

8/2/23 Wednesday

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US Stocks Suffer Worst Losses in Six Months Following Fitch's Credit Rating Downgrade

On Tuesday, international credit rating firm Fitch downgraded the US government's credit rating, citing fiscal instability in the wake of another recent budget showdown that risked a federal government default.

US stocks posted big losses on Wednesday, with the Nasdaq suffering its worst loss in six months after losing 2.17% of its value, or 310.47 points, closing at 13,973.45.

Other indices suffered as well, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average losing 348.16 points, or 0.98% of its value, to close at 35,282.52. The S&P 500 lost 1.38% of its value, dropping by 63.34 points to close at 4,513.39.

A day prior, [Fitch Ratings announced](#) it was downgrading the US federal government's credit rating from AAA to AA+, the second time it has done so and for the same reason as the first: shaken confidence in the US government to properly handle its debts.

"The rating downgrade of the United States reflects the expected fiscal deterioration over the next three years, a high and growing general government debt burden, and the erosion of governance relative to 'AA' and 'AAA' rated peers over the last two decades that has manifested in repeated debt limit standoffs and last-minute resolutions," Fitch said.

The decision came after congressional Republicans stonewalled raising the debt ceiling for months, using the threat of a government default to pressure Democrats into agreeing to stiff budget cuts. A deal was finally reached in early June, possibly just days before the Treasury predicted a default might occur. The last time the US' credit rating was downgraded was in 2011, following a nearly identical showdown.

"Investors may use this Fitch downgrade as a reason to take some profits, but we think that was probably a natural part of the market cycle anyway, after such a strong run, very little volatility," Mona Mahajan, senior investment strategist at Edward Jones, told US media. "Broadly speaking, this hasn't deterred our fundamental view of the economy or markets."

Jamie Dimon, the CEO of JPMorgan Chase, the world's largest bank by capitalization, told US media on Wednesday that the downgrading "doesn't really matter that much," but still called it "ridiculous" that other countries that depend on the US, such as Canada, have a higher credit rating than Washington.

"To have them be triple-A and not America is kind of ridiculous," Dimon said. "It's still the most prosperous nation on the planet, it's the most secure nation on the planet."

The downgrade also helped push the yield on the 10-year US Treasury bond to its highest point since last October and also edged the yield on the 2-year Treasury bond up higher as well. The two remain in what economists term an ["inverted yield curve,"](#) meaning the longer-term bonds are worth less than the short term - a telltale indicator that investors anticipate a recession in the coming months.

According to news reports, the bond markets were also responding to news that the US Treasury would be selling off another \$103 billion worth of securities next week, including 3-year, 10-year, and 30-year debts.

A number of other factors also contributed to the losses on Wednesday, including tech stocks that suffered following news that China would limit daily smartphone use for minors.

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Capitol Police: No Sign of Active Shooter After 'Bogus Call' Prompts Senate Building Lockdown

An earlier warning issued by US Capitol Police urged individuals within the Senate office buildings to shelter-in-place after officials received a 911 call reporting an active shooter. US Capitol Police Chief Tom Manger revealed during a Wednesday news conference that all three Senate office buildings were cleared in response to an active shooter report, explaining the 911 call was likely a hoax.

"This may have been a bogus call," Manger told reporters at a briefing at roughly 4 p.m. local time.

"We responded within seconds, we had a group of officers there. We have been training for active shooters for the last couple of years ... so it was very quickly, we had a group of about 20 officers who started going floor to floor through that building," Manger said, noting that some 200 officers had successfully cleared all three buildings.

"So far we've found nothing concerning, we've got nobody that actually heard shots and certainly no victims and as we go through the building nobody has said they've seen anything," the Capitol Police chief said.

He noted that additional calls came into 911, but that they believed it was friends and family of staffers who had told them about the lockdown and who then decided to call 911 themselves. An initial statement issued by the USCP via Twitter just before 3 p.m. local time stated that officers were "searching in and around the Senate Office Buildings in response to a concerning 911 call. Please stay away from the area as we are still investigating."

"If you are inside the Senate Buildings, everyone inside should be sheltering in place as the report was for a possible active shooter. It should be noted that we do not have any confirmed reports of gunshots," it added at the time.

Video posted on social media showed a group of people being led out of the Russell Senate Office Building with arms raised and through a police line. The building is the closer of three office buildings to the US Capitol and immediately adjacent to the USCP headquarters.

Observers noted at the time that police were searching the Dirksen and Hart Buildings as well. Observers reported "at least 50" police cars reporting to the scene, including dozens of officers with "long guns" - that is, rifles - and said police were telling bystanders outside the buildings to "run away."

An alert that reportedly went out to Senate staffers was also circulating on social media, which described the steps to take in order to shelter in place. It included directives to "close, lock, and

stay away from external doors and windows" and that no one will be permitted to enter or leave the building until directed to do so by Capitol Police.

Audio of the DC Fire and EMS dispatch sent out to officers was also posted online by reporters, revealing that the 911 caller "stated a staff member is shooting."

A spokesperson for DC Metropolitan Police Department later told reporters that the active shooter report "appears to be a bad call," adding that "no injuries and no shooter were located."

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Chinese Tech Firms Unveil New Microchip Production Amid Spat With West

As competition with China becomes the primary strategic focus of US foreign policy, Washington has looked to cut off Beijing from accessing the world's premier technologies, forcing Chinese planners to begin the arduous process of fostering a home-grown high tech production market, especially in high-end semiconductor chips.

According to reports in Chinese media, Shanghai Micro Electronics Equipment (SMEE) has perfected a 28-nanometer immersion deep ultraviolet (DUV) lithography machine and is expected to begin producing microchips using the technology by the end of the year.

Like many of China's leading tech firms, SMEE has been blacklisted by the US Department of Commerce for its links to the Chinese government and military, which Washington says could benefit from trade with US firms.

The Netherlands-based ASML has been one of the primary suppliers of high-end microchips to Chinese industry, withholding its DUV technology from Chinese producers and, earlier this year, agreeing to [abide by US demands to drop its trade](#) with China in high-end microchips altogether. The Dutch company is also under additional US pressure to restrict even further shipments to China, including devices with older chip models, according to US media reports.

In addition to the Netherlands, Japan and Taiwan have also faced pressure to curb or cut their trade in microchips with the Chinese mainland. A haphazard move by Washington to summarily ban microchip production by US-connected firms inside China last year was [quickly walked back](#) after it became apparent that it would cause complete chaos throughout the global tech market.

According to an expert who spoke with Chinese media, such a ban would "greatly affect" Chinese suppliers, as there is an "over-10-year gap" between Chinese lithography machine projects and the best ones from overseas.

In Wuxi, a city near Shanghai, a new High-Tech District is hosting a project by Jingjia Microelectronics to develop graphic processing units (GPUs), a type of electronic circuit that's key to producing phones, computers, and game consoles.

Jingjia has claimed to be China's leading GPU developer, although it lags far behind the US-based Nvidia, the world's largest maker of GPUs. Jingjia was also placed on the US blacklist at the same time as SMEE.

Late last year, Huawei also filed a patent for extreme ultraviolet lithography (EUV), the method used to make the world's most advanced microchips, although the company later dispelled reports that it could produce chips of the highest caliber, which are also the smallest. Meanwhile, US microchip giant Intel has launched a new project in the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, a hub of the tech industry, to produce AI-related chips. The company is partnering with six local firms including Ugreen, Senary Technology Group, and Chipsea Technologies, to set up joint labs for research into low-carbon and energy-saving IT solutions, PC and server chips, and smart transport, according to Chinese news reports. "We will further leverage Intel's technology and ecosystem strengths ... facilitate the integration and development of emerging sectors in the Greater Bay Area and across the country ... and help develop the digital economy," Intel China chairwoman Wang Rui said at a launch event.

