

7/25/23 Tuesday

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Ex-Marine Pilot's US Extradition Delayed Amid Claims Australia Illegally Lured Him From China

The extradition hearing of former US military pilot Dan Duggan was postponed on Tuesday as his lawyers push for recognition that their client was illegally lured from China back to Australia to be arrested. A US prosecutor has accused him of illegally training Chinese pilots.

Dennis Miralis, Duggan's lawyer, filed a motion in a Sydney court on Tuesday for his hearing on extradition to the United States to be delayed until November 24. Duggan, 54, was arrested near his home in New South Wales in October based on an indictment in a US court from 2016 that was only unsealed late last year.

According to the US government, Duggan conspired with others to provide training for Chinese military pilots without the proper license, for which he received \$61,000 between 2010 and 2012.

Miralis has argued his client was lured back to Australia for arrest by the Australian government, which approved his security clearance for an aviation license, then revoked it upon his arrival back in Australia. Duggan was [arrested shortly thereafter](#).

Duggan served in the US Marine Corps for 12 years before emigrating to Australia in 2002 and giving up his US citizenship in 2012.

It is alleged he trained Chinese pilots on a leased T-2 Buckeye, an obsolete training aircraft first adopted by the US Department of the Navy in 1959 and retired in 2008, when the Navy and Marine Corps adopted the T-45 Goshawk trainer jet. The Buckeye was used to acquaint future fighter pilots with flying a jet aircraft.

Duggan has characterized his arrest as a political game, saying he has been caught in the growing US-China rivalry.

"This is a signal, signal sending. It has nothing to do with me personally," Duggan told Australian media on Monday from a maximum-security prison. "It's more to do with the signal that they want to send in a geopolitical sense."

A former Pentagon analyst, retired US Air Force Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski, told Sputnik much the same, noting the facts of the case don't indicate a crime has happened, or that any regulations were broken.

"This makes me wonder if this is just part of general anti-China hysteria, or Biden pandering to the neocons in DC," she told Sputnik.

"It is part of a larger trend," Kwiatkowski asserted. "It also provides a face and name that will be consumed by the American public in a way that is possibly more powerful than similar anti-China agitation as we have seen with Huawei and TikTok."

"As an American, I see this as anti-China pandering in order to sell the China threat, and demand more military funding and higher Pentagon budgets," she said. "It doesn't seem to be a strong security case, but it serves the purpose of getting Americans to worry about the Chinese

military and to communicate to them that working with China is frowned upon by the US and its most loyal lackeys, in this case, Australia.”

“These are western aircraft, and it makes sense to utilize experienced native language speaking pilots to assist with the training of these various aircraft,” she further noted. “Globalization is a driver, and civil aviation is global in nature.”

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UPS, Teamsters Reach Tentative Deal to Avert Nation’s Largest-Ever Single Employer Strike

A strike by UPS workers would have had potentially catastrophic economic implications: the shipping company is responsible for moving 9% of the US economy each year, and the US Chamber of Commerce estimated the strike would cost \$3.8 billion per day.

Just days before a contract was set to expire, the United Parcel Service (UPS) and International Brotherhood of Teamsters (IBT) announced they had reached a tentative agreement on a new contract.

In a Tuesday statement, the labor union said a \$30 billion contract had been reached for a duration of five years. The deal will still have to be accepted before a strike is firmly averted.

“We demanded the best contract in the history of UPS, and we got it,” said Teamsters General President Sean M. O’Brien. “This contract sets a new standard in the labor movement and raises the bar for all workers.”

According to the statement, the UPS workers won a substantial wage increase, including for part-time delivery drivers whose exclusion from a raise under a two-tier system created by the company had been the subject of contention that [collapsed talks earlier this month](#).

UPS has reportedly agreed to pay new part-time workers \$21 an hour, up from the \$16.20 they start at presently. Existing workers will also get a raise of \$7.50 per hour over the next five years, \$2.75 of which will happen before the year is out.

In addition, 7,500 part-time driving positions will now become full-time positions.

It also establishes Martin Luther King, Jr. Day in January as a paid holiday for all workers, and bans driver-facing cameras in truck cabs as well as forced overtime work on drivers’ scheduled days off.

UPS CEO Carol Tomé also praised the deal, calling it a “win-win-win.”

“This agreement continues to reward UPS’s full- and part-time employees with industry-leading pay and benefits while retaining the flexibility we need to stay competitive, serve our customers and keep our business strong,” Tomé said.

The Teamsters authorized a strike in a near-unanimous vote last month, which would have started on August 1 without Tuesday’s deal.

Such a strike would have been the largest strike by employees of a single employer in US history, with an estimated 340,000 UPS workers set to walk off the job. The pilots of UPS delivery aircraft, who are represented by a separate union, said they would also refuse to fly if the Teamsters struck. The last time the Teamsters struck for a UPS contract in 1997, the pilots similarly honored their picket line.

The contract deal comes as much of Hollywood remains on the picket line. Actors represented by SAG-AFTRA [joined](#) writers represented by WGA in protesting many of the same trends, including the influence of AI on film and television production and the impact of streaming apps on the industry.

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'Hardest Day': Italy Wracked by Hailstorms, Wildfires, Extreme Heat

As the devastating heat wave continues to torment Italians with scorching temperatures, other extreme weather events have befallen the southern European country as well, including large wildfires and powerful thunderstorms.

The northern metropolis of Milan was hit by torrential rains and a "river" of hailstones, according to one Italian media outlet, which flooded streets and tore down trees on Tuesday morning. Widespread electrical outages have been reported, and at least two deaths are attributed to the wild weather.

"I have never seen anything like this," Milan Mayor Giuseppe Sala said. "We can't deny it any longer - climate change is changing our lives. We can't pretend it's not happening and we absolutely can't keep doing nothing."

Firefighters in the Lombardy region reported more than 200 calls in the aftermath of the storm.

A Delta Air Lines Boeing 767 passenger aircraft was struck by the hailstorm during takeoff from Milan's Malpensa International Airport, causing damage to its nose and on the fuselage near the wings and a redirection towards Rome instead of continuing on to New York City. Delta didn't say how many were on board or how the passengers would be compensated.

Days earlier, another catastrophic hailstorm wracked the Lombardy region, bringing large hailstones and tornadoes.

Meanwhile, Palermo Airport on the southern island of Sicily was closed on Tuesday as firefighters battled a blaze that had advanced to the airport's outskirts. Italy's Civil Protection Department reported "extensive fires" across the country's south, while local Sicilian media described Palermo as "encircled" by flames.

At least nine air support incidents had been filed, along with nine in Calabria, the closest mainland province, and one on the island of Sardinia.

According to local media, more than 200 people in Palermo have sought medical attention for smoke inhalation, causing two hospitals to suspend routine appointments in order to prioritize treatment for smoke inhalation or heat stroke.

The fires have been fanned by [extreme high temperatures](#) baking Italy in recent weeks, which showed no signs of letting up on Tuesday. Officials had placed 16 cities on red alert due to high temperatures, which in eastern Sicily reached 117.7 degrees Fahrenheit (47.6 Celsius) on Monday - close to the all-time European high of 119.8 degrees Fahrenheit (48.8 Celsius) set on the island two years ago.

"We are experiencing in Italy one of the most complicated days in recent decades - rainstorms, tornadoes and giant hail in the north, and scorching heat and devastating fires in the center and south," Italy's Civil Protection Minister, Nello Musumeci, said in a statement. "The climate upheaval that has hit our country demands of us all a change of attitude."

Several Italian regions have asked Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's government to declare a state of emergency.

"We knew that today would be the hardest day," Meloni said on Italian radio on Tuesday morning. "We have a situation where very high temperatures are combined with wind, which makes using Canadair [firefighting aircraft] impossible."

"We are following the situation, which is very delicate, minute by minute."

In May, parts of central Italy also suffered [catastrophic flooding](#) amid days of torrential rain, causing extensive damage and killing at least 11 people in the mountainous Emilia-Romagna and Marche regions.

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Farm Bill Must Protect US Small Farmers, Encourage Climate Change Mitigation

Federal lawmakers are rushing to prepare a massive new Farm Bill, a piece of omnibus legislation passed every five years that concerns a host of programs related to agriculture and nutrition in the United States.

Jim Goodman, a retired Wisconsin organic dairy farmer and board member of Family Farm Defenders, [told Radio Sputnik](#) on Tuesday that the new Farm Bill will have to do a lot more than just ensure crops make their way to market: it needs to tackle meaningful justice issues ranging from climate change to the lasting legacies of slavery and the enclosure of indigenous lands, too.

"I think people who just don't even know about farming need to pay attention to the farm bill, because especially nutrition programs are a huge part of it and a lot of people depend on the SNAP program," Goodman told Sputnik, referring to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, better known as "food stamps."

"A lot of people talk about farmers, but they don't really understand what goes on farm. I always think of when Jesse Jackson ran for president in 1988, he said the best urban policy has to begin with the best rural policy, because what goes on in rural areas definitely affects people in urban areas. Everyone eats, everyone is subject to the same problems with climate," he said. However, drafters of the new Farm Bill will face an additional uphill fight this year, thanks to the agreement hammered out in early June that raised the debt ceiling. In order to avoid a catastrophic default, Democrats agreed to spending caps for the coming fiscal year, including upper limits on discretionary funding - the portion of the budget from which funding for the Farm Bill's programs would be drawn. That means a scramble for the precious funding allowed under the deal.

"I think in a general sense, if money is not made available to support programs in the farm bill, those programs aren't going to work," Goodman told Sputnik. "You know, we seem to have no problem exempting military spending, but a lot of times programs that would benefit everyone be they nutrition programs, health care, climate mitigation, those are the ones that generally seem to bump up against the debt ceiling and spending limits that Congress seems to impose."

"I guess I'd be more in favor of looking at helping people survive, doing mitigation of climate excesses rather than more money for guns and bombs," the retired farmer added.

"The farm bill is for everyone. It impacts everyone. You know, you mentioned climate: agriculture is responsible, depending on who you talk to, for maybe 10% of greenhouse gas emissions. And there are bills that will eventually become part of the Farm Bill that help farmers to mitigate that, help them sequester more carbon, keep cover crops. And I'm sure there are some bills that are trying to make their way into the Farm Bill that will establish carbon markets - which I don't think is a good idea because it's great to have farmers sequester carbon and be paid for it, but if you sell those credits to some corporation to allow them to continue to pollute, we really don't do anything to address the climate problems," he explained.

"So that's the thing about the farm bill: just like any omnibus bill, there's good parts and there's bad parts, and we can only hope that more of the good things float to the surface," Goodman said.

Goodman explained that the impact of climate change on agriculture varies across the country, with weather, crops, and government policies and regulations differing between states and regions.

"It varies a lot across the country. And of course, now we see the heat dome down in Texas, in the South, where a lot of vegetables are grown. I think you have to look at the farm workers who have to be out there every day in this oppressive heat, harvesting the food crops for everyone. We saw the governor of Texas - and this wasn't specifically related to farming - but he banned mandatory water breaks for workers. So I think it affects farm workers a lot. In some parts of the country, as in Wisconsin, where we're under drought now. And it's really difficult to take care of your animals, to grow decent crops, if you don't get rain. We can't all afford irrigation and I don't think we'd all want to."

