hundreds of protesters stormed the Swedish embassy in Baghdad early on Thursday and set it on fire to protest against a planned Quran burning outside the Iraqi embassy in Stockholm, according to media reports.

Swedish police on Wednesday gave a green-light for the Quran-burning protest, scheduled for Thursday, less than a month after another Quran-burning in Stockholm in late June ignited anti-Sweden protests in Baghdad.

Miller stressed that freedom of peaceful assembly is an essential hallmark of democracy but called the attack “an unlawful act of violence.”

“It is unacceptable that Iraqi Security Forces did not act to prevent protesters from breaching the Swedish Embassy compound for a second time and damaging it,” he added.

The US calls on the Iraqi authorities to honor their international obligations to protect all diplomatic missions in the country against any intrusion or damage, Miller said.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani has demanded that the Swedish ambassador in Baghdad leave the country because of the Swedish government's repeated authorizations for the Quran burning protests, the Iraqi prime minister's office said on Thursday.