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Building Battery? Scientists Find Way to Store Electrical Charge in Cement

Scientists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) say they have found a new way to turn ancient materials into a capacitor for storing electricity.

In a [research paper published](#) in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), a group of MIT scientists described how they took cement, water, and carbon black (a type of powdery charcoal), and by mixing them together, accidentally created a new type of battery. "The material is fascinating, because you have the most-used human made material in the world, cement, that is combined with carbon black, that is a well-known historical material – the Dead Sea Scrolls were written with it," Admir Masic, a materials scientist at MIT, said in [a news release](#).

"You have these at least two-millennia-old materials that when you combine them in a specific manner you come up with a conductive nanocomposite, and that's when things get really interesting."

When the materials are mixed together, the carbon black forms ribbons throughout the mixture, and as the water is absorbed by the cement, it leaves voids. The lengthy surfaces with a gap between them are then able to act as capacitor plates, storing a charge in the voltage difference in the same way that a battery does.

According to the scientists, if it were incorporated into a house's foundation, it could potentially store a day's worth of energy without sacrificing the building's structural strength. They also envision a concrete roadway using the material that might be able to charge electric cars as they drive on it.

"These properties point to the opportunity for employing these structural concrete-like supercapacitors for bulk energy storage in both residential and industrial applications ranging from energy autarkic shelters and self-charging roads for electric vehicles, to intermittent energy storage for wind turbines," the scientists noted in their paper.

With the rush to convert gasoline-powered cars to all-electric, demand for the rare metallic components of powerful batteries, [such as lithium and cobalt](#), has soared. Prices have spiked,

new mines and production facilities are lucrative business opportunities, and the complex of politics of pollution caused by the mining and refining processes have also come to the fore. The ability to build a battery out of ordinary materials could be extremely valuable. The MIT brains' discovery brings to mind a much-hyped proposal in recent years to construct solar-powered roadways, converting a huge mass of sun-soaking asphalt surfaces across the country into a network of solar energy generation. The ambitious proposal went viral on the internet in 2014, but an attempt to prove the practicality of the technology in a section of roadway instead wound up [exposing its deep faults](#). It turned out to be prohibitively expensive to build, vulnerable to quick wear and even catching on fire, and wasn't very good at capturing sunlight on top of it all.

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Obama Reportedly Warned Biden of Trump Rematch During Private June Meeting

The two served in office together for eight years, with Biden serving as Obama's vice president during his two terms.

A newly surfaced report has detailed that former US President Barack Obama warned current US President Joe Biden of the political strengths of 2024 contender Donald Trump and vowed that he would do all he could to bring about a second Biden presidential term.

Citing individuals with knowledge of the private conversation, US media reported on Wednesday that Obama and Biden held their talks during a lunch meeting at the White House in June.

The report noted that Obama raised concerns over Trump's close following, his iron grip on the Republican party, the polarization of the country, as well as the conservative media storm that follows and props up Trump.

It was noted the pair had no specific agenda for their meeting; however, those who were close to the conversation said Obama and Biden discussed a range of political, policy as well as personal matters, including their families.

During the meeting, Obama reportedly promised to do everything available in his power to get Biden reelected for a second term. While the lunch was a regular catch-up between the two, during their talk, Obama was said to have emphasized his concerns about Trump's unwavering influence over the Republican party, as well as his supporters.

As recent polls have shown, Obama's concerns over the 2024 US election cycle are not unfounded. Biden's approval ratings stand at just 39%, and with Trump holding a heavy lead over his competitors, the likelihood of a close rematch between Trump and Biden is high. In a recent poll, the two were tied at 43% each for a hypothetical rematch in 2024.

One poll found that while some hypothetical voters may even be driven to vote for Biden, it's not because they approve of him but because they so strongly disapprove of Trump.

"Donald Trump is not a Republican, he's a criminal," said [John Wittman](#), a 42-year-old contractor from Phoenix, as well as a Republican.

He told a New York outlet that even though he disapproved of Biden's economic work, he will "vote for anyone on the planet that seems halfway capable of doing the job, including Joe Biden, over Donald Trump."

Obama, who will be campaigning and fundraising for his former vice president, is expected to hold a fundraiser later in August in Martha's Vineyard to benefit the National Democratic Redistricting Committee. He will then begin his fundraising efforts for Biden in the fall.

"President Biden is grateful for his unwavering support, and looks forward to once again campaigning side-by-side with President Obama to win in 2024 and finish the job for the American people," TJ Ducklo, a spokesman for the Biden campaign, said in a statement.

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Lufthansa Pilot Draws Phallic Flight Path After Being Forced to Divert Off Course

Officials have claimed the startling flight pattern was done unintentionally after the pilot was twice prevented from landing, forcing the pilot to remain in a holding position before being given landing clearance.

A nearly 15-mile-long 'drawing' of a penis appeared over Italian skies last week after a Lufthansa pilot was redirected from the Catania airport in Sicily due to high winds and a terminal closing. [FlightRadar24](#), a flight tracking app, first noticed the "unusual" flight pattern.

Flight LH306, responsible for the drawing, first left Frankfurt at around 1:45 p.m. local time on Friday, and was scheduled to land in the Sicilian city about two hours later. Mid-flight, however, the commercial airline pilot was told to divert his flight to Malta.

The airport in Catania, Fontanarossa airport, has been experiencing reduced operations following a passenger terminal fire on [July 16](#).

After being diverted from Catania, the pilot then reportedly took more than 16 minutes to complete the [phallic drawing](#) before turning back to the original flight path and eventually landing in Malta.

While Italian media has speculated the pilot drew the phallic shape out of frustration, Lufthansa officials are calling the pattern an accident.

It's worth noting that the practice of [pilots](#) drawing phallic shapes in the sky is nothing new. In 2022, a US Air Force pilot drew a penis-shaped flight pattern near a Russian base in Syria, which prompted American officials to review the "unintentional" incident.

In [2017](#), however, a more blatant act of buffoonery occurred when two Naval officers drew a large penis in the sky, reportedly saying that their prank would "be so funny" and "awesome."

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Webb Telescope Puts Hubble to Shame With New, Rare Photos

In the past, images of the galaxy have been taken by the Hubble Space Telescope, but on Wednesday, scientists announced that the James Webb Space Telescope had successfully captured new and unusual images of the galaxy.

A group of scientists revealed on Wednesday that the James Webb Space Telescope offered up some spectacular images of El Gordo, a galaxy cluster located 9.7 billion light-years from Earth. The galaxy cluster's Spanish name translates to "The Fat One" and, as it turns out, is indeed fat: the celestial body has a mass equivalent of about 3 million billion suns.

In addition to its massive size, and distance, El Gordo offers NASA a view into background galaxies with greater accuracy, with NASA [explaining](#) the system acts as a "natural, cosmic magnifying glass through a phenomenon known as gravitational lensing."

"Lensing by El Gordo boosts the brightness and magnifies the sizes of distant galaxies. This lensing effect provides a unique window into the distant universe," said Brenda Frye, a co-leader of the PEARLS-Clusters branch of the Prime Extragalactic Areas for Reionization and Lensing Science (PEARLS) who also serves as a lead author in one of the studies examining the El Gordo observations.

"Gravitational lensing was predicted by Albert Einstein more than 100 years ago. In the El Gordo cluster, we see the power of gravitational lensing in action," adds Rogier Windhorst, of Arizona State University and the principal investigator of the PEARLS program.

Using infrared technology the Webb telescope was able to capture a series of subjects, including: El Anzuelo (The Fishhook), a bright arc or "swoosh" shown in fiery red. Another object is a long, pencil-thin line known as La Flaca (Thin One). While the Fishhook's light took 10.6 billion years to reach Earth, the Thin One's light took nearly 11 billion years.