"We in Wisconsin in the last years I farmed saw precipitation remain roughly the same: most of it came in the spring or the fall, and in the summer when the crops are growing and really needed that we didn't get it. And a lot of people, of course, say, well, 'weather changes all the time'. Well, that's true, but climate doesn't, and I think anyone who denies the fact that we are living in a changing climate is just wrong."

Goodman noted that the final omnibus bill is still being assembled, but that some proposed bills include disaster relief programs for farmers affected by droughts, hurricanes, and other weather events that destroy their crops or flocks.

"One that we're aware of is called the Agricultural Resiliency Act, which has money available for climate resilience or to help farmers sequester more carbon in the soil. So there are things there that we hope to add," the farmer said. "And I think a lot of the research that is funded through the Farm Bill and university research to help farmers figure out ways to live through climate changes, to develop different kinds of scenes that are more drought tolerant. These are all things that farmers depend on and as the climate continues to change, we need that."

Other bills he noted were the Justice for Black Farmers Act and the Farmland for Farmers Act, which he said were needed to give farmers the ability, especially Black farmers, to correct the injustices that USDA [US Department of Agriculture] [perpetuated] over generations."

"The Farmland for Farmers Act, which restricts corporate ownership, which would definitely make it easier for small farmers to get into farming, because when corporations, be they foreign corporations or investment funds in the United States buy up farmland, they raise the price to the point where small farmers and beginning farmers, farmers of color, indigenous people can't afford to buy that land. So we just see this continuing trend of consolidation and farmland ownership. And consolidation begets more consolidation. As farms get bigger, the processing industry gets bigger and it just shuts small people out of the market, limits food choices, and really allows food prices to rise because the market is so tightly controlled by just a few entities."

Goodman also noted the tension between increasing access to locally produced food and the increasing integration of farmers into a "global marketplace." He noted one bill, the Local Farms and Food Act, that could help "establish regional food systems and farmers markets."

"I think the closer you can produce food to the people who need it, the better off you are. You know, we always talk about food miles, food shipped across the country - certainly that doesn't do any good for the environment and certainly it doesn't help people get fresh, locally produced food," he noted.

"I think that anyone who knows anything about agricultural marketing knows that it depends on a global marketplace. And we expect to export our excess grain or dairy or whatever it is, and other countries should pick that up for us as we continue to produce more and more. So I think any time you're talking about bills to protect farmers, part of that has to be dealing with imports and exports."

"You know, when this country was founded, we had very strong import restrictions to protect our farmers and small businesses. And now with [global corporations](#), it doesn't really make any difference to them where they buy or where they sell it, as long as they can buy cheap and sell high, and I think that really has an impact not just on small farmers and businesses here, but small farmers all over the world who don't have a seat at the table, can't get into that huge global marketplace. Very few farmers directly export. It's all done through large corporations that do that."

"So, I think we have to seriously look at protecting our farmers and farmers around the world. We're all kind of caught in this death spiral to the bottom: whoever can produce the cheapest best to sell their stuff. And that does not bode well for adequately feeding people here or anywhere else in the world."

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Totally Not a Tornado: 'Harmless' Funnel Cloud Spotted Over US Capitol

Washingtonians were mildly alarmed on Tuesday afternoon when a funnel cloud appeared in the skies over the US Capitol Building.

Severe storms swept through the Washington, DC, metropolitan area on Tuesday, spurred on by the hot, humid weather typical of July in the region. While sometimes it can cook up dangerous tornadoes, meteorologists around the nation's capital reassured residents that the day's sighting of a funnel cloud was "harmless."

Photos posted on social media showed a wispy, winding cone of cloud extending from the bottom of the mighty storm clouds overhead. Many users tagged local weather stations with alarmed questions about the sighting.

"WOW! Funnel cloud over the US Capitol," meteorologist Matthew Cappucci tweeted. "Rest assured this is NOT tornadic - just a happy accident."

One social media user joked the funnel cloud was a "Scud bomb for sure," alluding to the Soviet-built ballistic missile used against US forces by Iraq during the Gulf War.

According to the US National Weather Service, a funnel cloud is a rotating column of air that extends from the base of a cloud, but does not touch the ground, so it is harmless at ground level.

The nation's capital has experienced very real tornadoes in the past, however, [including two twisters](#) that cut their way across the city in July 2021.

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'Crime Against All Living Beings': Climate Change Being Fueled by Government Inaction

As scorching temperatures have skyrocketed and encouraged raging wildfires in Europe, researchers recently warned the current state of the environment would never have been likely without human-caused climate change. In fact, while an El Nino pattern has played a role, officials stress the 2023 heat is bolstered by fossil fuel burning.

The blame for the effects of the current state of climate change must be placed at the feet of governments around the world who are not acting with urgency, Anthony Rogers Wright, the director of environmental justice at New York Lawyers For the Public Interest, told Sputnik.

Wright joined [Radio Sputnik's Political Misfits](#) on Tuesday to discuss the record heat wave, massive wildfires and a range of climate change effects.

When asked about the wildfires in Greece and elsewhere around the world, Wright told hosts John Kiriakou and Michelle Witte it is "unfortunately the new normal," adding that climate change is a form of "slow violence" that doesn't elicit the same urgency as terrorism attacks or other instances of immediate violence.

"It starts with our president," Wright said. "At a time when all of this is happening, Joe Biden is approving more and more fossil fuel projects. We already know about the Mountain Valley Pipeline, his favor to [US Sen.] Joe Manchin [D-WV], maybe to keep him in the Democratic party or whatever else. New liquefied natural gas facilities across the country, especially in Alaska and the Gulf south [...] unfortunately his landmark Inflation Reduction Act will do nothing to really attack at scale what we are all witnessing."

"As you just said, the Mediterranean, China, Africa, here in the United States, no one is safe. There is really no region in the world that is immune to this," he added.

Massive wildfires are raging in Greece, causing tens of thousands of people to evacuate while similar wildfires raged in Italy and Algeria, where fires have killed at least 34 people. Wright fears this is just the beginning.

"It's not just the human species, all species that depend on weather patterns and temperature to determine what to do, when to mate, when to migrate, when to eat, when to sleep, when to wake up, all this is being altered and since it is all interconnected, this smells like serious, serious doom for us," Wright said. "Again, the only way we can characterize how our respective governments around the world are responding, save for a few who are taking this very, very seriously, is malfeasance. This literally is not just a crime against humanity but a crime against all living things."

Wright notes that it is our "slash, dig and burn economy" that is driven by fossil fuels and the infiltration of lobbyists into our government through Citizens United that encourages the continued destruction of our climate.

"That's an easy solution [switching to agricultural practices] but the reason it is not easy is because of Big Ag, and Citizen's United and politicians allowing themselves to be bought," he said.

The Citizens United ruling by the US Supreme Court in 2010 effectively brought down a complete shift in how companies can spend an unlimited dollar amount on political campaigns. Thus, rather than politicians being mostly influenced by taxpaying Americans, officials began taking into large consideration their biggest campaign backers.

"We have an administration here and around the world that refuses to hold this industry accountable for a legacy of systemic environmental racism, as well as them knowing since the 1970s what they were, and are doing to the environment. Instead, they are making record profits," Wright explained. "And Joe Biden is going to give them even more money with his Inflation Reduction Act, opening more oil and gas leasing in the Gulf, more oil and gas leasing on land. So it is just really troubling that you still have some in the Democratic party who refer to this man as a so-called 'climate president.' I'd say he is absolutely a climate chump."

When asked by Kiriakou whether there are any feasible solutions governments could take that would have an impact, Wright pointed to agriculture as a possible "massive solution multiplier." The environmentalist explained that by switching from industrial agriculture to agroecological practices, farming would not only be more sustainable but the healthy soil it promotes would trap greenhouse gasses and prevent flooding because healthy soil takes longer to become saturated.

"Let's transform how we do agriculture," Wright pleaded. "I have worked with a lot of farmers who have transitioned in Nebraska, not only are they having to do less work because there is no tilling but they are getting more profit yield per acre of land. So what we have is something that sequesters greenhouse emissions, it protects us from flooding."

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DeSantis Campaign Cuts Third of Staff, Including Worker Who Shared Nazi Imagery

Recent polling indicates Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis is the second-most preferred candidate among Republican voters, but he still remains far behind former President Donald Trump. A US poll aggregator states DeSantis is polling at 18.6% while Trump holds a commanding lead at 51.9%.

The 2024 presidential campaign for Florida Governor Ron DeSantis announced on Tuesday it cut a third of its staff as the camp struggled to keep expenses down.

The cuts were confirmed by campaign advisers and will eliminate 38 positions. Recent federal filings indicate the campaign had upwards of 90 staffers by the end of June.

Two senior DeSantis campaign advisers, Dave Abrams and Tucker Obenshain have already left the campaign. The pair, along with some other staffers, plan to work at pro-DeSantis groups outside of the main campaign.

"Following a top-to-bottom review of our organization, we have taken additional, aggressive steps to streamline operations and put Ron DeSantis in the strongest position to win this primary and defeat Joe Biden," DeSantis campaign manager Generra Peck said in a statement. "Gov. DeSantis is going to lead the Great American Comeback and we're ready to hit the ground running as we head into an important month of the campaign."

The campaign announced in early July it managed to raise an impressive \$20 million during the second quarter of 2023; however, it has reportedly already spent a sizable portion of the amount, according to US media. Additionally, many of DeSantis' largest donors have already reached the maximum amount allowed by law, meaning they cannot be counted on to refill the governor's coffers.

At a donor retreat last week, Peck said that the campaign would work to cut expenses by focusing on smaller, more intimate events.

Other senior staffers are being shuffled around in the shakeup, including Cody Hall, who currently serves as the campaign's chief technology officer and will now also be serving as its chief financial officer.

Among those let go by the DeSantis campaign is communications staffer and speech writer Nate Hochman, who recently found himself in hot water after sharing a post on X (previously Twitter) on Monday in which the Sonnenrad/Black Sun Symbol was superimposed behind DeSantis' face. The symbol is used by Neo-Nazis and the Azov Battalion* in Ukraine.

The campaign confirmed that Hochman was one of the staffers who was let go and said they would offer no further comment.

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McCarthy: Biden Investigation 'Rising to Level' of Impeachment Inquiry

US President Joe Biden has consistently stated he never discussed business with his son Hunter, go so far back as stating in August 2019 that he "never discussed, with my son or my brother or with anyone else, anything having to do with their businesses." To date, the White House denied the elder Biden ever kept business ties with Hunter.

US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) recently stated that he believes the investigation into foreign business dealings by President Joe Biden's family may result in an impeachment inquiry.

The investigation is specifically focused on Joe Biden's son, Hunter Biden, his business dealings and if the US president received any payments by way of his son.

"When Biden was running for office, he told the public he has never talked about business. He said his family has never received a dollar from China, which we prove is not true," McCarthy told Fox News host Sean Hannity late Monday, referring to comments the elder Biden made about not discussing business dealings with his son.

"We've only followed where the information has taken us. But Hannity, this is rising to the level of impeachment inquiry, which provides Congress the strongest power to get the rest of the knowledge and information needed," McCarthy added.

