

8/7/23 Monday

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Irate Kentuckians Bombard McConnell With 'Retire' Heckles Following Freeze-Up Incident

US Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) is no stranger to criticism or heckling, but the jeers he received at an event for the Kentucky gubernatorial race were of a different type, as many came from his fellow Republicans claiming he was unfit for office.

The aging Senate GOP chief was met with a chorus of boos and objections during a political event in western Kentucky on Saturday.

"Elaine and I are really excited to be back at Fancy Farm on behalf of the strongest Republican team we've ever run in our state," McConnell said at the St. Jerome Church Picnic in the town of Fancy Farm, better known as simply the Fancy Farm picnic. He appeared with his wife, former US Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao.

As he began to speak, however, the 81-year-old senator was met with a rising crescendo of boos and chants of "retire!" and "lost the Senate," referring to the results of the 2020 election, in which Republicans lost their majority in the upper congressional chamber. The crowd was reportedly composed of both Republicans and Democrats.

"We're up against the folks who gave you record-high inflation, we're up against the folks who closed schools and then told you that teachers' unions know what's best for your kids, we're up against folks who'd rather let repeat offenders walk free than get tough on crime," McConnell continued. But so did the jeers.

Eventually, the union chants of "retire" grew so loud that McConnell had to yell into the microphone to be heard over them.

Former US President Donald Trump, who has regarded McConnell as an enemy since the lawmaker refused to endorse his attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 US election, joined in the booing as well, posting "I AGREE!" and the other chants on his Truth social media platform.

The heckling comes after McConnell [froze during a presser](#) at the US Capitol late last month. After starting his opening remarks surrounded by a few dozen reporters and some of his staff, the Kentucky senator suddenly stopped speaking for nearly a minute, his face frozen in an expressionless appearance. He was eventually led away from the podium and down the hallway before later returning to answer their questions.

"I'm fine," he told them, declining to discuss his health further.

As footage of the awkward event spread across social media, it prompted a spike in internet searches for "[gerontocracy](#)," a term coined to refer to a government composed of elderly politicians.

McConnell has represented Kentucky in the US Senate since 1985 and is currently serving his seventh term after being reelected in the 2020 election. In the wake of his freeze-up, [McConnell's office stated](#) the senator would finish his term, which ends in 2026.

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American Freight Trucking Giant Yellow Declares Bankruptcy After Firing 30,000 Workers

Several days after shutting down operations, US trucking company Yellow has filed for bankruptcy. Executives have tried to pin the blame on the Teamsters union for blocking their restructuring plan, but the union said its members were justified in defending their benefits and blamed execs for failing their workers.

Last week, Yellow fired all but about 1,600 of its 30,000 workers, retaining a core staff of non-unionized workers to wind down operations.

“It is with profound disappointment that Yellow announces that it is closing after nearly 100 years in business,” Yellow CEO Darren Hawkins [said in a Monday statement](#). The company said it had filed Chapter 11 documents in a federal bankruptcy court in Delaware.

Hawkins told US media that the company had “faced nine months of union intransigence, bullying and deliberately destructive tactics,” adding that the Teamsters union “was able to halt our business plan, literally driving our company out of business, despite every effort to work with them.”

However, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, a labor union that represented 23,000 Yellow employees, blasted the company for trying to pin the blame on the union, saying that the “restructuring” effort was really an attempt to exploit their workers.

“Yellow may try to use the courts to eradicate its financial responsibilities, but they can’t escape the truth. Teamster families sacrificed billions of dollars in wages, benefits, and retirement security to rescue Yellow. The company blew through a \$700 million government bailout. But Yellow’s dysfunctional, greedy C-suite failed to take responsibility for squandering all that cash. They still don’t,” Teamsters General President [Sean O’Brien said on Monday](#).

“They shamelessly pin their corporate incompetence on working people. This is what’s wrong with Big Business. This is a reminder of why workers’ ability to organize and collectively bargain is so crucial to protecting and creating good jobs in America,” he added.

Yellow has long been in dire straits, posting just three profitable quarters since 2009 and boasting a massive debt problem since at least 2000, when it began buying up or merging with smaller competitors. However, in the summer of 2020, Yellow received \$700 million from the federal government as part of a massive \$2.2 trillion coronavirus relief package intended to prop up key parts of the US economy after the massive crash triggered by the Spring lockdowns. Yellow, then known as YRC Worldwide, received the bailout because it delivers to US military bases, and used the money to launch a restructuring plan the company said would help it consolidate the many regional trucking brands it had acquired over the years into a single large company.

However, by April 2023, the company’s outstanding debt had swelled to \$1.5 billion, half of which was the loan repayment owed to the federal government. The company has said that despite the bankruptcy filing, it will still pay Washington back.

The company said it has more than 100,000 creditors and more than \$1 billion in liabilities, including \$2 million owed to Amazon and \$1.7 million owed to Home Depot. The company also

lost some \$6.85 million in a settlement after the Justice Department accused Yellow of defrauding the federal government.

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China to Philippines: Remove 'Illegally' Grounded Warship From Disputed Reef

Beijing has told Manila it needs to remove a rusting hulk from a disputed reef in the South China Sea following a showdown with resupply ships over the weekend. The Philippines intentionally grounded the ship there more than 20 years ago to lay claim to the submerged reef.

The Chinese government on Monday urged their Philippine counterparts to remove an "illegally" grounded warship from a submerged reef in the Spratly Islands, which is claimed by both China and the Philippines.

"The Chinese side urges the Philippines to tow away the grounded warship from the Renai Reef and restore the Renai Reef to its original state," the Chinese spokesperson said, using China's name for the underwater feature which is known in English as Second Thomas Shoal.

The demands came after a showdown over the weekend - the second in as many months - in which Chinese Coast Guard ships using water cannons drove off a pair of Philippine resupply ships attempting to reach the grounded vessel. Chinese officials described the coast guard's actions as "professional and restrained" after Philippine authorities protested.

The ship in question is the BRP Sierra Madre, formerly the USS Harnett County, a World War II-era tank landing ship used for amphibious assaults. Following a stint in South Vietnamese service during the Vietnam War, the US gave the ship to Manila, which used it through the 1990s.

