

**8/15/23 Tuesday**

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'Thoughts and Prayers': Biden to Visit Maui After 'No Comment' on Fire Devastation

According to a lawsuit filed by several victims of the Maui wildfire, equipment owned by Maui Electric was responsible for sparking the blaze last week that killed nearly 100 people. The company has said it considered a shutdown amid the high winds but rejected it because there was no coordination plan.

US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday he and First Lady Jill Biden would soon visit the site of a devastating wildfire in Hawaii, but were waiting so as not to interfere with the rescue effort underway.

"My wife Jill and I are going to travel to Hawaii as soon as we can. That's what I've been talking to the governor about; I don't want to get in the way. I've been to too many disaster areas," Biden said at the beginning of a speech at a wind and electric power manufacturing plant in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on Tuesday.

"But I want to go, make sure we've got everything they need," he added. "Want to make sure we don't disrupt the ongoing recovery efforts."

Biden called the wildfire on Maui "devastating," noting that the death toll as of Tuesday had risen to 99 people, making it the deadliest wildfire in the United States in nearly a century. He said he has "reassured" Hawaii Governor Josh Green that his government will have Washington's support.

"It's painstaking work, it takes time, and it's nerve wracking," Biden said.

"All that area they've got to plow up, they can't do it now because they don't know how many bodies are in there; they don't know what's left," the President added.

The fire last week exploded thanks to high winds caused by an offshore hurricane that passed several hundred miles to the south, growing in just a couple of hours into a conflagration that consumed 3.39 square miles of the 727-square-mile island, including 80% of the historic city of Lahaina. The high winds also blasted smoke sideways, frustrating evacuation efforts in the town of 15,000 and making it impossible for firefighters to drop water on the flames.

Photos from the aftermath of the fire show dozens of automobiles charred by the flames as they crowded the roads out of town. More than 2,000 structures were destroyed, and reconstruction efforts could top \$6 billion, according to official estimates. Some 1,000 people remain missing amid the chaos, in which thousands fled the island or sought refuge in government shelters, while those closer to the flames jumped into the sea to escape.

**Biden Response Criticized**

Biden's response to the destruction thus far has been heavily criticized, including on Sunday when he told a reporter he had "no comment" on the disaster. On the day Lahaina was destroyed, he incorrectly told another journalist he had already declared an emergency on Maui - he has since signed such a declaration.

On Monday, Biden rolled out a [social media thread](#) describing the aid his administration was giving to the Maui victims, including being placed in temporary housing at hotels by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and a cash payment for survivors.

“We’re laser-focused on getting aid to survivors, including Critical Needs Assistance: a one-time \$700 payment per household offering relief during an unimaginably difficult time,” Biden said.

According to [CostofLive.com](#), a website that tracks the prices of typical basic commodities in different locales, the average cost of living on Maui once housing and utilities are excluded is about \$1,175 per month.

Describing it as a “whole-of-government response effort,” the White House [posted a fact sheet](#) expounding its actions on Maui, including deploying 500 federal personnel and massive amounts of food, water, blankets, and beds.

#### Power Company Blamed

A class-action lawsuit filed over the weekend by several survivors of the fire alleges that equipment belonging to Maui Electric, a subsidiary of the Hawaii Electric power company, was responsible for sparking the fire.

“We allege that many of the regulatory laws that require maintenance of equipment were broken,” James Frantz, chief executive of the Frantz Law Group, one of several law firms involved in the suit, told US media. “There’s got to be some accountability.”

According to data from Whisker Labs, a private company that monitors the US electric grid for potential fire-triggering incidents, told US media that they observed a pronounced, 8-second-long dip in voltage early on Maui the morning of August 7, when the fire is believed to have occurred.

Bob Marshall, co-founder and chief executive of Whisker Labs, said that eight seconds “is an eternity in electrical grid time ... Something on the grid was very unhappy for eight seconds and trying to recover from a shock.”

Other electrical companies, including Pacific Gas & Electric in California, have been found responsible for numerous deadly wildfires sparked by their equipment, which often occurred after the electrical provider decided not to preemptively cut power ahead of weather likely to damage its equipment or spark a fire, such as high winds.

Shelee Kimura, the chief executive of Hawaiian Electric, told US media on Monday that the company didn’t have a shutoff plan because water pumps and medical devices on the island are dependent on the electricity the company provides.