McCarthy also mentioned accusations by two IRS whistleblowers who said prosecutors slow-walked the investigation into Hunter Biden's tax crimes and congressional investigations that showed the Biden family received millions of dollars from over 20 shell companies they set up, including from Chinese and Ukrainian nationals.

The IRS whistleblowers also alleged they were prevented from following leads that may have led to President Biden.

"[T]his president has also used something we have not seen since Richard Nixon: Use the weaponization of government to benefit his family and deny Congress the ability to have the oversight," McCarthy said while explaining why an impeachment inquiry is necessary.

Last week, Republicans released an FBI document in which a confidential source outlined conversations they allegedly had with Burisma CEO Mykola Zlochevsky.

The source in that document alleges Zlochevsky hired Hunter Biden to leverage his connection to his father and sent payments to the Bidens to squash an investigation into Burisma by then-Ukrainian Prosecutor-General Viktor Shokin.

Then-Vice President Biden bragged on video about the dismissal handed down to Shokin, who was accused of corruption by the US and some European countries, by threatening to withhold \$1 billion in aid to Ukraine.

In 2019, a phone call between former US President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in which Trump threatened to withhold aid to Ukraine if it did not investigate Joe and Hunter Biden's business dealings in the country led to Trump's first impeachment.

The source in the FBI document also alleges Zlochevsky indicated he was coerced into paying the Biden family, and that he recorded conversations with both Hunter and Joe Biden. The accusations laid out in the document have not been proven and Democrats have pointed to a document from Trump's 2019 impeachment trial in which Zlochevsky reportedly told associates to Trump-era official Rudy Giuliani that Burisma never had contact with Joe Biden during his tenure as vice president.

It was also reported in US media on Monday that Hunter Biden's business associate Devon Archer plans to tell the House Oversight and Reform Committee that Hunter would often put his father on speaker phone during conversations with foreign business partners.

At her Monday briefing, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre again denied the commander-in-chief has ever had a connection to his son's business dealings.

"The answer is not going to change. The answer remains the same. The president was never in business with his son. I just don't have anything else to add," Jean-Pierre said when asked about the investigation.

Last month, a Hunter Biden WhatsApp message from 2017 discovered by investigators was made public. In the message Hunter appears to use his father to leverage a business deal with a Chinese businessman.

"I am sitting here with my father and we would like to understand why the commitment made has not been fulfilled. [...] And, Z, if I get a call or text from anyone involved in this other than you, Zhang, or the chairman, I will make certain that between the man sitting next to me and every person he knows and my ability to forever hold a grudge that you will regret not following my direction."

Photos found on Hunter Biden's abandoned laptop suggests Joe and Hunter Biden were both at Biden family's Wilmington, Delaware, home around the time the message was sent.

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Censure Here, Censure There, Censure Everywhere - Cartoon
By - Ted Rall

House Democrats are nearing a censure resolution for US Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-GA) for a myriad of comments she made throughout her congressional campaign, remarks that Democrats say fanned "the flames of racism, antisemitism, LGBTQ hate speech, Islamophobia, anti-Asian hate, xenophobia and other forms of hatred."

Among complaints listed in the documents are comments Greene made comparing mask mandates to the Holocaust, calling an LGBTQ California state senator a "communist groomer," remarks that she would "kick out every single Chinese in this country that is loyal to the CCP [Chinese Communist Party]," that Muslim members of Congress were not "really official" because they did not take their oath of office on a Bible, and that she called people who participated in the January 6 riots on the US Capitol "political prisoners of war."

Some of the complaints refer to Facebook posts Greene made or shared before being elected to Congress. The lawmaker was previously removed from her committee assignments but was not censured.

Her potential censure comes a week after Democrats filed a resolution against US Rep. George Santos (R-NY) for the various falsehoods he stated about his career, family and life during his campaign last year. Several Republicans reportedly said they will support that resolution if Democrats force a vote on it.

The move also comes after Republicans censured Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA) last month for his role in promoting the Russiagate conspiracy.

Censures used to be rare in the House. No Representatives were censured in the House from the end of 1983 until 2010. There have since been two, Paul Gosar (R-AZ) in 2021 and Schiff's last month.

Should Santos and Greene both be censured, 2023 will tie 1870 as the year with the most censured representatives. In 1870, three Republican representatives were censured for selling military academy appointments, with all three votes being unanimous.

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NATO-Ukraine Council to Discuss Cooperation With EU on Grain Issue - US Envoy

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - NATO will discuss how it can cooperate with the European Union to facilitate Ukraine's grain exports following the suspension of the Black Sea deal by Russia, US Ambassador to NATO Julianne Smith said on Wednesday, ahead of the Ukraine-NATO Council meeting in Brussels.

The ambassador-level meeting of the newly established Ukraine-NATO Council is set to convene on Wednesday at the urgent request of Volodymyr Zelenskyy and focus on the grain issue.

"We are going to think through whether or not individual allies should take additional steps or how NATO could work with the European Union that also plays a role here," Smith told reporters.

She expressed the hope that individual state members, particularly from the Black Sea region, would provide their own measures supporting grain export from Ukraine.

"We are going to hear from the Ukrainians themselves about their current assessment of how they intend or wish to continue to get grain out of Ukraine in light of Russia's announcement about its withdrawal [from the Black Sea Grain Initiative]," Smith said.

Smith criticized Russia for its refusal to extend the grain deal and threatening to attack commercial vessels with grain, saying that the move increased food insecurity across the globe.

The deal expired last week after Russia refused to extend it. Moscow has consistently complained that the deal's provisions pertaining to Russia were not being fulfilled and that most of the supplies were ending up in rich European countries.

On Monday, President Vladimir Putin said Russia would replace Ukrainian grain on the market and continue to supply grain and fertilizers to African countries both on a commercial basis and free-of-charge, despite Western sanctions.

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Republicans Maintain Low Confidence in Big Business - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Republicans continue to maintain low confidence in big business, with only 18% saying they have a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in it, according to a Gallup poll released Wednesday.

In Gallup's annual confidence in institutions polls conducted from 1973 to 2020, an average of

33% of Republican respondents said they had high confidence in big business, with an average +12 net confidence score. The only years that saw negative Republican assessments of big business were 1981 (-11) and 2009 (-12), during major recessions. Scores during the last few years changed drastically, with -18 net confidence in 2021, -9 in 2022, and -17 this year.

Confidence among Democrats and independents this year were even lower, at -32 and -33, respectively, although major declines in their confidence levels had already occurred about 20 years ago.

Gallup said the recent shift in Republican confidence levels was unclear, but noted that inflation, business policies on COVID-19 vaccinations, and corporate support for Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ+ issues may be reasons.

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Holding Russian Fertilizer in Europe 'Playing With People's Lives' - Eritrean Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - There is no reason for Russia's fertilizers to be held in European ports, it is hijacking and playing with human lives, Eritrean Permanent Representative at the UN Sophia Tesfamariam told Sputnik.

"It's politicized. There's no reason for holding it," Tesfamariam said when asked about some 262,000 tonnes of Russian fertilizer Moscow says is stuck in European ports. "It's hijacking. It's almost like playing with people's lives."

Tesfamariam said the fertilizer is especially important for larger countries like Ethiopia, Nigeria, Mali, and Sudan, that need to feed big populations. Tesfamariam said the West has campaigns to feed people in Africa while blocking grain that can help Africans feed themselves.

"So I think at some point, they have to do some... introspection," Tesfamariam said. "Actions speak louder than words."

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UN Needs to Conduct Independent Probe Into Nord Stream Pipelines Attacks - Eritrean Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - The UN should undertake an independent investigation into the attacks on the Nord Stream gas pipelines as such a course of action would restore the credibility of the organization, Eritrean Ambassador to the world body Sophia Tesfamariam told Sputnik.

"They should make an investigation," Tesfamariam said. "I think it would redeem the credibility of the UN and the UN system and the Security Council itself. But it will also find the culprits to this issue. And this is not an issue that should be shoved under the rug. It's a huge economic cost for all of them, all the people that are in the area."

Tesfamariam said she believes the United Nations will regret not allowing the investigation to

go where it needs to in order to find the culprits and put an end to potential attacks in the future. Addressing the issues thoughtfully and honestly today, she added, is better than saying 30 years later, "You know, by the way, this was the truth. Seymour Hersh was right."

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NATO Provoked Russia for 14 Years, Used Ukraine as 'Sacrificial Death' - Eritrea UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - NATO nations provoked Russia for over a decade before the special military operation was launched in Ukraine, Eritrean Permanent Representative at the UN Sophia Tesfamariam told Sputnik.

"Before that there were 14 years that the NATO Allies were pushing and pushing and pushing Russia, breaking one promise after another, breaking one agreement after another," Tesfamariam said. "This containment of Russia that they were going to do. And for us we just felt like yes, Ukraine was the sacrificial death that they used to get the noise going. But for us the culprits were known from day one, it was not Russia."

The UN General Assembly in March of Last year adopted a Western-backed resolution on the humanitarian situation in Ukraine, with 140 countries voting in favor, five against and 38 abstaining from the vote. Russia, Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea and Syria voted against the resolution.

Tesfamariam said Russia's special military operation in Ukraine was a preemptive act of security, and for those reasons Eritrea decided to oppose the measure.

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US, Allies Use Africa to Blame Russia Over Grain Deal Situation - Eritrean Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - The United States and other Western states are using Africa as a tool to blame Russia for the situation around the Black Sea grain initiative, Eritrean Ambassador to the UN, Sophia Tesfamariam, told Sputnik.

The US and some of its Western allies have said Russia's decision to allow the Black Sea grain deal to expire last week will harm African nations.

"This one was a good way to shame and blame Russia, but use Africans," Tesfamariam said when asked about the West's comments about how the end of the grain deal will affect Africa.

Tesfamariam also said she was not surprised by the comments from the US and its allies, adding that, from the very beginning, the West was not going to help Africa. Tesfamariam said the West makes many promises and does a "big display" with labels like "Africa Rising" or "African Initiative."

"I think Africans are too jaded now and don't feel surprised by things. Even now when we hear them sometimes complaining they [the West] didn't deliver on financial contributions that they

have promised," the envoy said. "Africans are learning that it's all talk."

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Eritrean Envoy to UN Says 'Politicization' of Food Aid Killed Black Sea Initiative

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - The West's politicization of food assistance is what killed the Black Sea grain initiative, Eritrean Ambassador to the United Nations Sophia Tesfamariam told Sputnik.

"It [food aid] was given to certain countries [who were on their [the West's] side for whatever issue. So, the politicization of food aid is what's killing this initiative," Tesfamariam said.

The ambassador said the approach is not new, it has been there with food delivery in the past from USAID and other US agencies. Moreover, even if the deal was implemented, it would have no huge impact on Africa.

"The effect [of implementing the agreement] was minimal on Africa," Tesfamariam said. "But the propaganda for the initiative was huge and Africa was used as this bait."

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Grain Deal Not Way to Solve Food Crisis, Africa Got Under 3% of Exports - Eritrea UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - The grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, was from the very beginning not a good way to address the food supply issue as African nations received less than 3% of the exports, Eritrean Ambassador to the UN Sophia Tesfamariam told Sputnik.

"After one year passed, some Europeans got the grain, which is good because they also needed it. So trying to make it look like only Africa is looking for grain from Ukraine was a non-starter," Tesfamariam said. "It was not the way to solve the issue from day one. Regarding Africa, we got less than 3%."