The Sierra Madre was intentionally grounded on Second Thomas Shoal in 1999 as part of an effort by Manila to lay claim to the totally-submerged reef. In the Philippines it is called Ayungin Shoal. The reef is about 121 miles west of the Philippine island of Palawan, and the Sierra Madre sits on a shallow reef on the northwestern side of its teardrop shape.

The Philippine government maintains a small detachment of soldiers on the derelict in an attempt to safeguard its claims. It was they whom the resupply ships were attempting to reach over the weekend.

Second Thomas Shoal is not the only seamount, reef, or island over which Beijing and Manila feud in the South China Sea. However, it is one of the closest to Palawan, a Philippine island home to one of four Philippine military installations to which [US forces have been given access](#), as per a recent agreement with the government of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

"We continue to assert our sovereignty. We continue to assert our territorial rights in the face of all of these challenges," Marcos said. His national security chief echoed his comments, saying the Philippines would never leave the shoal.

The US on Monday [reiterated its support for Manila](#), with a Pentagon spokesperson telling reporters that Washington condemns China's "efforts to impede lawful operations at Second Thomas Shoal."

However, at the same time, Marcos has [pushed for the finalization](#) of a Code of Conduct for the waterway, where China is not the only country with contested claims over land and sea: Malaysia, Brunei, and Vietnam have all claimed parts of the South China Sea for themselves, leading to regular encounters like that between the Chinese Coast Guard and Philippine Navy ships over the weekend. The code would normalize protocols for such encounters and hopefully avoid them escalating into diplomatic incidents.

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US Imported Over \$400M In Worth of Goods From Russia in June - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) - The United States imported \$411.7 million worth of goods from Russia in June, a nearly 20% drop from May, according to new data published by the Commerce Department on Tuesday.

While imports are down 20%, US exports of goods to Russia in June halved from \$60 million to \$30.9 million in May, the lowest figure in 2023, the data showed.

In the first half of the year, US imports of goods from Russia totaled \$2.8 billion, while exports amounted to just \$328.3 million.

Thus, the US trade deficit with Russia for the first six months of the year amounted to \$2.5 billion, according to the data.

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US Trade Deficit at \$65.5B In June, Retreats Further From 6-Month High - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, Aug 8 (Sputnik) - The US trade deficit stood at \$65.5 billion in June, retreating from April's six-month high, as imports fell more than exports for a second month in a row, the Commerce Department reported Tuesday.

"The goods and services deficit was \$65.5 billion in June, down \$2.8 billion from \$68.3 billion in May, revised," the department said in a news release.

In April, the deficit was at a six-month high of \$74.4 billion.

US imports were at \$313 billion in June, down \$3.1 billion from May. Records showed it to be the lowest imports in 18 months.

Exports were at \$247.5 billion, some \$0.3 billion less than in May.

The difference between the two resulted in the deficit for last month.

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Over 300,000 People Have No Power on US East Coast After Storms – Web Tracker

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) – Over 300,000 customers on the US East Coast have no electricity after a wave of storms hit the region, the website Poweroutages.us said on Tuesday. Pennsylvania faced the most significant electricity losses, with almost 100,000 customers still experiencing power problems there. More than 80,00 people have no power in North Carolina, along with another 64,000 in Maryland, it added.

Two other states, Tennessee and Georgia, also have significant issues, with 57,000 outages. Another 20,000 customers have no power in Virginia and West Virginia.

Severe thunderstorms hit the US East Coast late Monday. The US National Weather Service issued alerts and tornado warnings for most parts of the region.

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US Air Force Finds Hazardous Materials at Two ICBM Facilities - Global Strike Command

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) – The US Air Force is taking “immediate measures” after finding hazardous, carcinogenic materials at an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) base in Montana, Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC) said.

“Air Force Global Strike Command is taking immediate measures to clean up and mitigate polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) at two locations following the release of initial results as part of the Missile Community Cancer Study,” the statement said on Monday.

All major operations remain unimpeded during the cleanup, it added.

A team of bio-environmental experts on August 4 reported that they discovered the hazardous materials at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana after conducting testing for PCBs in late June.

“Three hundred surface swipe samples were taken from across all Malmstrom AFB LCCs [Launch Control Centers]. Of the swipes, 279 returned non-detectable results. Of the 21 with detectable results, 19 were below the mitigation level established by federal law and regulation,” the statement said.

AFGSC commander Gen. Thomas Bussiere said he ordered “immediate measures” at Malmstrom Air Force Base to begin the cleanup process for the affected facilities.

The experts continue analyzing tests from two other Air Force Bases, F.E. Warren AFB in Wyoming and Minot in North Dakota, the statement said.

The US Environment Protection Agency (EPA) describes PCBs as a group of man-made organic chemicals that can cause cancer and other adverse health effects.

The discovery of hazardous materials at Malmstrom Air Force Base comes amid reports that hundreds of cases of cancer are surfacing among workers at US nuclear missile bases.

The non-governmental organization Torchlight Initiative has documented at least 268 cases of cancer among troops who have served at US nuclear missile sites.

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Canada Sanctions 7 Iranians Over 'Threats to Int'l Peace,' Rights Abuses - Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) - The Canadian government has imposed sanctions on seven Iranian nationals over alleged rights violations and a purported threat they pose to international peace and security, Global Affairs Canada said on Tuesday.

"Today's sanctions list 7 individuals involved in activities that gravely threaten international peace and security or that constitute gross and systemic violations of human rights in Iran. These include a former commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy and Strategic Centre and other senior Iranian officials involved in entities that supply materials to Iran's repressive national Law Enforcement Command," the ministry said in a statement.

The designations also target individuals occupying senior positions in state-owned firms involved in the production of lethal military drones that are allegedly being supplied to and used by Russia in Ukraine, the statement added.

The sanctions list includes Ali Akbar Ahmadian, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council; Abdolkarim Bani Tarafi, Brigadier General in Iran's Army and Chairman of the Iran Aviation Industry Organization; Fatemeh Haghshenas, Chief Executive Officer and member of the Board of Directors of Imen Sanat Zaman Fara; Masoumeh Teymouri, Chief of the Board of Directors of Imen Sanat Zaman Fara; Reza Khaki, a primary member of the Board of Directors of Qods Aviation Industries; Majid Reza Niyazi-Angili, a primary member of the Board of Directors of Qods Aviation Industries; and Vali Arlanizadeh, a member of the Board of Directors of Qods Aviation Industries.