"We were able to carefully dissect the shroud of dust that envelops the galaxy center where stars are actively forming," said Patrick Kamieneski, of Arizona State University and lead author on a [second paper](#). "Now, with Webb, we can peer through this thick curtain of dust with ease, allowing us to see firsthand the assembly of galaxies from the inside out."

According to NASA the team then found another galaxy, not far from La Flaca. Within that galaxy, scientists were able to find a single red giant star they nicknamed Quyllur (a Quechua term for star), making it the first individual red giant star observed beyond 1 billion light-years from Earth.

"It's almost impossible to see lensed red giant stars unless you go into the infrared. This is the first one we've found with Webb, but we expect there will be many more to come," said Jose Diego of the Instituto de Física de Cantabria in Spain, lead author of a [third paper](#) on El Gordo. In addition to these subjects, the team was also able to find five lensed galaxies that made up a small cluster located about 12.1 billion light-years from Earth. This cluster could hold a total of 17 galactic members.

"We examined whether the properties of these galaxies are any different than the ultra-diffuse galaxies we see in the local universe, and we do actually see some differences. In particular, they are bluer, younger, more extended, and more evenly distributed throughout the cluster."

Timothy Carleton of Arizona State University, who served as lead author on another [paper](#) regarding the observations, said in the statement.

"This suggests that living in the cluster environment for the past 6 billion years has had a significant effect on these galaxies."

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Blinken to Announce \$362Mln for Countries Facing Severe Food Insecurity - USAID

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday will announce \$362 million in humanitarian assistance for countries facing severe food insecurity, US Agency for International Development (USAID) Deputy Administrator Isobel Coleman said. "Today, after UN Security Council, Secretary Blinken will announce \$362 million in additional humanitarian assistance through USAID for countries facing severe food insecurity, which has been exacerbated by Russia's war in Ukraine and Russia's withdrawal from the Black Sea Grain Initiative," Coleman told reporters.

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Blinken Says Hopes Black Sea Grain Deal Can Be Put Back Together as He Heads to UN

UNITED NATIONS, August 3 (Sputnik) - Secretary of State Antony Blinken told ABC he is hopeful that the Black Sea grain deal can be resuscitated as he heads to the United Nations to chair a UN Security Council meeting.

Blinken is in New York to chair a UN Security Council meeting, which will focus on the Ukraine conflict and its impact on the world food supply.

"Look, we hope so. But more than the fact we hope so is the fact that countries around the world, including the countries most directly affected, want to see this happen," Blinken said in an interview, when asked if there is a chance of putting the deal back together.

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Pentagon Says No Update on European Allies Submitting Plan to Train Ukrainians on F-16s

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - A Pentagon spokesperson told Sputnik on Thursday that there is no update on whether European allies have submitted a plan to train Ukrainian pilots on F-16 fighter jets.

"The US will support a joint effort to train Ukrainian pilots on fourth-generation fighter aircraft, including F-16s, as part of our long-term commitment to Ukraine's self-defense. We have no new announcements to make regarding this effort today," the spokesperson said, when asked whether European allies have submitted their training proposal to the United States.

On Tuesday, US media reported that the United States is still waiting for its European allies to finalize their plan for training Ukrainian pilots to use F-16 fighter jets, which Washington will

have to approve before the program can begin.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov said on Monday that Ukrainian pilots would begin training on US-made F-16 fighter jets in August.

In mid-July, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the delivery of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine would lead to a further escalation in the conflict because the aircraft have a modification that makes them nuclear-capable and represent a direct threat to Russia.

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US Military to Keep Contingent in Niger Amid Partial Departure of Embassy - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - There are no changes to the US military force posture in Niger during the departure of non-emergency embassy employees and their family members in the wake of the military coup in the country, Pentagon Press Secretary Brig. Gen. Patrick Ryder said on Thursday.

"There are no changes to the U.S. military force posture in Niger during the Department of State-led ordered departure. The Department of State has not requested DoD personnel or equipment as part of the ordered departure. We continue to monitor this fluid and evolving situation and reiterate our focus on a diplomatic solution," the Pentagon said in a statement to Sputnik.

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US Works to Award \$40Bn Worth of Contracts to Arm Ukraine, Resupply US Military - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - The Pentagon is working to award about \$40 billion worth of contracts to supply Ukraine and resupply the US military, a Politico journalist reported on Thursday.

The US Department of Defense is going to resupply its stock as it keeps sending weapons to Kiev, the report said.

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Biden Administration Scores Low on Ethics with Americans - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - Only 42% of Americans rate the ethics of the Biden administration as "excellent" (8%) or "good" (34%), according to a Gallup poll released Thursday.

While higher than the 37-38% reported during the previous Trump administration, the 42% rating was lower than the scores for all other administrations since Ronald Reagan's. Ratings were not taken during Reagan's second term when the Iran-Contra scandal occurred.

Gallup noted that the 42% ethics rating was close to Biden's 40% job approval score from the same poll – a pattern that has been present since the Obama administration.

It also reflected a partisan polarization, with 84% of Democrats and only 6% of Republicans rating the ethics of the Biden administration "excellent" or "good."

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US Prosecutors Asking for 14 Years in Prison for Russia's Klyushin - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - The US government is asking for a 14-year prison sentence for Russian national Vladislav Klyushin convicted of hack-and-trade charges, according to a sentencing memorandum.

A court in Boston is expected to sentence Klyushin on September 7. In February, the Russian national was convicted by a federal jury on charges of conspiracy, wire fraud and securities fraud. He pleads not guilty.

"The government respectfully requests that the Court sentence Klyushin to a term of 168 months in prison and three years of supervised release, and to pay a \$5,000,000 fine and restitution totaling \$8,285,314.36 under 18 U.S.C. § 3663A," Assistant US Attorney Seth B. Kosto said in the memorandum filed on Wednesday.

The court should separately allow for forfeiture totaling \$36,600,000 and permit the government to forfeit as substitute assets certain deposits the government has restrained in the Republic of Cyprus, the filing said.

The sentence sought by the government is somewhat below the applicable guidelines range, but above the typical sentences imposed in white-collar cases in the District of Massachusetts, it said.

The government believes that a sentence for the defendant will likely be "meaningfully shorter" given the significant credit that white-collar defendants typically earn for good behavior and under the First Step Act, according to the filing.

Defending the request for the years-long sentence, the filing said that Klyushin and his co-conspirators "earned tens of millions of dollars in illicit profits and inflicted millions of dollars in actual damages."

Klyushin had every reason not to offend, according to the prosecutor. He was "not destitute or depressed" when he committed the crimes, but was rather a "millionaire business owner who traveled in the highest echelons of Russian society," the memorandum said.

The court's sentence should make clear that "hackers and traders who would victimize U.S. companies and securities markets from abroad will, if caught, spend meaningful portions of their lives in prison," the memorandum concluded.

Klyushin was arrested in Switzerland in March 2021 and extradited to the US later that year.

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US Lawmaker Says Congress Must Demand Interview With Jack Smith Following Trump Indictment

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - The US Congress must demand an interview with Special Counsel Jack Smith following the release of an indictment charging former President Donald Trump with crimes linked to alleged efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election, Congressman Matt Gaetz said in a statement.

"The real question is: what will House Republicans do? First, House Republicans should immediately demand that Jack Smith present himself for a transcribed interview before the Judiciary Committee in the next 15 days," Gaetz said on Wednesday in an interview with Newsmax.

Lawmakers should subpoena Smith if he refuses to comply with their request for an interview, and hold Smith in criminal contempt if he refuses to comply with it, Gaetz said.