The ambassador said that African nations decided to produce food instead of waiting, and Ethiopia for example started producing its own wheat.

"Eritrea increased their output by 20% and other regions did the same," Tesfamariam added.

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RPT - Hunter Biden May Plead Guilty in US Court for Deal on Tax, Firearms Offenses

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden, son of US President Joe Biden, may plead guilty in a US court on Wednesday to two misdemeanor tax offenses and enter into a pretrial diversion agreement for a felony firearms offense as part of the deal.

Last month, US Attorney for the District of Delaware David Weiss announced that Biden agreed to plead guilty to the two tax offenses as part of a deal to resolve all three charges.

The tax charges carry maximum sentences of one year in prison each, while the firearm charge carries up to 10 years. Biden is not expected to face any jail time under the plea agreement, although a judge will have the final say.

Biden is set to appear in the US District Court for the District of Delaware on Wednesday at 10:00 a.m. EST (2:00 p.m. GMT), according to court schedules. Biden is scheduled for an initial appearance and a change of plea hearing.

The deal would resolve a five-year investigation into Biden by the Justice Department, according to his attorney. The Justice Department said its probe into Biden remained ongoing following the announcement of the tentative plea deal.

Hunter and Joe Biden are also the subject of US House investigations into alleged criminal activity by the president's family, including a foreign bribery scheme involving Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

The US House Oversight Committee likewise continues its probe into the Bidens despite the tentative plea agreement with the Justice Department, panel chairman James Comer said. Comer characterized the agreement as a "sweetheart deal" and a "slap on the wrist."

The deal was also criticized by former US President Donald Trump, who frequently alleges that the US justice system has been weaponized in favor of the Biden administration.

Earlier this month, FBI Director Christopher Wray told lawmakers that the agency is not protecting the Biden family.

However, US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) whistleblowers also told lawmakers this month that their own probe into Hunter Biden's receipt of foreign money was hindered by the Justice Department.

The IRS whistleblowers said that they uncovered evidence supporting felony tax evasion charges against Biden, although he was only ultimately charged with misdemeanor offenses.

Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden have said in response to the situation that they "love their son" and will continue to support him in life.

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Eritrean Ambassador to UN Says Organization's Charter 'Under Threat'

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - The charter of the United Nations is under threat due to circumventions and ineffective UN bodies, Eritrean Permanent Representative to the UN Sophia Tesfamariam told Sputnik.

"I think it is under threat. They found ways to circumvent the UN Charter and do things almost illegally and not be held into account," Tesfamariam said when asked about the state of the charter.

The envoy also said the world would likely not be facing the challenges it does if all member states were abiding by the UN Charter.

The UN Security Council, Tesfamariam added, has been made "practically impotent" despite its critical role in global peace and security.

The UN General Assembly has likewise been rendered dysfunctional due to its consideration of dozens of issues that are "irrelevant to 90% of the world," Tesfamariam said.

In addition, the envoy said some member states from Africa and the rest of the so-called Global South may not be paying attention to talks at this point, having been "lost" amid discussions on issues beyond the GA's mandate.

The UN Charter, she added, ought to bring countries together and allow every member state, regardless of relative size or wealth, to contribute to the work of the UN.

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Johns Hopkins Physics Lab Gets \$165Mln to Work on US ICBM Replacement - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Johns Hopkins University won more than \$165 million to develop support for the Sentinel Program to modernize the land-based leg of the US strategic nuclear triad, the Department of Defense announced in a press release.

"Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory [of] Laurel, Maryland was awarded a \$165,914,899 task order for Sentinel support," the release said on Tuesday.

The task order provides for continuing the strategic partnership between the US government and JHU/APL, the Defense Department noted.

"This contract provides for procurement of engineering, systems engineering for complex systems, research, and development of specialized functions," the release explained.

Work on the project will be performed in Laurel, Maryland over the next three years and is expected to be completed by July 23, 2026, the Defense Department said.

The USAF LGM-35A Sentinel weapon system, previously known as the Ground-Based Strategic Deterrent (GBSD) is the project to modernize the ground-based leg of the US strategic nuclear triad. The GBSD is to replace the old Minuteman III Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) force that has been deployed for more than half a century.

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Eritrean President's Visit to Russia Would Bring 'Concrete' Results - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - The participation of Eritrean President Isaias Afwerki in the upcoming Russia-Africa summit in St. Petersburg would bring concrete results for bilateral relations, the country's ambassador to the UN, Sophia Tesfamariam, told Sputnik.

"I'm sure if he [Afwerki] went over there [to Russia], there will be some concrete results,"

Tesfamariam said. "He is not a man of talk, he is a very much action-oriented gentleman and I think if he goes there, there will be some direct impact on the Russian-Eritrean relationship and maybe [resulting in making them] stronger, strengthening them as they go forward."

The envoy pointed out that no one can question the strength of the bilateral relationship between Russia and Eritrea, which is based on the support both countries provide for each other and on a similar view and understanding of world politics and where it needs to go in the future.

Kremlin aide Yury Ushakov said earlier in July that Russian President Vladimir Putin will hold a meeting with the Eritrean leader on July 27 in St. Petersburg.

The Eritrean ambassador to Russia also confirmed to Sputnik earlier in the month that Afwerki is planning to attend the Russia-Africa Summit to discuss several issues, including the arms race in space.

The second Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum will be held in St. Petersburg from July 27-28.

The first Russia-Africa Summit took place from October 23-24 2019, in the Russian city of Sochi. It was the first event of this scale in the history of Russian-African relations. Forty-nine African delegations are expected to attend this year's summit.

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US State Dept. Faces \$40Bln Shortfall in Budget to Counter China in Indo-Pacific - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The US is facing a major shortfall in funding that was requested for diplomatic efforts in the Indo-Pacific region in the Biden administration's bid to counter China, Foreign Policy reported citing a State Department report to Congress.

The documents reveal a \$41.3 billion gap between what the Biden administration has provided to the State Department and USAID versus what the agencies requested in order to do their work in the region over the next five years, according to the report.

Diplomats need the money to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region, but they may have to wait, the report added.

Some of the State Department's top priorities include sending arms to Taiwan and opening American diplomatic missions in the Maldives, the Solomon Islands, Tonga, Fiji, Vanuatu and Kiribati, the report said.

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US Houses Passes Bill to Boost Investment in Semiconductor Production, Secure Supply Chain

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed legislation to require the US Commerce Department to coordinate with state-level entities boosting

investment in semiconductor-related manufacturing and secure the semiconductor supply chain to the United States.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Securing Semiconductor Supply Chains Act, on Tuesday in a voice vote.

The bill directs the Commerce Department's SelectUSA program to solicit comments from state-level economic development organizations to review potential federal government efforts to support increased foreign direct investment in semiconductor production.

The legislation also directs SelectUSA to consult with the state-level organizations on barriers to investment and develop recommendations on how to increase independent and partnered investments.

In addition, the bill requires SelectUSA to provide Congress with a report on its review with state-level organizations and its efforts to boost foreign direct investment in semiconductor-related manufacturing.

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US House Passes Bill to Sanction Chinese Drug Manufacturers, Hold Officials Accountable

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a bill to impose sanctions on Chinese manufacturers of synthetic opioids and Chinese officials responsible for overseeing anti-narcotics efforts.

House lawmakers passed the bill, dubbed the Stop Chinese Fentanyl Act, on Tuesday in a voice vote.

The bill expands the Fentanyl Sanctions Act to include Chinese entities determined to be involved in the opioid trade under its definition of a foreign opioid trafficker.

The bill also expands the definition to include Chinese officials with law enforcement responsibilities who aid and abet opioid trafficking, including through intentional inaction.

In addition, the bill adds requirements the president must meet before publishing regulations under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act, which allows the president to regulate certain economic transactions following declaration of a national emergency.

The bill requires the US president to weigh the costs and benefits of existing authorities prior to publishing new regulations.

The measure comes as part of a broader US government effort to crack down on the flow of synthetic opioids, particular fentanyl. The United States has aimed its efforts at China, which Washington accuses of providing precursor chemicals and other support to drug enterprises in Mexico.

US media reported earlier this week that the Biden administration is considering lifting some sanctions on China in hopes of bolstering cooperation between Washington and Beijing on combating the flow of fentanyl.

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

US House Passes Bill to Require Support of Taiwan at International Organizations

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives passed a bill requiring the United States to support the status quo for Taiwan at international organizations and reject possible attempts by China to resolve the situation with the island through such entities.

House lawmakers passed the legislation, dubbed the Taiwan International Solidarity Act, on Tuesday in a voice vote.

The bill clarifies that the US opposes any UN initiative to change Taiwan's status without the consent of its people.

The bill also instructs US representatives at international organizations to use their influence to advocate against Chinese efforts to "distort the decisions, language, policies, or procedures" of such organizations as it relates to Taiwan.

In addition, the legislation requires the US State Department to report to Congress annually on efforts by China to undermine Taiwan's membership or observer status at international organizations.

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UK Starts 'Dirty Procedures' at Security Council, Blocks Briefers - Russian Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - The United Kingdom has tried during its presidency of the UN Security Council to prevent Russia-picked briefers on Ukraine from attending a meeting requested by the Russian mission to the United Nations, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the world body Dmitry Polyanskiy said.

"[T]he British presidency of the Security Council has already started dirty procedures in order to prevent our speakers from being admitted. The truth hurts the eyes of our Western colleagues too much," Polyanskiy said via Telegram on Tuesday.

The diplomat said the Russian mission cannot disclose at present the names of the briefers in order to protect them from potential retaliation by the Kiev regime, given that such practices had occurred in the past.

On Wednesday, two meetings on Ukraine will be held at the UN Security Council. The first one was requested by the Russian mission to the United Nations on the discrimination against canonical Orthodox Christians in Ukraine. The second meeting will address the recent attacks on the infrastructure of Ukrainian ports.

The United Kingdom presides over the UN Security Council during the month of July.

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White House On Biden's Dog Attacking Personnel: 'Can Be Very Stressful' For Pets

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The White House refuses to comment on Commander, Biden's German Shepherd who has made a habit of attacking members of the Secret Service recently, but Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre seemed sympathetic to the animal when she said on Tuesday that the compound can be "stressful" for pets.

"The White House can be unique and very stressful; you could imagine what it's like for a pet," said Karine when asked about the dog biting Secret Service agents.

Records, accessed by the conservative watchdog group Judicial Watch via a Freedom of Information Act request, show that Commander was involved in at least 10 biting incidents between October 2022 and January 2023.

Biden's other dog, a German Shepherd named Major, was sent to live in Delaware after multiple biting incidents during his owner's first year in the White House.

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US Astronaut Still Scheduled to Fly in Soyuz Spacecraft in September - NASA Official

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - A US astronaut will still be flying on a Russian manned Soyuz mission to the International Space Station (ISS) in September as planned and cooperation between NASA and Roscosmos, the US and Russian national space agencies, is continuing unchanged, NASA ISS Program Manager Joel Montelbano said.

"[A] NASA astronaut will be flying in the Soyuz mission," Montelbano told reporters on Tuesday. "To me, it is exciting to continue the integrated crew work [between US and Russian astronauts and cosmonauts] that we started about a year or so ago."