Since October 2022, Canada has sanctioned 170 Iranian nationals and 192 entities, including the IRGC and members of the country's security and intelligence services.

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White House Declines to Comment on Reports Ukraine Foiled Plot to Assassinate Zelenskyy

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) - White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre declined to comment on reports about Ukraine foiling an assassination attempt against President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Earlier in the day, Ukraine's intelligence agency said it arrested a woman in connection to an alleged plot to assassinate Zelenskyy.

"I saw the report. I haven't had a chance to talk to our National Security Council on this... just not going to comment from here," Jean-Pierre told reporters on Monday.

The White House press secretary referred reporters to the Ukrainian government to speak directly about the incident.

The woman, according to the Ukrainian intelligence agency, tried to establish the time and list

of locations that Zelenskyy planned to visit in Ukraine's southern region.

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Nuland Says US Held 'Frank and Difficult' Talks in Niamey With Nigerien Coup Leaders

(Updates attribution, adds details after para 3, changes throughout)

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) - Acting US Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland told reporters she was in Niger and met with several military leaders who are attempting to take control of the country.

"We met with the self-proclaimed chief of defense of this operation, General [Moussa Salaou] Barmou, and three of the colonels supporting him," Nuland said during a teleconference on Monday. "I will say that these conversations were extremely frank and at times quite difficult because, again, we were pushing for a negotiated solution. It was not easy to get traction there."

Niger's military leaders are quite firm in their view on how they want to proceed, and it does not comport with the constitution of Niger, Nuland added.

The US delegation, Nuland said, was frank about what's at stake for the country if power is not returned to Niger's president Mohamed Bazoum, but Washington is keeping open the door to diplomacy.

Moreover, Nuland pointed out that they made multiple requests for an opportunity to meet directly with Bazoum, who is detained by the military coup leaders, but it was never granted.

The US delegation was also not granted an opportunity to see Niger's self-proclaimed president Abdourahamane Tiani, Nuland added.

Nuland said she also raised matters concerning the Wagner private military company. Nuland said she got the sense the military leaders understood "very well the risks to their sovereignty when Wagner is invited in."

In addition, Nuland said Barmou is somebody who has worked very closely with US Special Forces over many years, so they were able to go through in considerable detail the risks to aspects of cooperation between the United States and Niger.

On July 26, Niger's presidential guard ousted and detained Bazoum. Tchiani proclaimed himself the president of the caretaker Nigerien National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland-led government.

On July 31, the Economic Community of West African States condemned the coup, suspended financial aid to the country, and gave Niger's coup leaders one week to reinstate the detained president, or the community would use "all measures," including military, to restore order in the African nation.

The military governments of Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger's neighbors, warned that any military intervention against Niger would be considered a declaration of war against them.

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Boeing Starliner First Manned Flight to ISS Delayed Until Next March - NASA Official

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) - Boeing's CST-1000 Starliner, planned to be the sister manned shuttle spacecraft to the International Space Station (ISS) alongside the successful SpaceX Dragon, will only make its first manned flight to the orbiting laboratory in March 2024 after a further delay, NASA and Boeing officials told a press conference.

"We anticipate we will be ready with the spacecraft by early March," Boeing CST-100 Vice President and Program Manager Mark Nappi said on Monday. "We will be ready at the beginning of March."

An exact date for the launch has yet to be set, Nappi said.

However, Boeing and NASA technicians have made great progress in redesigning a joint linking two parachutes for reentry on the vehicle, he added.

In June Nappi acknowledged that a proposed July manned launch to date with at least two US astronauts on board had been scrapped.

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DeSantis Says 'Of Course' Trump Lost 2020 US Presidential Election

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) - Florida Governor and 2024 Republican presidential candidate Ron DeSantis said during an interview with NBC News that rival candidate Donald Trump undeniably lost the 2020 election.

"Whoever puts their hand on the Bible on January 20 every four years is the winner," DeSantis said on Sunday. "Of course [Trump] lost... Joe Biden's the president."

However, DeSantis also criticized the media for acting like 2020 was a "perfect election."

Republicans will lose the presidential election if voters view it as a referendum on Trump's scandals, DeSantis said. Trump is currently facing criminal charges linked to his alleged role to overturn the 2020 election results, as well as for his alleged handling of classified documents.

Trump leads the pack of Republican presidential candidates, holding an average of 53.3% support as of August 3, according to a FiveThirtyEight primary poll tracker. DeSantis sits in second place among candidates at 14.3% support.

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Senior US State Dept. Official Nuland in Niger, Met With Military Leaders - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) - Acting US Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland is in Niger and met with military leaders attempting to take over control of the country, CNN reported. Nuland, according to the report on Monday, said her meeting with members of the military junta was extremely frank and at times quite difficult, but hoped they keep the door open to diplomacy.

Moreover, media reported that multiple requests to have Nuland meet with detained president Mohamed Bazoum were denied.

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Trump Team Argues Against Government Protective Order, Claim Violation of Rights - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) - Attorneys representing former US President Donald Trump filed a court document arguing against the US government's request for a protective order to keep evidence from the public in the criminal case involving Trump's alleged role in efforts to overturn the 2020 US presidential election.

The government is requesting the court restrict all of their produced documents without regard for their relative sensitivity. Trump's attorneys are instead proposing to shield only sensitive materials from public view.

"The government requests the Court assume the role of censor and impose content-based regulations on President Trump's political speech that would forbid him from publicly discussing or disclosing all non-public documents produced by the government, including both purportedly sensitive materials," the document, filed Monday, said. "This untargeted method offends... the First Amendment, which requires a compelling government interest and narrow tailoring to justify a prior restraint."

Trump's defense team said he does not contest the government's claimed interest in restricting some documents it must produce, but rather, just a blanket gag order.

The lawyers argued that the court should limit its protective order to "genuinely sensitive material" in order to satisfy the government's interest in confidentiality while preserving the rights of Trump and the public.

Trump's attorneys also said US President Joe Biden, who is poised to run against Trump in the 2024 US presidential election, has "capitalized" on the indictment by making references to it.

The request was filed in the US District Court for the District of Columbia, where Trump faces criminal charges including conspiracy against rights and conspiracy to defraud the United States for his alleged role in attempting to overturn the 2020 election results through the January 6 US Capitol riot and related activities.