Congress should also be prepared to impeach US Attorney General Merrick Garland if he refuses to enforce the criminal contempt charge, Gaetz added.

Earlier this week, a grand jury indicted Trump on four charges linked to his alleged role in efforts to overturn the US presidential election. Trump is set to make a court appearance on the matter Thursday.

The charges come amid an investigation by lawmakers into potential weaponization of the US government and its justice system against political opponents. Trump has repeatedly accused the Biden administration of weaponizing the Justice Department against him.

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US Orders Departure of Non-Emergency Gov't Personnel From Embassy in Niger - State Dept.

(Updates with details in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - The US State Department said in an advisory that it ordered the departure of non-emergency government employees and their family members from the American Embassy in Niger.

"The Department of State updated the Travel Advisory for Niger on August 2, 2023, to reflect the ordered departure of non-emergency US government employees and eligible family members," the advisory said on Wednesday. "The Department is advising US citizens not to travel to Niger."

On July 26, the Nigerien presidential guard overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum from power. On Sunday, the pro-Western 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) gave the coup leaders in Niger one week to reinstate the detained president or it would use all measures to restore order there.

The State Department further said in a press release that the temporary departure order is due to the ongoing developments in Niger. The release warned that commercial flight options out of Niger are limited.

Moreover, the release noted that the US Embassy in Niamey remains open for limited and emergency services to American citizens.

The United States, the release said, remains diplomatically engaged with Niger's government officials at the highest levels and rejects all efforts to overturn Niger's constitutional order.

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US to Begin Construction on 29th Virginia-Class Attack Submarine

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - Newport News Shipbuilding is about to begin construction on the 29th US nuclear-powered Virginia-class attack submarine for the Navy, local broadcaster KTUL reported.

The report said on Wednesday that the company kicked off the beginning of construction of the submarine with a symbolic ceremony authenticating the keel of the ship.

According to the report, Newport News Shipbuilding is one of two US shipyards that can make this class of attack submarines for the US Navy.

Australia is set to acquire up to five Virginia-class submarines from the United States under the AUKUS security pact, but the initiative is stuck in Congress as Republican lawmakers seek more funding to build this class of submarines for the US Navy and Australia's armed forces at the same time in a timely manner.

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Raytheon Receives \$50M In Contract to Provide More Ammunition to US Army - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - Raytheon has received a nearly \$50 million US Army contract to provide more ammunition, the Defense Department said.

"Raytheon Company [of] Tucson, Arizona, was awarded a \$49,038,625 contract... for procurement of ammunition," the Defense Department said in a press release on Wednesday.

Work on the contract is scheduled to take five years with an estimated completion date of August 2, 2028, the release said.

The US Army Contracting Command in Newark in the US state of New Jersey is the contracting activity to oversee work on the project, the release added.

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Ex-Prosecutor Says Expects Trump Would Get 5 Years in Prison if Convicted on New Charges

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - Former federal prosecutor Ronald Sievert told Sputnik on Wednesday that he expects former President Donald Trump would be sentenced to five years in prison if convicted on the federal charges accusing him of allegedly trying to overturn the 2020 US presidential election.

On Tuesday, a federal grand jury returned an indictment charging Trump with four criminal counts in connection to special counsel Jack Smith's probe into his alleged role in trying to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

"The judge is a D[emocrat] appointed judge. She would give him about five years. I just don't think the case would stand up on appeal," Sievert said.

Sievert said Trump was indicted for exercising his constitutional rights to protest and challenge an election.

"The indictment even suggests he knew he lost and knowingly lied. Everything I have seen strongly supports the view that he was convinced he won and that in his mind there was massive voter fraud. And he had every right to pursue every legal theory - right or wrong - to challenge the vote counts sent in by the states," he said.

Sievert pointed out that it is very questionable from a legal standpoint that Trump would be indicted for aggressively arguing his case and called it a "basic First Amendment violation."

Trump faces one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States, one count of conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding, one count of obstruction of and attempt to obstruct an official proceeding and one count of conspiracy against rights.

"Despite having lost, the Defendant was determined to remain in power. So for more than two months following Election Day on November 3, 2020, the Defendant spread lies that there had been outcome-determinative fraud in the election and that he had actually won. These claims

were false, and the Defendant knew that they were false," the indictment said.

Trump is expected to appear in person at the US District Court of the District of Columbia at 4:00 p.m. ET to hear the four criminal charges against him and to enter his plea.

Trump will appear before a magistrate judge prior to the case being handed over to US federal judge Tanya Chutkan, who was appointed by Democratic President Barack Obama, as she is assigned to oversee Trump's case.

Chutkan is the only federal judge in Washington to issue sentences to Americans convicted for participating in the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 that were longer than what prosecutors had requested, according to media reports.

Chutkan has reportedly sentenced at least 38 individuals despite the fact prosecutors did not seek prison time for most of them.

Trump has denied any wrongdoing and argued that the newly unveiled indictment against him is the latest attempt by what he called the Biden crime family and the weaponized US Justice Department to interfere in the 2024 US presidential election.

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US Secret Service Says Security Efforts for Trump Court Appearance May Disrupt DC Traffic

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - Efforts by the US Secret Service to provide security for former US President Donald Trump as part of his federal court appearance may disrupt traffic in Washington, DC, Secret Service Communications Chief Anthony Guglielmi said in a statement. "There may be short term traffic implications due to protectee movements," the statement said on Wednesday.

The Secret Service is working with the Metropolitan Police Department, US Marshals Service, US Park Police, US Capitol Police and the Federal Protective Service to ensure Trump's safety while minimizing disruptions to the normal court process, the statement said.

Trump is expected to appear in federal court on Thursday for proceedings tied to a new indictment, which charges the former president with crimes linked to his alleged efforts to overturn the 2020 US presidential election.

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PREVIEW - Trump Set to Appear in Court Over Charges of Trying to Overturn 2020 Election

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump is appearing in court on Thursday afternoon to be arraigned on federal charges accusing him of attempting to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

Trump is expected to appear in person at the US District Court of the District of Columbia at 4:00 p.m. EST (8:00 p.m. GMT) to hear the four criminal charges against him and to enter his

plea.

Trump will appear before a magistrate judge before the case is handed over to US federal judge Tanya Chutkan.

Chutkan, who was appointed by Democratic President Barack Obama, is assigned to oversee Trump's case. Chutkan is the only federal judge in Washington to issue sentences to convicted January 6 rioters that were longer than what prosecutors had requested.

Chutkan has reportedly sentenced at least 38 individuals convicted on charges in connection to the January 6 riot, most who were sentenced to prison time even if prosecutors were not seeking it.

Trump's legal battles, and even if convicted, would not stop him from running for president.

On Tuesday, a federal grand jury returned an indictment against Trump in connection to special counsel Jack Smith's probe into his alleged role in trying to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

The former US president faces one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States, one count of conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding, one count of obstruction of and attempt to obstruct an official proceeding, and one count of conspiracy against rights.

There are also six unnamed co-conspirators listed in the indictment revealed on Tuesday, who are accused of aiding Trump's alleged efforts to overturn the election.

Trump has denied any wrongdoing and argued that the newly unveiled indictment against him is the latest attempt by the "Biden crime family" and the weaponized US Justice Department to interfere in the 2024 presidential election.

Trump's attorneys did not immediately respond to Sputnik's requests for comments on this matter.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 3 (Sputnik) -

NIGER DEVELOPMENTS

* The military chiefs of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) will discuss options for a military intervention in Niger at a meeting in Nigeria's capital Abuja, the RFI broadcaster reported on Wednesday.

* Russia believes that it is important to avoid a further deterioration of the situation in Niger and calls for dialogue between the sides to the conflict, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said on Wednesday.