Montelbano emphasized that concerns about technical or wider political issues had not impacted the continued cooperation between the space agencies on supplying and jointly operating the ISS.

"Our cooperation with Roscosmos hasn't changed at all. ...In Houston, we continue to have Russian colleagues in the Mission Control Center working side by side with our US specialists. Again, nothing has changed. We are ready to go and there are no major changes in our cooperation," he said.

Montelbano said he and NASA Space Operations Mission Directorate Associate Administrator Ken Bowersox visited Moscow less than two weeks ago and held talks on continued cooperation with their colleagues in Roscosmos.

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White House Says Will Not Comment on Upcoming Hunter Biden Court Appearance

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said they will not comment on an upcoming court appearance by US President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, given that he is a private citizen.

"I'm just not going to get into anything that's related to Hunter Biden. He's a private citizen," Jean-Pierre said on Tuesday, when asked about the upcoming court appearance.

Hunter Biden is scheduled to initially appear in the US District Court for the District of Delaware on Wednesday for a change of plea hearing, according to court schedules.

Last month, US Attorney for the District of Delaware David Weiss announced that Hunter Biden agreed to plead guilty to two misdemeanor tax offenses and enter into a pretrial diversion agreement for a felony firearms offense as part of a deal.

Hunter Biden is not expected to face prison time as part of the deal, which has been criticized by some Republican lawmakers who are investigating Joe and Hunter Biden for alleged criminal activities.

The tentative plea deal would not impact the US House Oversight Committee's investigation into a possible foreign bribery scheme, involving the Bidens and Ukrainian energy company Burisma, panel chairman James Comer has said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) -

RUSSIA-AFRICA SUMMIT

* Russian President Vladimir Putin will deliver a major speech at the plenary session of the Russia-Africa summit on Friday, Kremlin aide Yury Ushakov said on Tuesday, adding that 17 African leaders will attend the session.

* Participation of many countries in the Russia-Africa summit in St. Petersburg shows their desire to strengthen relations with Moscow despite current circumstances, Ushakov said, adding that 49 African nations out of 54 will present at the summit.

* Putin will hold a working breakfast with heads of region organizations of African countries on Thursday, Ushakov said.

* Putin will discuss the situation in Ukraine during a working lunch with African leaders on Friday, Ushakov said.

IMF WORLD ECONOMIC OUTLOOK

* The International Monetary Fund has revised upward its forecast for Russia in 2023 by 0.8 percentage points to 1.5%, according to the World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

* The IMF said that it projects global economic growth would fall from 3.5% in 2022 to 3% in 2023 and also next year.

* Global inflation is expected to decline to 6.8% in 2023 and to 5.2% in 2024, the report said.

* Economic growth in the United States is expected to slow to 1.8% in 2023 and 1% in 2024,

the report said.

* The IMF expects oil prices to fall by 21% in 2023, the report said.

TREVOR REED IN UKRAINE

* Trevor Reed, a US Marine who spent two years in a Russian prison and was freed in a prisoner swap in 2022, is again pleading for help to return to the United States after he was wounded while fighting in Ukraine as a mercenary, The Messenger reported on Tuesday.

* Reed was transported by a non-governmental organization to Germany for treatment, US State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said.

CHANGES IN CHINESE GOVERNMENT

* The Chinese parliament appointed Central Foreign Affairs Office Director Wang Yi to be the country's new foreign minister and announced that Qin Gang has resigned.

* Wang will visit Turkey on July 26, the Turkish Foreign Ministry said.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS

* There are plans to hold a summit of the leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia this year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said on Tuesday.

* A possible peace treaty between Armenia and Azerbaijan most likely will not contain wording about Nagorno-Karabakh that is suitable for both sides, Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan said.

* Nagorno-Karabakh is currently facing a serious humanitarian crisis, and the situation is only getting worse, Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan said

GRAIN EXPORTS AGREEMENT

* The United Nations is communicating with Russia "at various levels" after Moscow decided not to extend its participation in the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, and the agreement expired, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Tuesday.

* UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has not given up on the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, and continues his efforts to resuscitate the deal, Haq said.

* Russia is ready to return to the Black Sea Initiative if the obligations concerning Moscow are implemented, Kremlin aide Yury Ushakov said.

* A letter from Guterres contained an action plan on the Black Sea Grain Initiative and a promise that obligations towards Russia could be fulfilled in future, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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Hunter Biden May Plead Guilty in US Court for Deal on Tax, Firearms Offenses

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Hunter Biden, son of US President Joe Biden, may plead guilty in a US court on Wednesday to two misdemeanor tax offenses and enter into a pretrial diversion agreement for a felony firearms offense as part of the deal.

Last month, US Attorney for the District of Delaware David Weiss announced that Biden agreed to plead guilty to the two tax offenses as part of a deal to resolve all three charges.

The tax charges carry maximum sentences of one year in prison each, while the firearm charge carries up to 10 years. Biden is not expected to face any jail time under the plea agreement, although a judge will have the final say.

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The deal would resolve a five-year investigation into Biden by the Justice Department, according to his attorney. The Justice Department said its probe into Biden remained ongoing following the announcement of the tentative plea deal.

Hunter and Joe Biden are also the subject of US House investigations into alleged criminal activity by the president's family, including a foreign bribery scheme involving Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

The US House Oversight Committee likewise continues its probe into the Bidens despite the tentative plea agreement with the Justice Department, panel chairman James Comer said. Comer characterized the agreement as a "sweetheart deal" and a "slap on the wrist."

The deal was also criticized by former US President Donald Trump, who frequently alleges that the US justice system has been weaponized in favor of the Biden administration.

Earlier this month, FBI Director Christopher Wray told lawmakers that the agency is not protecting the Biden family.

However, US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) whistleblowers also told lawmakers this month that their own probe into Hunter Biden's receipt of foreign money was hindered by the Justice Department.

The IRS whistleblowers said that they uncovered evidence supporting felony tax evasion charges against Biden, although he was only ultimately charged with misdemeanor offenses.

Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden have said in response to the situation that they "love their son" and will continue to support him in life.

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NASA Delaying ISS Crew 7 Takeoff by Two Days For Early Comsat Launch - Officials

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - NASA and SpaceX are delaying the launch of the next crew to the International Space Station (ISS) in a dragon spacecraft by two days until August 17 because of the need to reconfigure its launch pad after an earlier unmanned liftoff with a heavy booster, senior agency officials told a press conference on Tuesday.

"We are going to adjust the launch date a few days to the right," NASA Commercial Crew Program Manager Steve Stich told reporters. "We will adjust the launch date to turn the pad

around after our Falcon 9 Heavy Launch Vehicle."

The previous scheduled launch date announced by NASA was August 15. The Falcon 9 Heavy will be carrying the EchoStar Jupiter 3 communications satellite into orbit.

The Falcon 9 heavy booster, also built by SpaceX, is scheduled to launch an Echo Star mission into orbit on Wednesday, July 26 off Launch Pad 39A at Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral in the US state of Florida. It is the same launch pad that the ISS SpaceX Dragon manned mission to the ISS will take off from.

The SpaceX Crew 7 mission carrying Russian, Japanese and European members is now scheduled to dock at the ISS at 2:45 am Eastern Daylight Time (EDT) on Friday morning, Stitch added.

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Federal Judge Blocks Biden's Asylum Policy in Blow to Administration - Court Documents

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - A federal judge in the District of Northern California has blocked President Joe Biden's controversial asylum policy in a major blow to the administration, which relied on the measure as part of its post-title 42 strategy, court documents showed on Tuesday.

The Biden administration has 14 days to appeal the ruling, which was handed down by Judge Jon Tigar and nullifies the May 2023 policy that makes migrants ineligible for asylum if they have entered the US illegally and failed to take advantage of lawful pathways set up by the federal government.

According to the court documents, the plaintiffs are left-wing groups that represent and assist asylum seekers. They argue the rule is invalid under the Administrative Procedure Act (APA) because they claim it is unlawful, arbitrary, and issued without adequate opportunity for public comment.

Tigar, who was appointed by Obama, blocked the rule on the basis that its notice procedures are insufficient under the APA, which determines how rules are enacted by federal agencies and requires certain notice and comment periods. Tigar found the 30-day notice period that the Biden administration had initially approved to be insufficient considering the rule's complexity.

"The complexity of the Rule suggests that 30 days is unreasonable, particularly because the agencies were preparing for the end of Title 42 well before it was announced, such that they could have issued the Notice with sufficient time to grant a longer comment period and still have had the Rule in place when Title 42 expired," wrote Tigar in the ruling.

The ruling is likely to have major implications along the US-Mexico border, where tensions between Texas Governor Greg Abbott and the Biden administration are heightened over the floating barriers the state installed in an attempt to curb illegal crossings.

The Justice Department is expected to appeal the ruling.

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US Education Dept. Agrees to Investigate Harvard College Admissions Complaint - Letter

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Education said that it will investigate a civil rights complaint filed against Harvard College for alleged racial discrimination via its donor and legacy admissions programs, according to a letter released by the Lawyers for Civil Rights group.

Earlier this month, a group of organizations filed a complaint with the Department of Education through the legal group, alleging that Harvard's donor and legacy admissions practices provide preferential treatment for mostly white applicants.

"This letter is to notify you that the US Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has opened for investigation the above-referenced complaint you filed against Harvard University," the Department of Education said in a letter, dated Monday.

The complaint was filed under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination on the basis of race or national origin in any program receiving federal funding through the Department of Education.

OCR will investigate specifically whether Harvard is violating Title VI by using donor and legacy preferences in its undergraduate admissions process, the letter said.

Nearly 70% of donor-related and legacy applicants are white, according to the civil rights complaint. Donor-related applicants were nearly seven times more likely to be admitted to Harvard than non-related applicants, and legacy applicants were six times as likely to be admitted.

The opening of an investigation in no way implies that OCR has made a determination on the merits of the complaint, the letter said.

OCR will investigate the matter by collecting and analyzing relevant evidence from the complainant, Harvard and other sources as appropriate, the letter said.

The complaint and investigation come following a US Supreme Court decision in June that banned race-based college admissions practices, stemming from a lawsuit against Harvard.

The court ruled that Harvard and University of North Carolina's consideration of race in their college admissions practices violated the Fourteenth Amendment of the US Constitution, which guarantees equal protection under the law.

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US House Panel to Vote on Thursday on Holding Zuckerberg in Contempt of Congress

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - US House Judiciary Committee will vote on July 27 over holding Meta (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) CEO Mark Zuckerberg in contempt of Congress for failing to comply with its subpoena, the panel said on Tuesday.

"The House Judiciary Committee will hold a markup on Thursday, July 27, 2023, at 2 p.m.," the committee said. "Legislation to be considered includes: Report Recommending that the House

of Representatives Cite Mark Zuckerberg for Contempt of Congress."

Earlier this year, the committee requested information from Meta and other tech companies about their content moderation policies as part of a broader probe by lawmakers into the alleged weaponization of the federal government and collusion with tech companies to censor speech.

Fox Business said on Tuesday, citing sources familiar with the matter, that Meta has not provided internal communications regarding the company's censorship efforts.

The report also quoted a Meta spokesperson, who told Fox Business last week that the company provided lawmakers with over 50,000 pages of documents requested by the committee. He also noted that nearly a dozen current and former company personnel are ready to discuss external and internal issues.