Trump, who also faces criminal charges linked to other cases, has characterized the indictment as part of a broader weaponization of the US justice system against him.

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New START Most Important Arms Control Treaty That US, Russia Must Keep - Ex-US Officer

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) - The New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) is the most important arms control agreement that the United States and Russia must do all in their power to keep in effect, retired US Lt. Col. Nicholas Troyan told Sputnik.

"I think this is the most important treaty, among all others, because when we speak about strategic missiles, that means the end of the entire world," Troyan said.

In 1988, Troyan, a Chinese-born Russian emigre to the United States who served 33 years in the US military, became chief of one of 12 US teams that inspected Soviet nuclear sites under the terms of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.

Troyan said the New START and any other similar initiative is very important in diminishing the threat of nuclear weapons.

He called "idiotism" the complaints that another country has 6,000 nuclear warheads when the United States has 5,000 because "less than 1,000 is enough to destroy the whole world almost completely."

Troyan called on the United States and Russia to start talking about all open nuclear-related issues rather than engage in mutual insults.

"We must try to communicate to understand each other and this is the most difficult thing, of course," he said.

Troyan also emphasized the necessity of reaching agreements on both strategic and tactical nuclear weapons of any range, warning that the negative effects of using such arms impact not only the battlefield but the entire world.

"The greatest danger to me is that not only where you bomb, where the center of impact is, but all the secondary effects of radiation and how they affect the people and the environment all around," he said.

When the United States dropped the atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, Troyan was seven years old and living with his parents in China and was unaware of the war's developments.

"Of course, the United States and Russia now have more accurate warheads than those used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But there can always be, as the Russians say, 'stray shells,'" he added.

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima killed 140,000 people and 74,000 in Nagasaki and the vast majority of them were civilians.

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FAA Issues Ground Stops at Numerous US Airports Due to Severe Weather

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) – US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) issued ground stops at numerous airports in the country on Monday as severe thunderstorms are expected to

hit the eastern part of the country.

“The FAA is re-routing aircraft around the storms heading to the East Coast as much as possible,” the agency said on Twitter.

Flight operations would “likely” be paused in major airports, including New York City, Washington, DC, Atlanta, Philadelphia, and other cities, it added.

FlightAware.com web tracker informed that almost 5,200 flights within the US are currently delayed, and more than 1,200 were canceled. There were over 230 delays and almost 180 cancellations in three Washington, DC area airports, while in New York City, these numbers are 321 and 183, it added.

US National Weather Service issued a tornado watch and severe thunderstorms warning for most of the US East Coast.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 8 (Sputnik) -

SAUDI SUMMIT ON UKRAINE

* China's participation in the Saudi summit on Ukraine was productive, but further details about the meeting are private, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

* The Saudi summit on Ukraine held over the weekend was productive, and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland attended on behalf of the United States, Miller said.

* Russia expects that the BRICS countries which took part in the meeting in Saudi Arabia over the weekend will inform Moscow about the course of the consultations, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said.

CHINA-RUSSIA TALKS

* Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov held a telephone conversation with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and discussed international issues, including the Ukrainian crisis, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Monday.

* China will take an unbiased stance on Ukraine, express its objective opinion and promote peace negotiations, Wang Yi told Lavrov.

UKRAINE CONFLICT

* The vicegerent of the Kiev-Pechersk Lavra, Metropolitan Bishop Pavel has been released on a \$900,000 bail, his lawyer Nikita Chekman said on Monday.

* Special Representative of the Chinese government on Eurasian Affairs Li Hui held an extensive discussion with the participants of the meeting in Jeddah and China will continue to strengthen the dialogue with all parties to find a political settlement of the Ukrainian crisis, the Chinese Foreign Ministry told Sputnik.

* Kiev lost 360 soldiers in the Donetsk and South Donetsk directions during the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* Russian armed forces has successfully repulsed 12 counterattacks by Ukrainian military in the Kharkiv region and the Luhansk People's Republic, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

EXPLOSION IN TURKEY

* An explosion occurred near the commercial port of Derince in Turkey, but it has not disrupted the port's operation, a source in the Safiport operator company told Sputnik on Monday.

* The explosion damaged 13 out of 16 elevators, Kocaeli Municipality Mayor Tahir Buyukakin said.

* The number of people injured in an explosion has risen to ten, Kocaeli Governor Seddar Yavuz said.

BRICS SUMMIT

* South African President Cyril Ramaphosa invited a total of 67 country leaders and 20 representatives of organizations to the meeting within the BRICS summit framework, South African Foreign Minister Naledi Pandor said on Monday.

* French President Emmanuel Macron has not been invited to the BRICS summit in South Africa on August 22-24, Pandor said.

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Biden Says Intends to Treat Certain Parts of Trade Agreement With Taiwan as Non-Binding

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Monday that he is going to treat certain requirements of the newly implemented US-Taiwan trade agreement as non-binding when they infringe on his authority to negotiate with foreign partners.

"Today, I have signed into law H.R. 4004, the 'United States-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade First Agreement Implementation Act,'" Biden said in a statement. "In cases where the requirements of section 7 of the Act would impermissibly infringe upon my constitutional authority to negotiate with a foreign partner, my Administration will treat them as non-binding."

Earlier in the day, Biden signed into law a House resolution implementing the US-Taiwan trade agreement signed on June 1.

The resolution among other things sets robust transparency and consultation requirements for any future agreements negotiated under the initiative, according to a US House Ways and Means Committee press release.

The agreement sets rules in five areas of bilateral trade: customs administration and trade facilitation, good regulatory practices, services regulation, anti-corruption, and small and medium-sized businesses.

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Biden Admin. Preparing to Ask US Congress for Further Ukraine Aid Funds - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is developing a new supplemental funding request to Congress for additional aid to Ukraine, CNN reported on Monday.

The Biden administration is preparing the package for consideration by lawmakers this autumn, the report cited Assistant Secretary of the Army for Acquisition, Logistics and Technology Doug Bush as saying.

The funding request will focus on boosting munitions production and purchasing more munitions for Ukraine, the report said.

The Defense Department should have a strong case to bring to lawmakers for the additional funding, the report added.

In December, Congress authorized \$36 billion in aid for Ukraine. The funds were intended to last until the end of September. The current request may come as Congress attempts to finalize the defense policy and appropriations bills as well, which contain provisions related to Ukraine aid.