* The State Department cannot confirm any plans to evacuate the US Embassy staff in Niger and the facility remains open, spokesman Matthew Miller said.

SYRIA TENSIONS

* Moscow is very concerned about the information that suicide bombers are actively preparing

to carry out terror attacks against Russian military patrols in Syria, Russian Defense Ministry Center for Reconciliation of Opposing Sides in Syria deputy head Vadim Kulit said on Wednesday.

* US-led coalition drones breached the deconfliction protocols 13 times in Syria over the past 24 hours, Kulit said.

PUTIN-ERDOGAN TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin has held a phone conversation with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, with the two leaders continuing the dialogue on various issues of cooperation between Russia and Turkey, the Kremlin said on Wednesday.

* Putin and Erdogan agreed to determine the exact place and date of their meeting in the near future, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

* Turkey does not necessarily have to be the meeting place of Putin and Erdogan, but the Turkish leader invited Putin to visit his country, Peskov said.

* Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin did not discuss the issue of the transfer of the commanders of the nationalist Azov battalion (banned in Russia) back to Ukraine, a source familiar with the situation told Sputnik.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* Relations between Ukraine and Poland have been historically complex and the current contradictions between the two countries will only increase, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Wednesday.

* Ukraine once again tried to attack a Russian Navy ship in the southwestern part of the Black Sea overnight by using a drone boat, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* The Ukrainian forces lost nearly 300 soldiers during failed attempts to attack in the Donetsk area in the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Meetings on a peace resolution to the Ukraine conflict based on the peace plan by President Volodymyr Zelenskyy are Kiev's attempt to create a coalition against Russia, Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

POLAND-BELARUS TENSIONS

* Belarus provided Poland with objective control data on the absence of any grounds for the accusations of border violations by Belarusian helicopters, the Belarusian Defense Ministry said on Wednesday.

* The Belarusian Foreign Ministry said that Poland should not escalate the situation with accusations of border violation by Belarusian military helicopters and not use this as a pretext to militarize the border area.

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PREVIEW - APEC Officials to Discuss Food Security in Seattle

SEATTLE, August 3 (Sputnik) - High-ranking officials and ministers will gather in Seattle this week to address food security matters as part of the third Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings.

The Food Security Ministers Meeting (FSMM) will be held on Thursday with participation of US Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and US envoy for APEC Matt Murray.

Officials will gather for the High-level Meeting on Health and the Economy (HLMHE) on August 6. The meetings in Seattle will conclude with the Energy Ministerial Meeting on August 15.

The APEC Economic Leaders' Week will take place in San Francisco in November.

The event will take place in the aftermath of the suspension of the Black sea Grain Initiative. On July 18, the Turkey-and UN-mediated Black Sea Grain Initiative, which provided for a humanitarian corridor to allow exports of Ukrainian grain over the past year, expired, as Russia did not renew its participation in the deal.

Moscow emphasized that the deal's component on facilitating Russian grain and fertilizer exports had not been fulfilled, specifically with regard to reconnecting Russian banks to SWIFT and unblocking the Tolyatti-Odesa ammonia pipeline.

The United States serves as the APEC host of 2023. In November last year, US Charge d'Affaires in Moscow Elizabeth Rood told RIA Novosti that the US intends to ensure the participation of all delegations in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation's annual meeting of economic leaders in San Francisco in 2023 in accordance with US laws.

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US Capitol Police Says Getting Ready to Reopen Buildings After Checking for Active Shooter

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - The US Capitol Police (USCP) said on Wednesday that it is getting ready to re-open the Senate office buildings after they were cleared amid reports of an active shooter.

"4:17 p.m. [20:17 GMT]: USCP is standing by to prepare the Senate office buildings for re-entry. There is no active threat at this time," the police said in a tweet.

US Capitol Police Chief Thomas Manger also said that the police have found no confirmation of an active shooter in any of the buildings and that a call that caused all the turmoil may have been a bogus one.

According to Manger, USCP cleared a total of three office buildings after someone called the police at about 2:30 p.m. (18:30 GMT) and reported an active shooter inside one of the buildings in the vicinity of the US Capitol.

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Fitch Downgrade Does Not Change US Treasuries' Status as Top Safe, Liquid Asset - Yellen

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - The credit downgrade of the United States by Fitch Ratings does not dilute the standing of the country's Treasury instruments as the world's most dependable assets for investment, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Wednesday.

"At the end of the day, Fitch's decision does not change what all of us already know," Yellen said in a speech delivered at an event hosted by the Internal Revenue Service. "The Treasury securities remain the world's pre-eminent, safe and liquid asset, and that the American economy is fundamentally strong."

On Tuesday, Fitch Ratings announced that it downgraded the credit rating of the United States from AAA to AA, citing fiscal deterioration over the next three years. The ratings agency also said that it found troubling the debt limit standoffs between the two major political parties in Congress - Republicans and Democrats - and their last-minute resolutions to avoid debt default.

The downgrade has been criticized by the White House and several officials and political allies of the Biden administration, who questioned the timing of the move nearly three months after the resolution of the last debt crisis. Many attributed blame for the weakened US fiscal situation to Biden's predecessor Donald Trump and cited the possibility that the Fitch decision may have been politically motivated.

Yellen joined in the criticism, saying Fitch's decision was puzzling in light of the economic strength seen in the United States.

"I strongly disagree with Fitch's decision and I believe it is entirely unwarranted. Its flawed assessment is based on outdated data and fails to reflect improvements across the range of indicators including those related to governance that we've seen over the past two and a half years," she said.

Yellen also said that despite the challenge Democrats have had in getting Republicans to raise the US debt ceiling, "we've seen both parties come together to pass legislation to resolve the debt limit as well as to make historic investments in our infrastructure in American competitiveness and fiscal priorities."

Fiscal prudence has been a priority for the Biden administration, with the president having signed debt limit legislation that included over \$1 trillion in deficit reduction, Yellen added.

The US gross federal debt currently stands at \$32.67 trillion.

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RPT - Trump Says He Now Faces Up to 561 Years in Prison in Light of New Indictment

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump said in an email to his supporters on Wednesday that he is now facing up to 561 years in prison following the publication of a new indictment against him in connection with his alleged attempts to overturn the 2020 presidential election results.

On Tuesday, a federal grand jury returned an indictment charging Trump with four criminal counts in connection to special counsel Jack Smith's probe into his alleged role in trying to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

"With Crooked [US President] Joe's [Biden's] corrupt DOJ [the Department of Justice] having

unlawfully INDICTED yours truly yet again, reports indicate that I could now face a combined 561 YEARS in prison from the Left's witch hunts," Trump said in the email.

The Justice Department accuses Trump of one count each of four crimes: conspiracy to threaten or oppress someone exercising a constitutional right, which carries a maximum penalty 10 years in prison; conspiracy to defraud the US (maximum sentence of five years in prison); corruptly obstructing an official proceeding (maximum sentence of 20 years in prison) and conspiring to obstruct an official proceeding (maximum sentence 20 years in prison).

It remains unclear, however, whether he will receive the maximum penalty for each charge and whether any of the charges can be served concurrently.

Trump was first indicted by the Manhattan district attorney in March in relation to hush money paid via his personal attorney to porn actress Stormy Daniels in 2016. He faces 34 counts of falsifying business records in the first degree. Each count carries a maximum sentence of four years in prison.

Trump was indicted a second time in June - his first federal indictment - relating to his alleged retention of classified government documents at his Mar-a-Lago residence in Florida. Trump faces a total of 40 counts on various charges. Each of the 32 counts of retention of national defense information carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in prison.

The charges also include one count each of conspiracy to obstruct justice; withholding records from an official proceeding; concealing records from an official proceeding; concealing documents from federal investigators; altering, destroying, or hiding something sought by the government; and corruptly altering, destroying, or hiding something sought by the government, each of which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

In addition, Trump also faces one count each of scheming to conceal and lying to the US government, each of which carries a maximum five-year prison sentence.