In May, the committee's chairman Jim Jordan warned Meta that the company's response was insufficient, in violation of a request for internal communications between employees.

Earlier in July, Jordan sent a letter to Zuckerberg, requesting information related to Meta's new social media platform Threads, "given that Meta has censored First Amendment-protected speech as a result of government agencies' request and demands in the past." Jordan's letter comes amid an investigation by the House Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government, which he chairs, into the US government's purported misuse of power to target political opponents and suppress disfavored speech online.

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Three US Marines Assigned at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina Found Dead - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - Three US Marines who were assigned at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina were found lifeless and an investigation to clarify the circumstances of death is currently ongoing, Task & Purpose reported on Tuesday.

The three marines were found dead on July 23 in a privately owned vehicle in the city of Hampstead in North Carolina, the report said citing 2nd Marine Logistics Group Corps officials, and the circumstances of death are being investigated by the Pender County Sheriff's Department.

The individuals have been identified as Marine Corps Lance Cpl. Merax Dockery and Ivan Garcia, both aged 23, and nineteen-year-old Tanner Kaltenberg, the report added.

On Sunday, media reported that three marines were found dead by law enforcement at Speedway gas station in Hampstead by Pender County Sheriff' Office deputies, after they answered missing person calls.

It was noted by officials that one of the dead individuals was the person declared missing, further adding that there was no indication of it being foul play, and that autopsy reports were awaited by the Sheriffs Department.

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US House Speaker Says Impeachment Inquiry Needed to Uncover Truth About Biden Family

(Updates with more details in paras 5-7)

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - An impeachment inquiry into alleged criminal activity by US President Joe Biden and his son Hunter Biden is necessary to acquire information and effectively investigate the matter, House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said on Tuesday.

"You've got to get to the bottom of the truth, and the only way Congress can do that is to go to an impeachment inquiry that gives Republicans and Democrats the ability to get all the information," McCarthy said during a press conference.

Impeachment inquiries allow Congress to investigate matters by bolstering information acquisition powers, McCarthy said.

The statement comes amid investigations by House lawmakers into an alleged foreign bribery scheme involving then-Vice President Joe Biden, Hunter Biden and executives of the Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

The investigation is rooted in allegations made by a highly trusted, confidential FBI informant. McCarthy is unable to simply ignore such information as an elected official, the lawmakers said.

As US House of Representatives investigations into the Biden family's alleged criminal activity have uncovered more information, the matter has risen to the level of an impeachment inquiry, McCarthy said.

Biden and other White House officials have repeatedly denied that the president was involved in foreign business deals with Hunter.

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US Flowing Security Aid to Ukraine at 'Incredibly Rapid Pace' - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is flowing military aid to Ukraine at an "incredibly rapid pace" as Ukraine grapples with ammunition hunger amid its counteroffensive, Pentagon Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday.

"We are flowing aid and security assistance to Ukraine at an incredibly rapid pace," Singh said during a press briefing.

The Department of Defense continues to work with the industry to ramp up production of needed ammunition and also works with US allies and partners in the defense industrial base to increase US stockpiles, Singh added.

Earlier on Tuesday, the Pentagon announced another package of security assistance for Ukraine worth \$400 million, which includes armored vehicles, anti-armor weapons, as well as munitions for air defense and artillery systems.

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US Has Not Heard Back From N. Korea Regarding Defected Private Travis King - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - The United States has not yet heard back from North Korea regarding the location and well-being of US soldier Travis King, Defense Department Deputy Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday.

"We have not heard anything back from the DPRK on how he [King] is doing, on his well-being, on where he is," Singh said during a press briefing.

The United States remains concerned about private King and continues to work through the interagency on engaging with Pyongyang, but to date has not received any response from North Korean officials, Singh added.

On Monday, the United Nations Command said that it had begun discussions with North Korea regarding Travis King.

On Tuesday, July 18, the United Nations said that a US national had been detained by North Korea after illegally crossing the border from South Korea.

Later in the day, 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.

UN Command Deputy Commander Lt. Gen. Andrew Harrison said King was serving with the US Army in South Korea and had recently completed a two-month prison sentence for assault and for destroying public property. King had reportedly been due to return to the United States for further disciplinary action.

King managed to join a tour of the demilitarized zone while he was at the Seoul airport and then ran across the border into North Korea.

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Russia Calls on Countries to Help, Facilitate Peace Efforts in West Africa - UN Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 25 (Sputnik) - Russia calls on countries outside the region of West Africa to support the region and help to facilitate settlements, the Russian Deputy Permanent Representative Anna Evstigneeva said on Tuesday.

"We call upon countries outside the region to facilitate these contacts, and to refrain from steps that may undermine this process," Evstigneeva told the Security Council members in a meeting on West Africa.

We refer to the spillover into this already volatile region by the envious posture of Western countries, she added.

The main role and maintenance of peace and security needs to be in the hands of the region. Earlier today, the Kremlin said that all African countries have been subjected to an unprecedented level of pressure from the United States, France and other Western nations to prevent the upcoming Russia-Africa summit.

The second Russia-Africa Summit and Economic Forum will be held in St. Petersburg from July 27-28.

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Pentagon Says No Indications Russia, Iran Coordinate on Reaper Drone Incidents in Syria

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - The United States sees no indications of coordination between Russia and Iran on recent incidents between US MQ-9 Reaper drones and Russian aircraft over Syria, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday.

"I don't have anything to speak to in terms of that these are coordinated events with our MQ-9 aircraft and Russian pilots or Russian aircraft. I don't have any indication that says that this is a coordinated effort between Russia and Iran," Singh during a press briefing.

Singh further added that although there is an increasing number of incidents between Russian and American aircraft, the US does not seek escalation, including war, with Russia.

The spokesperson said that Russia's "unprofessional behavior" in Syria disregards US-led efforts against the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia), while also distracting it from carrying its operations. Singh also called on Moscow to "abide by international law."

Earlier today, the US Air Force said that on July 23, flares from a Russian fighter jet struck a US MQ-9 Reaper drone that was on an anti-terrorist mission in Syria, causing severe damage to its propellers.

The US Air Force Central Command called on Russian forces to stop what they characterized as "reckless, unprovoked, and unprofessional behavior."

The latest incident comes as the Russian Center for the Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria accuses the US-led coalition of systemic violations of deconfliction protocols during UAV flights over northern Syria. The Russian military previously warned it is not responsible for the safety of uncoordinated UAV flights. On Monday, Russia said that drones of the US-led coalition breached the deconfliction protocols 15 times over the past day.

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Biden Says US to Cancel \$130Mln in Debt for 7,400 Student Borrowers - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - The US government will cancel \$130 million in debt for 7,400 student borrowers in Colorado who were lied to and ended up with significant amounts of debt, President Joe Biden said on Tuesday.

"Today, we are taking another significant step to deliver on that promise by canceling \$130 million in debt for 7,400 student borrowers who attended CollegeAmerica in Colorado. These borrowers were lied to, ripped off and saddled with mountains of debt," Biden said in a statement.

The Biden administration has approved \$116 billion in debt relief for more than 3.4 million Americans, including over a million students, the president said.

Biden also promised never to stop fighting to deliver relief to borrowers and make college education accessible to more Americans.

In addition, Biden emphasized the necessity to hold "bad actors" accountable for their actions. Last week, the White House announced a decision to wipe out \$39 billion worth of student debt for 804,000 borrowers.

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"You've got to get to the bottom of the truth, and the only way Congress can do that is to go to an impeachment inquiry that gives Republicans and Democrats the ability to get all the information," McCarthy said during a press conference.

Impeachment inquiries allow Congress to investigate matters by bolstering information acquisition powers, McCarthy said.

The statement comes amid investigations by House lawmakers into an alleged foreign bribery scheme involving then-Vice President Joe Biden, Hunter Biden and executives of the Ukrainian energy company Burisma.

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NASA-Roscosmos Cooperation Continues With No Change, Ready for Another Launch - Manager

UNITED NATIONS, July 25 (Sputnik) - The cooperation between NASA and Roscosmos has not changed following Soyuz coolant leak and NASA is ready to launch Crew-7 with Roscosmos cosmonaut, the NASA International Space Station Program Manager Joel Montalbano said on Tuesday.

"No changes at all... In Houston, we continue to have our Russian colleagues in the center working side by side with our US specialists. Again, nothing has changed and we are ready to go," Montalbano said during the press conference.

NASA said the Crew7 is now set to launch to the ISS no earlier than August 17. The initial launch was no earlier than August 15. It is the seventh rotational mission of NASA and SpaceX as part of the agency's Commercial Crew Program. Konstantin Borisov from Roscosmos is part of the 4-manned crew.

Earlier Today, NASA lost communication with the International Space Station (ISS) due to a power problem at mission control in Houston, although contact has been restored via Russian assets and neither the crew nor vehicle is in danger.

In December of last year, shortly before a spacewalk, the thermal circuit of the manned spacecraft Soyuz MS-22 depressurized. A Soyuz-2.1a rocket with the Soyuz MS-23 unmanned spacecraft docked on the ISS from the Baikonur Cosmodrome on February 26. Today, the conclusion of Roscosmos is that some external force was the result of the leak.

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Biden Nominates Derek Chollet for Defense Undersecretary for Policy Position - White House

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has nominated State Department Counselor Derek Chollet to be the next Undersecretary of Defense for Policy to replace Colin Kahl who departed the department earlier in July, the White House said on Tuesday.

Before assuming office as the State Department Counselor in January 2021, Chollet also served as the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs between June 2012 and November 2014 under then-President Barack Obama.

Chollet was among the US diplomats who were helping negotiate a deal between Germany and the United States in 2021 that threatened new sanctions linked to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline if Russia cuts gas supplies to Europe. The deal became obsolete in the aftermath of explosions that made the pipeline inoperable.

Outside of government positions, between 2016 and 2020 Chollet served as Executive Vice President at The German Marshall Fund of the United States.

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US State Dept. Says Trevor Reed Injured in Ukraine, Evacuated by NGO to Germany

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - US Marine Corps veteran and former detainee in Russia Trevor Reed was injured while fighting in Ukraine and transported by a non-governmental organization to Germany for treatment, US State Department Principal Deputy Spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Tuesday.

"We are aware that Trevor Reed was injured while participating in fighting in Ukraine," Patel said during a press briefing. "Mr. Reed was not engaged in any activities on behalf of the US government."

Reed was transported to Germany through the support of a non-governmental organization to receive medical care, Patel said.

The US government is not in a place to provide evacuations from Ukraine for private citizens, Patel also said.

The US government has repeatedly warned Americans that they face significant risks by traveling to Ukraine to engage in hostilities, Patel added.

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State Dept. After Qin Gang Replaced: Up to China to Decide Who Their Foreign Minister Is

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - It is up to China to decide who their foreign minister is, the US State Department said Tuesday, after Beijing ousted Foreign Minister Qin Gang following seven months of service.

"First, it is up to China to decide who their foreign minister is," deputy spokesman Vedant Patel said during a press briefing.

Patel added that the United States will continue to engage with newly appointed Foreign Minister Wang Yi and other PRC officials.