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Biden Signs US-Taiwan Agreement on Trade in 21st Century - White House

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden signed into law a House resolution implementing the US-Taiwan trade agreement signed on June 1, the White House announced.

"On Monday, August 7, 2023, the President signed into law: H.R. 4004, the 'United States-Taiwan Initiative on 21st-Century Trade First Agreement Implementation Act,' which approves the June 1, 2023, trade agreement between the United States and Taiwan, under the auspices of the American Institute in Taiwan and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States," the White House said in a press release.

The US House Ways and Means Committee also issued a press release saying that the agreement sets rules in five areas of bilateral trade: customs administration and trade facilitation, good regulatory practices, services regulation, anti-corruption and small and medium-sized businesses.

At present, Taiwan is the United States' ninth largest trading partner with \$90.6 billion in total traded goods in 2020, according to US Trade Representative Office data.

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US Detected Chinese Hackers Breached Japan's Classified Defense Networks - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - The US National Security Agency in fall 2020 claimed that it detected that Chinese military hackers had breached Japan's classified defense networks, the Washington Post reported on Monday citing current and former officials familiar with the matter.

US officials did not disclose to the Japanese government how US spy agencies knew about China's alleged breach in order to protect sources and methods, the report said.

The report said a former US military official briefed on the matter described the cyber intrusion as "shockingly bad."

The report said, citing former US officials, that the Chinese stole sensitive defense information from Japan pertaining to plans, capabilities and assessments of military shortcomings.

Although Japan has taken steps to strengthen its networks, the United States believes its still not enough to defend against spying from China, which may hinder intelligence sharing between the two countries, the report said citing officials.

Senior US national security official under the Trump administration briefed then-incoming national security adviser Jake Sullivan about the alleged breach, the report said, adding that Chinese hackers were still in Japan's defense networks by the time the Biden administration came into power in early 2021.

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US Government Agencies Close Earlier Amid Tornado Watch in Washington

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - All US federal agencies are closing earlier in Washington, DC, on Monday, as the US National Weather Service issued a tornado watch and severe thunderstorm warning for the area, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) said.

"Employees should depart 2 hours earlier than their normal departure time and may request Unscheduled Leave to depart prior to their staggered departure time," the OPM said in a statement.

All federal buildings should be closed by 3:00 p.m. Eastern time (7:00 p.m. GMT), it added.

The US National Weather Service has issued a tornado watch until late evening. It also warned of widespread dangerous storms in the area.

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Two Dozen US House Democrats to Visit Israel This Week for Talks With Leaders - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - Two dozen Democratic members of the US House of Representatives will visit Israel this week for talks with Israeli and Palestinian leadership, House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries said in a statement.

"Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries and Representative Steny Hoyer are leading a group of 24 House Democrats to Israel this week, the second trip Rep. Jeffries is taking to Israel in the 118th Congress," the statement said on Sunday.

Members will hold meetings with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, activists and stakeholders while in Israel and the West Bank, the statement said. The delegation will address issues such as a two-state solution, judicial reforms, combating terror and preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons, the statement said.

House Democrats will reaffirm their commitment to the "special relationship" between the United States and Israel, the statement said. The members will learn how Congress can continue to strengthen the US-Israel alliance and enable peace in the region, the statement said.

The trip is organized by the nonprofit charitable group American Israel Education Foundation, the statement added.

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US Will Continue to Press Russia to Revive Black Sea Grain Initiative - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - The United States will continue to press Russia to resume its participation in the grain exports agreement, formally known as the Black Sea Initiative, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"We're going to continue to press Russia to rejoin the Black Sea grain initiative," Miller said during a press briefing. "Unfortunately, we have as of yet seen no sign that Russia intends to return to the initiative."

Earlier on Monday, a source in the administration of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told Sputnik that Ankara continues its dialogue with Western partners on the resumption of the Black Sea Initiative and continues an interdepartmental dialogue with Russia as well.

Miller said that US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with his Turkish counterpart over the weekend about efforts to get Russia to return to the grain exports agreement and that the United States believes Turkey has a productive role to play in this effort, Miller added.

The Turkey- and UN-brokered agreement, which provided for a Black Sea humanitarian corridor to allow exports of Ukrainian grain over the past year expired on July 18 because Russia did not renew its participation in it. Moscow said it reached the decision not to extend the agreement because the provisions pertaining to exports of Russian grain and fertilizer were not implemented.

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State Dept. Says Assisted 100 Americans to Depart Niger Last Week Amid Military Takeover

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - The US government helped one hundred Americans evacuate from Niger last week due to the concerning situation in the country, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

Last week, the State Department ordered non-emergency embassy personnel and their families to leave the Embassy in Niger because of the military coup. The US government has not yet officially recognized there is a coup in Niger.

"We also assisted the departure of around 100 American citizens on a charter flight that left the country on Friday," Miller said during a press briefing.

Miller added that they have not seen a significant number of other requests from Americans seeking assistance with leaving Niger.

Moreover, according to Miller, State Department officials have been in contact with military leaders in Niger, urging them to step aside. US officials have also remained in contact with Niger's president Mohamed Bazoum.

On July 26, Niger's presidential guard ousted and detained Bazoum. The guard's commander, Gen. Abdourahmane Tchiani, proclaimed himself the president of the caretaker Nigerien National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland-led government.

On July 31, the Economic Community of West African States condemned the coup, suspended financial aid to the country, and gave Niger's coup leaders one week to reinstate the detained president, or the community would use "all measures," including military, to restore order in the African nation. The military governments of Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger's neighbors, warned that any military intervention against Niger would be considered a declaration of war against them.

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State Dept. Says 'Productive' China Attended Saudi Summit on Ukraine

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - China's participation in the Saudi summit on Ukraine was productive, but further details about the meeting are private, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"We did believe it was productive that China attended. I'm not going to speak to the details of the meeting because it was a private meeting," Miller said during a press briefing.

Miller added that US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, who attended the summit, had a separate meeting with the Chinese special envoy Li Hui on the margins of the summit.

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State Dept. Says Saudi Summit on Ukraine Was Productive, Sullivan and Nuland Attended

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - The Saudi summit on Ukraine held over the weekend was productive, and US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and acting Deputy Secretary of State Victoria Nuland attended on behalf of the United States, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

"I would say that we felt there were productive talks that were attended on the US part, obviously by Jake Sullivan, the National Security Adviser, and by acting Deputy Secretary Nuland," Miller said during a press briefing. "We thought it was productive that a number of countries were able to hear directly from Ukraine."