The array of criminal charges comes in the middle of the campaign for the 2024 presidential election, in which Trump is the Republican Party's leading candidate, according to the latest polling data compiled by Real Clear Politics.

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Trump Says He Now Faces Up to 561 Years in Prison in Light of New Indictment

*US*INDICTMENT*JUSTICE*PRISON*WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump said in an email to his supporters on Wednesday that he is now facing up to 561 years in prison following the publication of a new indictment against him in connection with his alleged attempts to overturn the 2020 presidential election results.

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World Bank Says Paused Disbursements for Operations With Niger 'Until Further Notice'

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - The World Bank said on Wednesday that it has decided to pause disbursements for all operations related to Niger "until further notice" due to the overthrow of the government in the country.

"We are alarmed by efforts to overthrow the democratically elected government in Niger. In response, the World Bank has paused disbursements for all operations until further notice other than private sector partnerships which will continue with caution," the statement said.

The World Bank said in the statement that it continues to monitor the situation in Niger very closely.

However, the World Bank also expressed a desire to be able to improve the quality of life and opportunities for the people of Niger.

On July 26, the Nigerien presidential guard overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum from

power.

On Sunday, the pro-Western 15-member Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) gave the coup leaders in Niger one week to reinstate the detained president or it would use all measures to restore order there.

The governments of Mali and Burkina Faso, who border Niger, warned that any military intervention against Niger would be considered a declaration of war against them as well.

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US Defense Assistant Secretary, Senior Chinese Diplomat Discuss Military Ties – Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Ely Ratner discussed bilateral defense relations and regional security with Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs Department of North American and Oceanian Affairs Director-General Yang Tao, US Defense Department spokesperson Lt. Col. Martin Meiners said on Wednesday.

“Assistant Secretary of Defense for Indo-Pacific Security Affairs Dr. Ely Ratner spoke today (August 2) with PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs Department of North American and Oceanian Affairs Director-General Yang Tao,” Meiners said in a press release. “Assistant Secretary Ratner and Director Yang discussed US-PRC defense relations, as well as regional security issues.”

Ratner emphasized during the talk that the department continues to seek open lines of military-to-military communication between the United States and China, according to the release.

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US Capitol Police Say Responding to Report of Active Shooter at Senate Office Buildings

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) – US Capitol Police said on Wednesday that officers are searching the Senate Office Buildings in response to a concerning 991 call related to a possible active shooter and urged people to stay away from the scene.

“Our officers are searching in and around the Senate Office Buildings in response to a concerning 911 call. Please stay away from the area as we are still investigating,” the police said via Twitter. “If you are inside the Senate Buildings, everyone inside should be sheltering in place as the report was for a possible active shooter. It should be noted that we do not have any confirmed reports of gunshots.”

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State Dept. Can't Confirm Allies Have Not Submitted Plan to Train Ukrainians on F-16s

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller on Wednesday said he cannot confirm that no European allies have submitted a proposal to the United States for training Ukrainian pilots on F-16 fighter jets.

"I can't confirm that," Miller said during a press briefing.

Miller deferred the question to the Pentagon to talk specifically about training, however, the Pentagon did not immediately respond to Sputnik's request for comment on this matter.

On Tuesday, US media reported that the United States is still awaiting its European allies to finalize their plan for training Ukrainian pilots to use F-16 fighter jets, which Washington will have to approve before the program can begin.

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov said on Monday that Ukrainian pilots would begin training on US-made F-16 fighter jets in August.

In mid-July, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the delivery of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine would lead to a further escalation in the conflict because the aircraft have a modification that makes them nuclear-capable and represent a direct threat to Russia.

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US Says NATO Not at Stage to Invoke Article 5 Amid Polish-Belarus Border Dispute

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - The United States does not consider NATO to be at the stage to invoke Article 5 collective defense obligation after Poland accused Belarus of violating its airspace, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

The Polish Defense Ministry said on Tuesday that two Belarusian helicopters intruded into the country's air space. The Belarusian Defense Ministry replied that Minsk provided Warsaw with objective air control data indicating an absence of any grounds for the Polish accusations.

"There is a process that is in place for NATO countries to invoke Article 5. We are not at that stage," Miller said during a press briefing.

NATO's article 5 states that an armed attack against any NATO member will be considered an attack against the entire alliance and it will take action it deems necessary.

Miller also said that the United States expects all countries to respect the sovereign airspace of other countries and will continue to take NATO member states' security very seriously.

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Canada to Plant 35Mln Trees in Forests, Reserves Affected by Wildfires - Natural Resources

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - Canada will allocate C\$60 million (\$45 million) to plant over 35 million trees in forests and reserves affected by the ongoing wildfires, the Ministry of

Natural Resources said on Wednesday.

The federal and municipal funds are part of the country's 2 Billion Trees program, which is aimed at planting said amount of trees by 2031.

"Today, the Honourable Jonathan Wilkinson, Minister of Energy and Natural Resources, announced over \$60 million in federal funding to support four projects that will plant over 35 million trees to restore wildfire-impacted forests and rehabilitate reserve lands that have been damaged by wildfires," the ministry said in a statement.

The projects, which will be implemented in the provinces of British Columbia, Manitoba, and Alberta, are also going to help in the ongoing restoration and preservation efforts of Canadian boreal forest lands.

As of August 1, there were 1,030 active wildfires in Canada, with 647 of them being out of control, according to the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre. The fires have consumed over 13.1 million hectares of land.

British Columbia, Northwestern Territories, Alberta and Yukon are among the worst affected regions.

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Former Biden Associate Says Calls Between Joe, Hunter Biden Constitute Abuse of Soft Power

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - Devon Archer, a former associate of Hunter Biden, said on Wednesday that the calls between then-Vice President Joe Biden and his son during the latter's foreign business calls constitute an abuse of soft power.

Earlier this week, Archer provided testimony to lawmakers on Joe Biden's connection to his son's foreign business deals. Lawmakers provided split opinions on Archer's testimony, with some claiming it exonerated Joe Biden while others claimed it was further evidence of wrongdoing.

Archer testified that Joe Biden joined Hunter and his business associates at least 20 times either in person or via speakerphone.

"In the rearview, it's an abuse of soft power," Archer said during an interview with Tucker Carlson.

Biden knew there were business associates at certain dinners and meetings, Archer said.

Congressman Dan Goldman said following Archer's testimony that Biden often did not know who was present during the interactions.

There is no way to know if the calls were orchestrated, but they were "powerful," Archer said.

Archer's testimony comes amid investigations by lawmakers into potential criminal activity by the Biden family, including bribery and influence peddling. Joe Biden has repeatedly denied discussing foreign business deals with his son.

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

US House Republicans Open Probe Into Alleged China Email Hack of Federal Agencies - Letter

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - A group of US House Republican lawmakers on Wednesday sent a letter to the secretaries of State and Commerce, Antony Blinken and Gina Raimondo, saying that they have started an investigation into the recent breach of email systems in federal agencies by China-based actors and requested briefings on the matter.

"According to recent reports, as part of a 'suspected cyber-espionage campaign to access data in sensitive computer networks' by China, the breaches reportedly occurred at over two dozen organizations, including some US government agencies. We request a briefing on the discovery of, impact of, and response to the intrusion," House Committee on Oversight and Accountability Chairman James Comer and subcommittee chairs Nancy Mace and Glenn Grothman wrote in the letter.

The breaches occurred due to a "flaw in a Microsoft cloud-computing environment," which allowed hackers to access email accounts, the letter said.

Lawmakers expressed concern that the attacks against the US government represent evidence of the new level of Chinese hacking skills and sophistication.