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NASA Lost Contact With ISS Due to Power Issue in Houston, Crew Not in Danger - Official

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - NASA lost communication with the International Space Station (ISS) on Tuesday due to a power problem at mission control in Houston, although contact has been restored via Russian assets and neither the crew nor vehicle is in danger, Program Manager Joel Montalbano said at a briefing.

"Earlier this morning, about eight o'clock central time, we had a power problem in the mission control center Houston, where we lost command, telemetry, voice to the ISS from mission control center Houston. There was not an issue on board, it was clearly a ground problem. We were able to talk to the crew through Russian assets about 20 minutes after the failure," he said. "At no time was the crew or the vehicle in any danger."

The official also said NASA hopes to study and fix the ground problem and be back to normal configuration by end of day.

NASA said the Crew7 is now set to launch to the ISS no earlier than August 17. The initial launch was no earlier than August 15.

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US Marine Veteran Freed From Russia in Prisoner Swap Injured Fighting in Ukraine - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - Trevor Reed, a US marine veteran who spent two years in a Russian prison and was freed in a prisoner swap in 2022, is again pleading for help to return to the United States after he was wounded while fighting as a mercenary against Russian forces in Ukraine, US news website The Messenger reported on Tuesday.

According to two US military officials, Reed was injured after he stepped on a landmine about two weeks ago and suffered shrapnel wounds, the report said.

The extent of Reed's injuries remains unknown, the report also said.

Reed was being treated in Kiev and had requested to be transferred to a US military facility in either Germany or Poland, but Ukrainian authorities refused to allow him to leave the country because of his signed contract with the Ukrainian military, the report said.

US officials have privately shared their frustration over Reed's situation considering how much effort it took to bring him back to the United States from Russia, the report added.

In April 2022, Washington and Moscow exchanged two prisoners for the first time in 12 years. Russian pilot Konstantin Yaroshenko, who was serving a 20-year sentence in the United States on charges of drug trafficking, was exchanged for Reed, who was serving a nine-year sentence in Russia for disorderly conduct and fighting police officers.

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US Providing \$400Mln in New Aid to Ukraine, Including Air Defense Munitions - Pentagon
(Updates with more details in para 4)

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is providing up to \$400 million in new security assistance to Ukraine, including munitions for air defense and artillery systems, the US Defense Department said on Tuesday.

"Today's commitment in security assistance, valued at up to \$400 million, includes additional air defense munitions, artillery and other ammunition, armored vehicles, anti-armor weapons, and other equipment to help Ukraine counter Russia's ongoing war of aggression," the Defense Department said in a statement.

The new package includes munitions for Patriot air defense systems and National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems (NASAMS), as well as ammunition for High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and 155mm artillery pieces, the statement said.

The package also includes Javelin anti-armor systems, Stinger anti-aircraft systems, Stryker vehicles, Hornet drones and Hydra-70 aircraft rockets, according to the statement.

The United States, its allies and partners will stand with Ukraine for "as long as it takes" to defeat Russia and re-take its territory, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on the latest military aid package.

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The US, its allies and partners will stand with Ukraine for “as long as it takes” to take territory from and defeat Russia, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said in a statement on the package.

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US Marine Veteran Freed From Russia in Swap Injured While Fighting in Ukraine - Reports

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US Defense Chief Underscores Need for Consensus in Israel Amid Reform Protests - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin held a call with Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant to express the United States' belief in the need for political consensus in Israel amid protests against judicial reforms in the country, the US Defense Department said on Tuesday.

"During their conversation, Secretary Austin underscored the United States' belief that broad consensus through political dialogue, especially in the coming weeks and months, are critical elements of a resilient democracy," the Defense Department said in a statement.

The call occurred amid protests in Israel against judicial reforms that limit the power of the country's Supreme Court to review the government's decisions. On Monday, the Israeli parliament approved a draft law on the concept of "reasonableness" within the framework of the judiciary. The judicial reforms aim to limit the power of the Supreme Court to overturn government actions by being able to declare them unreasonable.

Austin underscored that the United States' commitment to Israel's security is unwavering, the statement said.

The two leaders also discussed Iran's alleged threats to regional security and agreed to cooperate to counter them, the statement said.

Moreover, Austin expressed concern about the urgent need for Israeli and Palestinian officials to take meaningful steps to ensure stability in the West Bank, the statement added.

Austin urged Gallant to address extremist settler violence against Palestinian civilians and continue to work to improve economic opportunity for Palestinians in the West Bank, according to the statement.

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US Envoy to OSCE Avoids Question on Abbot Arrest in Kiev, Talks of Odessa Attacks Instead

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE) Michael Carpenter avoided answering a question about the Kiev regime detaining the abbot of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, Metropolitan Pavel, and shifted the discussion to the recent attack on an Orthodox cathedral in Odessa.

"I do not have anything specific for you on this," Carpenter told reporters on Tuesday when asked about the detention of Metropolitan Pavel.

Instead, Carpenter accused Russia of allegedly targeting Orthodox churches and other cultural heritage in Ukraine, saying the attacks are "deeply disturbing."

Carpenter also blamed Russia for partially destroying the Transfiguration Cathedral in n Odessa, which he called a "real architectural gem."

In April, the Kiev regime put Metropolitan Pavel of the canonical Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC) under house arrest allegedly for collaborating with Russia and for inter-religious incitement. On July 14, a Kiev court ruled that Metropolitan Pavel should remain in custody until August 14.

Russian Patriarch Kirill has contacted various prominent religious and political figures and urged them to pay attention to the ongoing persecution of the UOC and its members in Ukraine. On Sunday, the Russian Defense Ministry dismissed Kiev's claims that a Russian missile strike had hit the Transfiguration Cathedral in Odessa, noting that all targets were located at a safe distance from it. The damage to the cathedral was most likely caused by a Ukrainian anti-aircraft missile, according to the Defense Ministry.

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UPS, Teamsters Union Reach Five-Year Agreement to Avoid Labor Strike - Company Statement

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - UPS and the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, representing about 330,000 UPS employees in the US, have reached a five-year agreement to avoid a labor strike, the company said on Tuesday.

"Together we reached a win-win-win agreement on the issues that are important to Teamsters leadership, our employees and to UPS and our customers," UPS CEO Carol Tome said.

The agreement rewards UPS's personnel with "industry-leading" pay and benefits. At the same time, it gives the company the flexibility needed to stay competitive in the market, Tome added.

"The five-year agreement covers US Teamsters-represented employees in small-package roles and is subject to voting and ratification by union members," according to the statement.

7/25/2023 12:45:22 PM -04:00

Pentagon Chief in Call With Israeli Counterpart Underscored Need for 'Broad Consensus Through Political Dialogue' Amid Judicial Reform Protests

Sputnik

7/25/2023 12:40:35 PM -04:00

UN in Contact With Russia 'At Various Levels' After Grain Deal Expired - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, July 25 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is communicating with Russia "at various levels" after Moscow decided not to extend its participation in the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, and the agreement expired, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Tuesday.

"We are continuing our contacts at various levels," Haq said during a press briefing when asked whether the United Nations has been in contact with Russia since the grain exports agreement expired on July 17.

7/25/2023 12:39:17 PM -04:00

US Screen Actors Guild Holds Rally in Support of Strikes in New York's Times Square

(Adds details from Christian Slater speech in paras 2-5)

NEW YORK, July 25 (Sputnik) - The Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) held a rally in New York City's Times Square in support of the organization's labor strike, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Tuesday.

Actor Christian Slater who starred in Interview With the Vampire and many other movies told the audience that people came to defend their wages and save their healthcare. He said from the stage that employers' payments remain unchanged for 40 years.

"It is too long," he said.

The actor also noted that protesters can achieve fair wages "at all levels."

Slater promised to continue fighting for rights. Yet he also noted that it is not important how long and how difficult this fight will be.

Other actors, including Steve Buscemi, are expected to take part in the so-called Rock the City for a Fair Contract rally.

The event has drawn hundreds of participants to the area between 43rd and 44th Avenues.

"Pay the actors, pay the screenwriters," has become one of the primary slogans of those on strike.

The strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) failed to reach an agreement with SAG-AFTRA to improve working conditions for actors and other media company employees. The Writers Guild of America also went on strike over a labor dispute with AMPTP.

Former 20th Century Fox and Paramount executive director Barry Diller has said the film industry is approaching an "absolute collapse" if the strikes do not end before September 1.

The Biden administration hopes that the parties can reach a mutually beneficial agreement as soon as possible, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said earlier this month.

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UN Chief Not Giving Up, Continues His Efforts on Restoring Grain Deal - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 25 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has not given up on the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, and continues his efforts to resuscitate the deal, United Nations spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Tuesday.

"As the Secretary-General made it clear, he has not given up on this because it's essential, not just for the two countries, but for the well-being of the world. We can confirm that we are continuing with our efforts," Haq said during a press briefing.

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US Consumer Confidence at 2-Year High as Inflation Retreats - Conference Board

NEW YORK, July 25 (Sputnik) - Consumer confidence in the United States hit two-year highs in July as consumers' short-term outlook on income, business and labor market conditions improved amid a retreat in inflation, the Conference Board said on Tuesday.

"Consumer confidence rose in July 2023 to its highest level since July 2021, reflecting pops in both current conditions and expectations," the Conference Board said in a statement. "The proportion of consumers saying recession is 'somewhat' or 'very likely' to occur ticked up in July, contrary to the Expectations Index spiking this month above the threshold of 80."

Nevertheless, recession expectations remain below their recent peak, suggesting that fears of a recession have eased relative to earlier this year, the statement said.

The organization's flagship Consumer Confidence Index increased to 117 this month from 110.1 in June.

Conference Board Chief Economist Dana Peterson said headline confidence appears to have broken out of the sideways trend that prevailed for much of the last year.

"Greater confidence was evident across all age groups, and among both consumers earning incomes less than \$50,000 and those making more than \$100,000," Peterson said.

"Assessments of the present situation rose in July on brighter views of employment conditions, where the spread between consumers saying jobs are 'plentiful' versus 'hard to get' widened further. This likely reflects upbeat feelings about a labor market that continues to outperform."

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, hit a four-decade high of 9.1% per year in June 2022 in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic measures and the trillions of dollars of relief spending.

The Federal Reserve responded by raising interest rates, adding a total of 5% in ten installments to the prior rate of 0.25%.

Inflation subsequently eased, falling to as low as 3% in the Consumer Price Index reading for July. But that is still well above the Fed's long-term target of 2%, with officials at the central bank saying they feared renewed spikes if consumers start spending big again.

The Fed is supposed to decide again on interest rates on July 26, with economists saying there was a high probability the central bank would add another quarter percent to rates.

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Mali Cooperating With UN on Safe MINUSMA Withdrawal From Country 'Critical' - US Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 25 (Sputnik) - It is critical for the transitional government of Mali to cooperate with the United Nations on the safe withdrawal of the UN mission - more commonly known by its acronym MINUSMA - from the country, US deputy envoy to the world body Robert Wood said on Tuesday.

"It is critical that the transition government of Mali fully cooperate with the UN to ensure a safe and orderly withdrawal of MINUSMA. This includes fully respecting the Status of Forces Agreement until the final MINUSMA element departs beyond December 31," Wood said during

a meeting of the UN Security Council on peace consolidation in West Africa.