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Severe Thunderstorms With Hail, Damaging Winds to Hit Eastern US - Weather Service

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - A wave of thunderstorms accompanied by heavy rain, damaging winds and hail will hit most of the eastern part of the United States, the US National Weather Service said on Monday.

"A strong storm system tracking across the Great Lakes region and associated frontal boundaries will focus the threat for strong to severe thunderstorms across most of the eastern United States today," the National Weather Service said in a warning.

The storms are expected to be accompanied by damaging winds, hail, heavy rain and flash flooding along with a few tornadoes, the National Weather Service added.

US media reported that the National Weather Service issued a Level 4 of 5 warning for a severe storm in Washington and its neighborhoods for the first time in a decade. The National Weather Service said it has high confidence that the storms will contain damaging winds, severe hail and/or tornadoes, the report said.

The authorities are urging residents to remain indoors during the storm and get ready for extended power outages and the potential for some roads to be blocked.

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UN Welcomes Any Diplomatic Initiative Leading to Peace in Ukraine - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, August 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations welcomes any initiative leading to any form of peace in Ukraine that would preserve the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said on Monday.

Haq's comment was in reference to the Ukraine peace talks organized by Saudi Arabia on August 5-6.

"We welcome all of the diplomatic initiatives towards dealing with this crisis and we want to keep pushing forward towards any form of peace that is based on the UN Charter, including on the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine," Haq said during a press briefing.

The United Nations and specifically UN Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo participated virtually in the talks, Haq added.

Saudi Arabia hosted the Ukraine peace talks in Jeddah over the weekend, having invited representatives from some 30 countries, but not Russia. The Jeddah meeting is a follow-up to a similar conference held in Denmark in June. The Copenhagen meeting failed to produce any joint statements.

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Blinken, Ukrainian Counterpart Discuss Peace Talks in Jeddah, Counteroffensive—State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke over the telephone with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba and discussed developments in the ongoing counteroffensive against Russian forces as well as the recently concluded peace talks in Saudi Arabia, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Monday.

“Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba today via phone from Washington, D.C. The two discussed developments in Ukraine’s counteroffensive efforts, recent conversations about a just and durable peace in Ukraine held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and long-term security arrangements between the two countries,” Miller said in a press release.

Saudi Arabia hosted peace talks on Ukraine in Jeddah over the weekend, having invited representatives from some 30 countries, but not Russia. The Jeddah meeting is a follow-up to a similar conference held in Denmark in June. The Copenhagen meeting failed to produce any joint statements.

On Friday, the Russian Defense Ministry said that Ukrainian forces have lost over 43,000 soldiers on the line of contact since the start of its counteroffensive in June.

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US Judge Dismisses Trump's Defamation Counterclaim Against E. Jean Carroll - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - A US judge dismissed former President Donald Trump's counterclaim alleging E. Jean Carroll defamed him by continuing to accuse him of raping her in public statements following a verdict from a jury, court documents revealed on Monday.

A jury concluded that Trump had not raped Carroll within the meaning of the New York Penal Law - meaning that it did not find that he had penetrated her.

However, the judge writes that Trump's assertion of falsity is insufficient to state a claim for defamation because "the jury's verdict in Carroll II establishes, as against Mr. Trump, the fact that Mr. Trump 'raped' her, albeit digitally rather than with his penis," US Judge Lewis Kaplan wrote in the court document.

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US Appeals Court Strikes Down State of Hawaii's Ban on Butterfly Knives - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - The US Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals struck down a law banning butterfly knives in the state of Hawaii based on constitutional protections for weapons ownership, according to a court opinion filed Monday.

"The panel held that possession of butterfly knives is conduct covered by the plain text of the Second Amendment. Bladed weapons facially constitute 'arms' within the meaning of the Second Amendment," the filing said. "The Constitution therefore presumptively guarantees keeping and bearing such instruments for self-defense."

The Second Amendment of the US Constitution guarantees the right of Americans to keep and bear arms. Butterfly knives are a type of knife in which the blade can be concealed between two folding handles.

Hawaii criminalized carrying butterfly knives in 1993, prompting two plaintiffs to sue the state to assert their right to purchase butterfly knives for self-defense, the filing said.

The appeals court found that the weapons are covered under the Second Amendment and that Hawaii's ban failed to comply with the United States' historical tradition of weapons regulation, the filing said.

The appeals court reversed an earlier district court decision in the case that ruled in favor of Hawaii and remanded it for further proceedings consistent with the higher court's opinion.

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Pentagon Says US Defense Chief Hosting Iraqi Counterpart at Honor Cordon Ceremony

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is hosting his Iraqi counterpart Thabet al-Abbasi at an honor cordon ceremony in the United States, the Defense Department said on Monday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III will host Defense Minister Thabet al-Abbasi of Iraq at an honor cordon ceremony at the River Entrance August 7 at 3 pm EDT," the Pentagon said in a statement.

Last month, a helicopter conducting counterterrorism missions in Iraq as part of the US-led Operation Inherent Resolve was damaged in an in-flight mishap near Erbil.

The coalition continues to operate in Iraq and Syria to take on remaining elements of the Islamic State terror group (outlawed in Russia).

Defense communications between the United States and Iraq come in the wake of decades of intervention in the country, including the Gulf War, Iraq War and broader Global War on

Terrorism.

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American Red Cross Says Now Accepts Blood From Gay, Bisexual Men Per New FDA Rules

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - The American Red Cross announced on Monday that it has begun implementing the new blood collection guidelines adopted by the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) earlier this year regarding gay and bisexual donors.

"The American Red Cross is now welcoming more donors into its lifesaving mission through updated FDA blood donation eligibility guidelines that eliminate longstanding broad, time-based deferrals based on sexual orientation," the organization said in a statement.

In May, the FDA finalized new recommendations for determining the eligibility of blood donors that are expected to increase the donor pool by eliminating questions regarding the sexual orientation of potential donors.

The FDA explained that it made the changes after reviewing data from other countries that share similar rates of HIV infection and have already put in place risk-based eligibility for blood donations.