To support the investigation, the lawmakers called on the two agencies to provide special briefings on the impact of the intrusions and the government's response no later than August 9, the letter said.

Microsoft said in July that it was tracking a China-based actor known as Storm-0558 who gained access to email accounts, including US government accounts. The tech giant's analysis revealed that the cyber attacks have affected some 25 organizations, including government agencies.

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Hunter Biden Diversion Agreement Released After Judge Objects to Plea Deal - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - The US District Court for the District of Delaware on Wednesday released a diversion agreement between Hunter Biden and federal prosecutors to resolve a firearms charge, after a judge rejected the agreement and related plea deal last week.

The agreement between Biden and the US Attorney's Office for the District of Delaware would resolve one count of knowingly possessing a firearm as an unlawful user of a controlled substance, according to the filing.

"The United States agrees that if Biden complies with all of his respective obligations under this Agreement, then the United States... will file a motion with the Court seeking the dismissal of the Information," the agreement said.

Biden agrees that the US Attorney has probable cause to bring the charge, but has accepted responsibility for the actions and maintained sobriety, the filing said.

The pre-trial diversion agreement is separate from a plea deal to resolve tax charges brought

against Biden. A judge rejected the package deal last week, expressing concerns about the settlement.

The diversion agreement contains a provision preventing the US from prosecuting Biden for any federal crimes encompassed by an attached statement of facts, which outlines Biden beginning illegal drug use in October 2016 and purchasing a firearm in October 2018, before ending regular use of narcotics in May 2019.

However, the agreement notes that it does not protect against any prosecution for future conduct.

The plea and diversion agreements were criticized by Republican officials, including lawmakers investigating potential criminal activity by Hunter Biden and US President Joe Biden.

Lawmakers are also investigating potential weaponization of the US justice system to the benefit of the Bidens and the detriment of their political opponents.

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State Dept. Says Cannot Confirm Plans to Evacuate Embassy in Niger, Facility Remains Open

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - The State Department cannot confirm any plans to evacuate the US Embassy in Niger and the facility remains open, spokesman Matthew Miller said on Wednesday.

"I cannot [confirm reports]. I've seen the reports. I'm not in a position to make announcements at this point. I will say that the US embassy ... is open. We intend for it to remain open," Miller said at a press briefing.

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Trudeau Announces Decision With His Wife Sophie Gregoire to 'Separate'

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau on Wednesday announced that he and his wife Sophie Gregoire have decided to "separate" after 18 years of marriage.

"Hi everyone, Sophie and I would like to share the fact that after many meaningful and difficult conversations, we have made the decision to separate. As always, we remain a close family with deep love and respect for each other and for everything we have built and will continue to build," Trudeau said via Instagram (banned in Russia as an extremist organization).

Trudeau requested that Canadians respect his privacy in this matter and that of his wife children in order to preserve their well-being.

While Trudeau and Gregoire married in 2005 and have three children: Xavier James, Ella-Grace and Hadrien.

Gregoire's early work consisted of being an entertainment reporter for the French language

news outlet Le Canada Nouvelles (LCN).

The former first lady has notably been involved in a number of charities and non-for-profit organizations such as Sheena's Place for eating disorders, Girls for the Cure and the Canadian Mental Health Association, among others.

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UN Pleased With Chinese Energy Data Stating Renewable Energy Surpassed Coal - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, August 2 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is happy with the Chinese National Energy Administration announcing that its renewable energy production has surpassed coal, the UN spokesperson Farhan Hag said on Wednesday.

"This is certainly what the Secretary General wants all nations to pursue and he's very pleased by the nations that actually move ahead towards using sustainable energy resources and move away from coal." Hag told a briefing.

Coal has no future in humanity, he added.

The Chinese National Energy Administration revealed data for the first time in the history of China that renewable energy surpassed coal - especially in the first half of this year. Wind and solar generation increased on a year on year basis about 24%.

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Jury Votes for Death Penalty in Pittsburgh Synagogue Shooter Trial - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - A federal Jury decided on Wednesday that Robert Bowers, the convicted gunman who killed 11 and injured seven at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh in October 2018, will receive the death penalty for his actions, The New York Times reported.

Prosecutors had argued that Bowers, 50, was fueled by hatred when defiled a place of worship, entering the synagogue during Shabbat services on the morning of October 27, 2018 and opening fire on worshippers with an AR-15 rifle, the report said. The act constituted one of the deadliest antisemitic attacks in US history.

In January 2019, Bowers was charged in a 63-count superseding indictment including 13 violations of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, according to the Justice Department. Bowers pleaded not guilty to all charges.

The indictment specifically alleged that Bowers willfully caused bodily injury to the deceased and surviving victims because of their actual and perceived religion.

In June of this year, the same jury found Bowers guilty on 63 charges and determined that he was eligible for the death penalty for his actions.

Jurors began deliberating on Tuesday morning and delivered the vote, which was unanimous, on Wednesday afternoon. A sentencing hearing, where Bowers will be given the death penalty formally by the judge, is scheduled for tomorrow morning in the same Pittsburgh courtroom, the report said.

The jury's decision marks the first time a Biden administration prosecutor successfully wins a death penalty case.

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Obama Warned Biden of Trump's Political Strengths During Private Lunch - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - Former US President Barack Obama warned incumbent president Joe Biden of the political strengths held by ex-officeholder Donald Trump during a private lunch earlier this year, the Washington Post reported on Wednesday.

Obama warned Biden about the loyalty of Trump's followers, the favorability of the media ecosystem to Trump and an increasingly polarized political climate, the report said, citing two people familiar with the meeting.

Obama expressed concerns that Trump could be a more formidable opponent in the 2024 US presidential election than some Democrats think, the report said.

Obama promised to aid Biden in his reelection bid, which may again put him up against Trump as the Democratic and Republican nominees, respectively, the report said.

Obama made clear during the discussion that his concerns were about Trump's strength as a Republican candidate, not Biden's own abilities on the campaign trail, the report added.

The private lunch between the former running mates took place at the White House in late June, according to the report.

Obama is set to begin fundraising on behalf of Biden this autumn, the report said, citing a person familiar with the plans.

Trump currently leads the pack of Republican candidates ahead of debates and primary elections, although he also faces unresolved criminal charges on several matters.

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Fitch Ratings Says Expects US Fiscal Deficits to Rise Over Next 3 Years

(Update: adds details in paras 5-6)

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - Fitch Ratings Co-Head of the Americas Richard Francis said on Wednesday that the credit rating agency expects the United States' fiscal deficits to rise over the next three years, contributing to their decision to lower the US' credit rating from AAA to AA+.

"We're expecting fiscal deficits to rise over the next three years," Francis said during an

interview with CNBC. “The underlying numbers, especially on the fiscal and debt side, are quite negative.”

Fitch has also seen a steady deterioration in governance, including the January 6 US Capitol riot and the “constant brinkmanship” by Congress on the US debt ceiling, Francis said.

White House Council of Economic Advisers Chair Jared Bernstein gave a subsequent interview, in which he characterized the timing of Fitch’s credit downgrade as odd. Bernstein defended the Biden administration’s economic policy and pinned fiscal problems on the administration of former US President Donald Trump.

US credit worthiness dropped under Trump based on Fitch’s quantitative models, but indicators began to rise again under the Biden administration, Bernstein said. The deficit and debt-to-GDP ratio rose under Trump and has stabilized at a high level under Biden, Bernstein also said.

The Biden administration is doing all it can to ameliorate those financial tensions, Bernstein added.

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US Preparing to Possibly Evacuate Embassy Personnel in Niger Amid Military Coup - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - The United States is preparing to possibly evacuate most of its embassy personnel in Niger amid the coup in that country, Politico reported on Wednesday.