Wood said once the plan for MINUSMA's transition is finalized, the United States would welcome discussions on what additional resources the United Nations Office for West Africa and the Sahel (UNOWAS) may require for maintaining and increasing activities there.

On June 30, the UN Security Council unanimously voted to end the MINUSMA - the Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali - and to fully withdraw by the end of 2023.

The decision came after the Malian government asked the United Nations to urgently withdraw its mission from the country. The government said MINUSMA's ten-year presence in Mali failed to adequately respond to the security situation there and contributed to the escalating tensions.

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US Screen Actors Guild Holds Rally in Support of Strikes in New York's Times Square

NEW YORK, July 25 (Sputnik) - The Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) held a rally in New York City's Times Square in support of the organization's labor strike, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Tuesday.

Actors including Steve Buscemi and Christian Slater are expected to take part in the so-called Rock the City for a Fair Contract rally.

The event has drawn hundreds of participants to the area between 43rd and 44th avenues. "Pay the actors, pay the screenwriters," has become one of the primary slogans of those on strike.

The strike against the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) failed to reach an agreement with SAG-AFTRA to improve working conditions for actors and other media company employees. The Writers Guild of America also went on strike over a labor dispute with AMPTP.

Former 20th Century Fox and Paramount executive director Barry Diller has said the film industry is approaching an "absolute collapse" if the strikes do not end before September 1.

The Biden administration hopes that the parties can reach a mutually beneficial agreement as soon as possible, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said earlier this month.

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Envoy to OSCE on Killing of Russian Reporter: US Condemns Any Attack on Journalists

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - The United States condemns any attack on journalists regardless of where they occur, US Ambassador to the Organization of European Security and Co-Operation (OSCE) Michael Carpenter said on Tuesday.

Carpenter made the statement in response to a question about the killing of Russian news service RIA Novosti reporter Rostislav Zhuravlev by Ukrainian troops via cluster munitions.

"The United States condemns any attack on journalists wherever they take place," Carpenter said during a press briefing.

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Biden's German Shepherd 'Commander' Involved in 10 Attacks in 4 Months - Watchdog

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden's German shepherd, Commander, has been involved in 10 attacks in a four-month span involving people tied to the White House, watchdog group Judicial Watch said on Tuesday.

"Judicial Watch announced today that it received 194 pages of records from the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) revealing 10 attacks by President Joe Biden's German Shepherd, Commander, on officers and agents of the US Secret Service (USSS) between October 2022 and January 2023, and do not include any possible recent events," Judicial Watch said in a statement.

In several instances, the victims of the attacks required medical care, including at a hospital, the statement said.

In addition to USSS personnel, Commander also attacked a technical security investigator at the Bidens' house in Wilmington, Delaware, the statement said.

The incidents come following the departure of another Biden dog, Major, from the White House in December 2021 for biting personnel. Commander was brought to the White House as a puppy in coincidence with Major's departure from the presidential residence.

"What a joke... if it wasn't their [the Bidens'] dog he would already have been put down – freaking clown needs a muzzle," one Secret Service employee reportedly said in an email to an injured colleague.

USSS attempted to illegally hide documents about the abuse of its agents and officers by the Biden family, Judicial Watch President Tom Fitton said in the statement.

The communications were released through a Freedom of Information Act lawsuit filed after USSS failed to adequately respond to a December 2022 request for records relating to Commander's aggression, which was based on a tip about the dog's behavior, the statement said.

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US Determined to Keep Russia Isolated at OSCE - Ambassador

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is resolved to keep Russia isolated at the Organization for Security and Co-Operation in Europe (OSCE), US Ambassador to the OSCE Michael Carpenter said on Tuesday.

"We are determined to keep Russia isolated at the OSCE, where, currently, not a single other

OSCE participating state supports Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine," Carpenter told reporters.

Carpenter also said that the United States will not allow Russia to veto OSCE's efforts to support Ukraine.

The OSCE now has a field mission in Ukraine that provides the country with different types of support, Carpenter added.

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UK's UN Envoy Says African Leaders Should Send 'Strong' Message to Putin at Summit

UNITED NATIONS, July 25 (Sputnik) - The United Kingdom believes that African leaders should send a "strong" message to Russian President Vladimir Putin during the Russia-Africa Summit in St. Petersburg this week, UK Ambassador to the UN Barbara Woodward said on Tuesday.

"I think the Russia-Africa Summit this week is a very important one. It would be wonderful if African leaders were really strong in their messaging to President Putin," Woodward said at a UN Security Council stakeout.

She claimed that Russia has promised a considerable amount of investments in Africa, but only a small amount has materialized.

The second Russia-Africa Summit will take place in St. Petersburg from July 27-28. The Kremlin said it views the summit as an important opportunity to discuss the Black Sea Grain Initiative and Russia's support for Africa.

The summit comes against the backdrop of the collapse of the Black Sea grain deal, an agreement that provided for continued grain exports from Ukraine over the past year. The deal expired last week after Russia refused to extend it. Moscow has been dissatisfied that the deal's provisions pertaining to Russia were not fulfilled and that most of the supplies were ending up in rich European countries.

UN data show that the largest share of Ukrainian grain exports ended up in the EU, while Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan and Ethiopia received slightly over 2% of the grain.

On Monday, President Vladimir Putin said Russia would replace Ukrainian grain on the market and continue to supply grain and fertilizers to African countries both on a commercial basis and free-of-charge, despite Western sanctions.

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IMF Hopes World Entered Final Stage of Inflationary Cycle – Chief Economist

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) hopes that the global economy has entered the final stage of the inflationary cycle, IMF Chief Economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said on Tuesday.

"Hopefully, with inflation starting to recede, we have entered the final stage of the inflationary cycle that started in 2021," Gourinchas told reporters at the presentation of IMF's updated World Economic Outlook (WEO).

Gourinchas pointed out that inflationary risk is more balanced now. He also noted that most major economies are less likely to need additional outsized increases in policy rates.

At the same time, he stressed that it is still critical to avoid easing monetary policy.

The IMF said in its updated WEO that global headline inflation is expected to fall from 8.7 percent in 2022 to 6.8 percent in 2023 and 5.2 percent in 2024.

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UN Security Council to Address Attacks on Odessa Wednesday at Ukraine's Request - UK Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, July 25 (Sputnik) - The UN Security Council will convene a meeting on Wednesday at the request of Ukraine to address Russia's attacks on the city of Odessa, United Kingdom Ambassador to the United Nations Barbara Woodward said on Tuesday.

"Tomorrow, at the request of Ukraine, the Security Council will once again meet on Russia's escalatory attacks on Odessa and attempts to weaponize global food supply chains," Woodward said during a media stakeout.

The diplomat pointed out that the strikes against grain storage facilities in Odessa and across Ukraine are calculated part of Russia's strategy to weaponize the global food supply chains.

"Russia doesn't care one bit about people across Africa, Asia and Latin America are facing famine and drought," Woodward said.

The diplomat also said the United Kingdom has information indicating that Russia plans to further destroy grain facilities in Ukraine as well as civilian shipping vessels in the Black Sea.

Woodward called on Russia to return to implementing the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, and allow for global food supply chains to work normally.

Moscow did not extend participation in the grain Black Sea Initiative because its repeated complaints that the provisions of the agreement pertaining to Russia were not fulfilled were continually ignored. Russian officials have also said that most of the grain ended up in the European countries and the humanitarian maritime corridor was abused for transport of weapons that were then used against Russia.

On Sunday, the Russian Defense Ministry said that the strikes in the past several days against Ukrainian military and terrorist infrastructure are based on thoroughly verified and cross-checked information to deliberately avoid striking civilian facilities and cultural and historical heritage sites.

The Russian military also launched an overnight missile strike on facilities that manufactured and prepared drone boats near Odesa, where foreign mercenaries were also present, the Defense Ministry added.

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IMF Says Reasonable To Expect 10-15% Grain Prices Increase After Suspension of Grain Deal

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund considers that it is reasonable to estimate a 10-15% increase in grain prices after the suspension of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, IMF Chief Economist Pierre-Olivier Gourinchas said on Tuesday.

“We are still assessing where we are going to land, but we would be thinking that somewhere in the range of a 10-15 percent increase in prices of grains is a reasonable estimate, although we have to see exactly how this is going to unfold,” Gourinchas told reporters.

Gourinchas called the grain deal “very instrumental,” adding that it helped provide enough grain to the world last year. He also said that suspending this initiative would likely put “upward pressure on food prices.”

On July 18, the Black Sea Grain Initiative, which provided 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 and that most of the supplies were ending up in rich European countries.

UN data shows that the largest share of Ukrainian grain exports ended up in the EU, while Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, and Ethiopia received slightly over 2% of the grain.

On Monday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said Russia would replace Ukrainian grain and gave assurances that Moscow would continue to supply grain and fertilizers to African countries despite sanctions.

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Large Fire Erupted on Brunot Island in Pennsylvania on July 24 - Pittsburgh City Office

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - A large fire erupted on Brunot Island in Pennsylvania on Monday evening as a result of a failure of a specialized transformer at the Duquesne Light facility, the Pittsburgh city office said.

"Just after 8 p.m. on July 24, the Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire, EMS and police responded to a large fire caused by the failure of a specialized transformer at a Duquesne Light facility on Brunot Island," the Pittsburgh city office said in a press release on Tuesday.

The Pittsburgh Bureau of Fire managed to extinguish the fire and douse it with additional water to cool down the site overnight, the release said.

As a result of the incident, the Norfolk Southern Rail line, crossing the Ohio River, had to be temporarily closed and has been since reopened, the release added.

The authorities said no members of the crew at the facility or first responders were injured in the incident, according to the release.

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Tanzania to Receive \$161.1Mln from Canada in Development Aid - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government will provide Tanzania with C\$212.75 million (\$161.1 million) to support food security, education, health as well as reproductive rights in the country, Global Affairs Canada said on Tuesday.

"Today, the Honourable Harjit S. Sajjan, Minister of International Development and Minister responsible for the Pacific Economic Development Agency of Canada, announced funding for \$212.75 million in development programming as he concluded his trip to Tanzania," the ministry said in a statement.

Of the amount, C\$75 million will be given to the Tanzanian government and C\$500,000 to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) to strengthen the country's primary healthcare system for women and girls, Global Affairs said in a statement.

In addition, C\$15 million will be allocated in support of sexual and reproductive health and rights of marginalized adolescent boys and girls in Tanzania, the statement said. Another C\$15 million will exclusively focus on sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and young women aged 10-24.

A total of C\$50 million will be provided for education purposes, another C\$19.25 million will support feminist entrepreneurs focused on the green economy, C\$23 million will strengthen COVID-19 vaccination and reinforce Tanzania's health system, and an additional \$C15 million will be directed to improve girls' health through nutrition.

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Ron DeSantis Uninjured in Car Accident in Tennessee - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, July 25 (Sputnik) - Republican presidential candidate Ron DeSantis was in a car accident on Tuesday morning but was uninjured, the Florida governor's spokesperson said.

"This morning, the governor was in a car accident while traveling to an event in Chattanooga, Tennessee," Press Secretary Bryan Griffin told Fox News in a statement. "He and his team are uninjured."

The event in question was a fundraiser.

Fox reported Monday that some of DeSantis' top campaign officials have told top donors that the campaign is undergoing a reset after overspending in the two months since the governor declared his candidacy.