According to the new guidelines, a person who reports a new sexual partner, more than one sexual partner, or recent anal sex activity will be instructed to wait at least three months to donate blood.

In addition, those individuals taking medications to treat or prevent HIV would also be blocked from donating blood.

Before 2015, men who practiced sex with other men were barred from donating blood after the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, when it was discovered that HIV tests did not provide the necessary accuracy to protect the blood supply.

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Russia Can Help Create Truly African Orthodox Church - Missionary

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - Due to its historically close relationship and legacy of supporting anti-colonialism, Russia can help Africans create a truly African Orthodox church, one that is indigenous to the continent, US-born Russian Orthodox missionary Hieromonk Silouan (Brown) told Sputnik.

"Russia is seen today as a kind of an anti-colonial ally to Africa. So, there is already a strong bond between Russia and Africans and so, to the extent that Russia can truly enable an indigenous Orthodox church and allow people to express the fullness of Orthodox faith in ways that speak to the African heart," Silouan, who serves at the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) mission in Uganda, said.

Silouan noted that people in former Western colonies in Africa do not want to be occupied again in new ways and they respect the former Soviet Union and Russia for their anti-colonial stance, adding that seeing Russian flags in East Africa is not uncommon nowadays.

He expressed confidence that Orthodox Christianity would continue developing in Africa but cautioned missionaries that they should always be mindful of local conditions and respectful toward the local populations just as true Christians should.

Providing the faithful an opportunity to take care of their basic needs and helping them avoid becoming economic refugees are essential for Africans to stay with the church, Silouan said.

"I think it all comes down to empowerment. If the Russian mission in Africa empowers natives and allows the indigenous Orthodox faith to develop, as the mission did in Alaska, I am sure we will be there for generations to come," he said.

Silouan pointed out the importance of adjusting to the cultural and other traditions of the local populations. He described how his parish on Bukasa Island in Lake Victoria begin singing, drumming and dancing after the end of the Divine Liturgy, noting that such practices are a big part of the African tradition.

"It can be very disconcerting when people are drumming and dancing, but this is how the Africans express their love for Christ," he said.

ROCOR established a mission in Uganda in the early 1980s when Gerasimos Kambites, the church's Greek missionary from Canada, opened a parish there. Kambites left the country several years later and his closest supporter, Christopher Walusimbi, served as the only priest there for almost three decades.

Despite the challenges, the mission continued developing and currently accounts for about 120 parishioners and about 45 catechumens.

Silouan said it would be easy to have several hundred new believers in Africa but the lack of local clerics hinders the provision of pastoral care on a regular basis.

"This thirst for faith is amazing, but we need more priests," he said.

While sacramental life is a major part of the mission in Uganda, the mission is also trying to provide education and meet other needs of the faithful. Silouan said he has considered opening secondary schools in addition to the existing primary schools the mission has in local villages.

"In our mission center in Uganda's capital, Kampala, we recently bought a drug store and a clinic. The idea is not only to provide services that are needed in the community but also to generate income locally that will pay salary to the people that are working in the mission, so they can afford to focus on evangelization," Silouan said.

Silouan said the priority is to establish a permanent church there so that they do not have to hold worship services under a tarp.

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Fourth Police Officer in Floyd Murder Sentenced to 57 Months - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - Former Minneapolis police officer Tou Thao, who was found guilty of aiding and abetting manslaughter in the landmark George Floyd case, was

sentenced to 57 months in prison on Monday, according to Fox News.

Judge Peter Cahill gave him a longer sentence than the 51 months requested by prosecutors, saying that he expected to hear more remorse and acknowledgment of responsibility.

Thao is the fourth and final former police officer sentenced in the murder of Floyd. Derek Chauvin, the lead officer who knelt on Floyd's neck, is serving concurrent 22.5-year and 21-year sentences.

Thao, who is already serving a 3.5-year sentence for federal charges of depriving Floyd of his civil rights, will receive 340 days of credit for time served. He will serve the two sentences concurrently.

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FBI Agent Reveals Bureau Met With Tech Companies on Biden Laptop, Withheld Info -
Lawmaker

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - An FBI agent on the Foreign Influence Task Force revealed in testimony to Congress that the bureau met with social media companies to discuss the Hunter Biden laptop story in 2020 but withheld information from them, US House Judiciary Committee Chairman Jim Jordan said on Monday.

The Judiciary Committee and its Select Subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal Government interviewed Foreign Influence Task Force chief Laura Dehmlow in July, Jordan said in a statement via social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter.

"[Dehmlow's] testimony was shocking, revealing that the FBI deliberately withheld critical information from social media companies about Hunter Biden's laptop the day that the New York Post story broke," Jordan said in a statement.

The FBI met with both Facebook (owned by Meta, banned in Russia) and Twitter on October 14, 2020 – the same day US media broke the Hunter Biden laptop story, the statement said.

During its meeting with Twitter earlier in the day, one FBI agent confirmed to the company that the laptop was real, before another agent jumped in to say the agency has "no further comment," the statement said.

The FBI then held emergency deliberations to decide how to answer the question ahead of the meeting with Facebook, with one FBI employee ordering that the agency respond with "no comment" moving forward, the statement said. The FBI provided such a response to Facebook when they asked about the laptop's authenticity, the statement said.

"Did Dehmlow know that the FBI had the laptop and it was real? Yes. Did other key members of the FBI's Foreign Influence Task Force know? Yes. The FBI knew the laptop was real and yet decided it would say 'no comment,'" the statement said.

Twitter and Facebook then censored the Hunter Biden laptop story, the statement said. The Biden administration "secretly set in motion" the events that led 51 former US intelligence officials to claim the story was Russian disinformation, the statement said.

FBI Special Agent Elvis Chan, the primary conduit between the agency's Foreign Influence Task Force and big tech companies, made a number of "inconsistent statements" during sworn

testimony, the statement also said.

Chan lied about his knowledge of the FBI's Hunter Biden laptop investigation and the extent of his engagement with social media platforms on the matter, the statement said. The Justice Department has "stonewalled" the committee's efforts to interview Chan, the statement added.

The lawmakers' investigation into the "censorship-industrial complex" remains ongoing, the statement said. Lawmakers are preparing and considering legislation to bolster constitutional protections for freedom of speech and the press, the statement said.