The report said, citing US officials familiar with the matter, that a final decision to evacuate the embassy personnel has not been made.

According to a US diplomat, the situation on the ground in Niger’s capital Niamey is relatively stable, the report said.

The State Department did not immediately respond Sputnik’s request for comment on the matter.

On Tuesday, Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder said he was unaware of US forces participating in an evacuation operation, but emphasized that there was no imminent threat to US embassy personnel or citizens in Niger.

Last Wednesday, Niger’s presidential guard detained President of Niger Mohamed Bazoum. The guard’s commander, Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani, proclaimed himself the country’s new leader.

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Austin, Nyusi Discuss US-Mozambique Military Ties, Security in Cabo Delgado Province

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin and Mozambique President Filipe Jacinto Nyusi discussed the bilateral military partnership and the situation in

Mozambique's Cabo Delgado province, Defense Department spokesperson Patrick Ryder said on Wednesday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III spoke on the phone with Mozambican President Filipe Jacinto Nyusi to discuss the US-Mozambique bilateral defense relationship and the security situation in Cabo Delgado province," Ryder said in a statement.

Ryder's comment referred to the Mozambique's government fight against extremists in the country's northern province.

Austin and Nyusi exchanged views on Mozambique's role on the UN Security Council and also discussed regional issues of shared interest as well as priorities for the nearest future, the statement said.

The two officials also confirmed their commitment to deepening the defense and security relationship between the United States and Mozambique, the statement added.

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Biden's Point Man for Microchips Aaron Chatterji Steps Down - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - White House coordinator for implementing the CHIPS and Science Act Aaron "Ronnie" Chatterji is set to leave the Biden administration and return to academia, Politico reported on Wednesday.

Chatterji has served in his role of coordinator since September 2022 after President Joe Biden signed the CHIPS and Science Act on August 25, 2022. The legislative measure has provided

\$50 billion in funding for the domestic development of semiconductors amid shortages and a growing technological competition with China, with a focus on supply chains.

Supply chain policy is something that's still relatively new in Washington and around the world, the report cited Chatterji as saying in a recent interview.

Prior to his current role, Chatterji served as chief economist at the Commerce Department and was a principal economic adviser to Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo. Chatterji was responsible for developing policy related to US competitiveness, labor markets, supply chains, innovation, entrepreneurship and economic growth.

Chatterji is planning to return to his position as a professor of business at Duke University, according to the report.

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Trump Faces 78 Criminal Counts in 3 Indictments, Hundreds of Years in Prison

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - Former President and 2024 presidential hopeful Donald Trump faces a total of 78 counts of various criminal charges after the government initiated a third criminal indictment against him earlier this week, potentially facing a maximum sentence of 55 years in prison for that indictment and hundreds of years in prison for the other two indictments.

Trump has said he is innocent of all charges, which individually and cumulatively pose hefty maximum prison sentences, but it is unclear whether any of the potential sentences could be served concurrently.

The latest indictment by the US Justice Department relates to the alleged attempts by Trump to overturn the 2020 presidential election results to secure a second term in office, which culminated in the unrest at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

The Justice Department accuses Trump of one count each of four crimes: conspiracy to threaten or oppress someone exercising a constitutional right, which carries a maximum penalty ten years in prison; conspiracy to defraud the US (maximum sentence of five years in prison); corruptly obstructing an official proceeding (maximum sentence of 20 years in prison) and conspiring to obstruct an official proceeding (maximum sentence 20 years in prison).

Trump was first indicted by the Manhattan district attorney in March in relation to hush money paid via his personal attorney to porn actress Stormy Daniels in 2016. He faces 34 counts of falsifying business records in the first degree. Each count carries a maximum sentence of four years in prison.

Trump was indicted a second time in June - his first federal indictment - relating to his alleged retention of classified government documents at his Mar-a-Lago residence in Florida. Trump faces a total of 40 counts of various charges. Each of the 32 counts of retention of national defense information carries a maximum sentence of ten years in prison.

The charges also include one count each of conspiracy to obstruct justice; withholding records from an official proceeding; concealing records from an official proceeding; concealing documents from federal investigators; altering, destroying, or hiding something sought by the

government; and corruptly altering, destroying, or hiding something sought by the government, each of which carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

In addition, Trump also faces one count each of scheming to conceal and lying to the US government, each of which carries a maximum five-year prison sentence.

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US Soldier Dies in Traffic Accident in Germany - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - A US Army soldier who served in Germany has died in a vehicle accident in Bavaria, US Army Europe and Africa said on Wednesday.

The accident occurred on Tuesday near Tirschenreuth.

"The Soldier was traveling in a Stryker when a civilian semi-truck struck the military vehicle as it merged onto Autobahn 93," US Army Europe and Africa said in a statement.

The soldier was transported to a local hospital, where the service member was pronounced dead, it added.

No other US Army personnel traveling in the Stryker received injuries, according to the statement.

The soldier was assigned to the 2nd Cavalry Regiment. The incident is currently under investigation.

US Army Europe and Africa withheld the soldier's identity pending next-of-kin notification.

Stars and Stripes, meanwhile, identified the victim as a 24-year-old female soldier. The accident reportedly occurred when the armored vehicle was merging into a highway. A 57-year-old German national driving the semi-truck in the right lane was unable to switch lanes, resulting in a lateral collision.

The soldier was looking out of the roof hatch of the vehicle. During the collision, the hatch struck her in the head, the report said, citing local police.

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New Trump Charges Not Solid, Criminalize Constitutional Free Speech Right - Ex-Prosecutor

WASHINGTON, August 2 (Sputnik) - Former US Justice Department prosecutor Ronald Sievert told Sputnik that the new indictment against former President Donald Trump is not solid and criminalizes his constitutional right of free speech.

On Tuesday, a federal grand jury returned an indictment charging Trump with four criminal counts in connection to special counsel Jack Smith's probe into his alleged role in trying to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election.

"As a DOJ [Justice Department] prosecutor for 25 years, I am very disturbed by this indictment," Sievert said. "I thought there would be something solid in there, but as I read it, all I

saw was that they were indicting Trump for taking a position in the election with which they, the prosecutor and Ds [Democrats], disagreed," Sievert said.

Trump faces one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States, one count of conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding, one count of obstruction of and attempt to obstruct an official proceeding and one count of conspiracy against rights.

"Despite having lost, the Defendant was determined to remain in power. So for more than two months following Election Day on November 3, 2020, the Defendant spread lies that there had been outcome-determinative fraud in the election and that he had actually won. These claims were false, and the Defendant knew that they were false," the indictment stated.

However, Sievert, who noted he has not supported Trump for the Republican nomination, said the new indictment appears to be criminalizing free speech.

"Whether his [Trump's] belief in fraud was right or wrong, whether the legal theory of sending this back to the states was right or wrong, he had the right under our First Amendment to believe and advocate those positions," Sievert said.

The former prosecutor said he would expect an "objective" judge or judges would throw the case out.

Federal judge Tanya Chutkan, who was nominated by then-President Barack Obama, is assigned to oversee Trump's case. Chutkan is the only federal judge in Washington to issue sentences to convicted January 6 rioters that were longer than what prosecutors had requested, according to media reports.

Trump is summoned to appear in federal court in the US capital on Thursday to face the new charges.

Trump argued that the newly unveiled indictment against him is the latest attempt by the "Biden crime family" and the weaponized US Justice Department to interfere in the 2024 presidential election.

The new indictment comes amid a number of other probes into potential misconduct by Trump, including his alleged mishandling of classified documents, which are all taking place in the middle of his presidential campaign for the 2024 presidential election. Trump is by far the Republican Party's leading candidate, according to the latest poll data from Real Clear Politics.