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Ex-FBI Agent May Change Plea in Case of Aiding Russian Billionaire Deripaska - Court Order

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - Former FBI agent Charles McGonigal, who is accused of illegally helping a sanctioned Russian billionaire, has been granted a change of plea hearing on August 15, according to a court order.

"The Court has been informed that Defendant Charles McGonigal may wish to enter a change of plea. Accordingly, on August 15, 2023 at 12:15 p.m., a plea proceeding will take place in Courtroom 12B, 500 Pearl Street, New York, New York 10007," the order said.

McGonigal is a retired former head of counterintelligence in the FBI's New York office. He was indicted in January on charges of money laundering and violating US sanctions for allegedly working for Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska to remove him from the sanctions list and to investigate a rival.

McGonigal had pleaded not guilty to the charges.

McGonigal also faces a separate indictment related to accepting \$225,000 from a former Albanian intelligence operative while working for the FBI.

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US Partisan Gaps Widen Most on Government Power, Climate, Abortion - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - Democrats and Republicans have become more polarized over the past two decades on a number of issues including government power, climate, and abortion, according to a Gallup poll published on Monday.

Over the covered period, partisan gaps have either remained roughly the same or expanded, the pollster noted.

Political polarization has increased most significantly on federal government power. Compared to 2003, the Republican over Democratic gap has widened by 50 percentage points when it comes to the number of those who believe the federal government has too much power.

Republicans have also increased their lead (+29 points) when it comes to those feeling immigration should be decreased

Democrats, on their part, now look even more worried than Republicans that human activity caused climate change, with the gap increasing by 33 percentage points. The Democratic over Republican gap on the need for abortion to be legal under any circumstance has grown by 30 percentage points.

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US Senator Ernst Says Adding NDAA Measures to Counter Chinese Influence on Pacific Islands

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - US Senate Armed Services Committee member Joni Ernst included measures in the fiscal year 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) to counter Chinese influence on Pacific island countries, the lawmaker said on Monday.

The legislation dubbed the Connecting Oceania's Nations with Vanguard Exercises and National Empowerment (CONVENE) Act, was included in the FY24 NDAA, Ernst said in a statement obtained by Sputnik.

"The strategic location of these islands is integral to our national security, but the lack of direct security channels between our nations creates risk. Through increased coordination, my bipartisan effort will strengthen cooperation and help counter and expose Chinese coercion," the statement said.

The United States must ensure its relationships with Pacific island countries are not "corrupted" by China, the statement said. China's activity in the region necessitates a US response, the statement added.

The CONVENE Act would aid the formation of National Security Councils to coordinate between Pacific island countries and the US on counter malign influence and security activities, the statement said.

The legislation would also enable increased coordination with Compacts of Free Association (COFA) nations – the Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau – on humanitarian, law enforcement, counterintelligence and maritime security issues, the statement said.

In addition, the legislation requires the use of Defense Department-approved technical equipment to prevent Chinese monitoring of US activity, allows the US to share information with COFA nations to counter malign activities and supports further integration between US and COFA national security apparatuses, the statement said.

The US Senate and House of Representatives both passed their versions of the FY24 NDAA last month, setting the stage for the pieces of legislation to be reconciled before presentation to the president. Both bills authorized approximately \$886 billion in US defense funding and set policies on how the funding could be spent.

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

Federal Reserve Must Raise Interest Rates Higher to Win Fight Against Inflation - Governor

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - US interest rates, already at a 22-year high, need to rise further as inflation remains above tolerable level for the average American, Federal Reserve Governor Michelle Bowman said on Monday.

"We have made progress in lowering inflation over the past year, but inflation is still significantly above the FOMC's two percent target, and the labor market continues to be tight, with job openings still far exceeding the number of available workers," Bowman said, referring to the US central bank's policy-making Federal Open Market Committee. "I expect that additional increases will likely be needed to lower inflation to the FOMC's goal."

The United States is to release on Thursday its July reading for the key Consumer Price Index (CPI), which will show how much further the Fed has to go with raising interest rates.

The CPI, which rose by 3% year-on-year in June for its smallest growth in two years, is expected to have seen a slightly more aggressive expansion of 3.3% in July. The Fed's target is 2% per year.

The Fed has identified runaway jobs growth and correspondingly higher wages - as well as trillions of dollars of relief spending over the 2020 coronavirus outbreak - as among reasons for inflation hitting 40-year highs of more than 9% a year in June 2022. While the pandemic spending is over, jobs and wage growth have continued to fuel inflation, prompting the Fed to keep adding to interest rates.

Since March 2022, the Fed has hiked rates by 525 basis points from a previous 25. Its next decision on interest rates is on September 20.

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Investigators Headed to Helicopter Collision Site in California That Killed Three- Reports

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) – Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board are headed to the spot where two helicopters collided killing three people in California, CNN reported on Monday citing an agency spokesperson.

Earlier, CalFire Southern Region Chief David Fulcher said three firefighters were killed after two helicopters collided while extinguishing a fire in California on Sunday.

"The first helicopter was able to land safely nearby. Unfortunately, the second helicopter crushed, and tragically, all three members perished," Fulcher told reporters.

He added that those killed were the Division chief, air captain, and contract pilot.

The incident occurred on Sunday night about 90 miles east of Los Angeles. Media reports noted that the helicopters were among six firefighter crews responding to the fire, which spread to nearby vegetation.

Fulcher noted that the crash caused an additional fire, which was extinguished. He also said

that the authorities are investigating the incident.

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PayPal Says Launches Its Stablecoin Redeemable 1:1 for US Dollars

WASHINGTON, August 7 (Sputnik) - PayPal announced on Monday that it has launched its own stablecoin, which is backed by US dollar deposits and can also be redeemed for US dollars.

A stablecoin is a form of cryptocurrency, the value of which is pegged to a reference asset, for instance, precious metals, fiat currency or another cryptocurrency.

"Fully-backed, regulated stablecoins have the potential to transform payments in web3 and digitally native environments. To address that emerging potential, PayPal today announced the launch of a US dollar-denominated stablecoin, PayPal USD," the company said in a press release.

PayPal's stablecoin is fully backed by US dollar deposits, short-term US treasuries and similar cash equivalents, and can be redeemed 1:1 for US dollars, the release added.

The stablecoin will be issued by Paxos Trust Company and rolled out in the coming weeks, but will not be available in the US state of Hawaii, according to the release.