“In Lahaina, the electricity powers the pumps that provide the water - and so that was also a critical need during that time,” Kimura said. “There are choices that need to be made - and all of those factors play into it.”

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House, Senate Leaders Unite on Short-Term Spending Bill as Solution to Budget Impasse

The Democratic leader of the US Senate and the Republican leader of the US House of Representatives have agreed in principle to support a short-term spending bill and avert a potential government shutdown as they hammer out their remaining differences on spending priorities.

On Tuesday, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) announced his support for a short-term spending bill after his Republican counterpart in the House, Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA), informed other House Republicans that such a measure was likely during a conference call the evening prior.

"I thought it was a good thing that he recognized that we need a CR [continuing resolution] in September. I'm supportive of that," Schumer said

"A CR until early December provides time for consideration of these bipartisan bills," Schumer added. "We urge our House colleagues to emulate the Senate. The only way we're going to avoid a government shutdown is by bipartisan support in both houses. You cannot keep the government open if you just want to do it with one party ... We hope that House Republicans will realize that any funding resolution has to be bipartisan or they will risk shutting down the government."

In fact, the two legislative leaders had discussed the interim solution earlier this month before lawmakers took their traditional August recess.

The possibility of a budget showdown in September has been known for months, since the two parties reached a tenuous deal on lifting the budget ceiling in early June. In that agreement, Republicans succeeded in [extracting commitments to spending cuts](#) from Democrats that they would not otherwise have agreed to, except for the need to avert an impending default on the US federal debt.

Since then, different interpretations of the deal have fueled not just partisan posturing, but also a [furious internal dispute](#) between Republicans, with a small but vocal right wing of the House GOP caucus claiming McCarthy had all but abandoned his conservative principles in making a deal with the liberals. The pro-Trump faction has [punched far above its weight](#) in congressional politics this year, having served as kingmaker in the race for Speaker in the closely-split House - albeit after exacting a heavy price from McCarthy, who they say isn't living up to his promises. Rep. Ralph Norman (R-NC), who was rated as the most conservative member of Congress last year by the legislator [vote-tracking website GovTrack](#), told reporters last month he was "absolutely" willing to force a government shutdown to accomplish his policy goals.

Another, Rep. Bob Good (R-VA), said recently that lawmakers "shouldn't implement bad policy to avoid" a government shutdown.

On Monday, Rep. Tony Gonzales (R-TX), who has been censured by his own party for voting with Democrats on several hot-button issues, pinned the blame on both sides for failing to reach an agreement thus far.

"It's clear President Biden and Speaker McCarthy want a government shutdown, so that's what Congress will do after we return in September," he posted on social media. "Everyone should plan accordingly."

The deadline for a new budget bill to be passed is September 30, requiring the passage of a dozen appropriations bills, [only one of which](#) has been sent to the president. However, lawmakers are in session just 12 of the days between September 12, when they return from break and the end-of-month deadline.

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#### How Russia's Position on Cluster Munitions in Conflict Differs From US

A Russian and an American military expert told Sputnik that if Russia decides to use cluster munitions in response to the US arming Ukraine with the same weapons, it will most likely be careful and calculated, since unlike with American military interventions, the Russians have to live with their neighbors afterward.

Speaking at an international security conference in Moscow on Tuesday, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu warned that the Russian military might soon be forced to “reconsider the decision” to refrain from using cluster munitions in Ukraine, due to Washington’s decision to arm Kiev with such weapons.

“The consequences of the use of such weapons for the civilian population are known. Before, American representatives have repeatedly stated that the use of cluster munitions is a war crime,” Shoigu said. “Today, Washington and its accomplices are committing this crime in Ukraine. There is no condemnation from humanitarian organizations, as expected.”

A certain percentage of the tiny bomblets contained in each cluster bomb or artillery shell don’t immediately explode upon striking the munition’s target, and can be found later by animals or humans, with children being especially vulnerable since the bomblets can look like toys.

Igor Korotchenko, a military analyst and editor-in-chief of National Defense magazine, told Sputnik on Tuesday that Moscow had showed restraint in deploying the highly effective antipersonnel weapons in the special operation in Ukraine due to its “responsible attitude to the use of such weapons,” which is different from Washington’s.

“The question of how long we will be engaged in this abstinence, and how much it will further meet our interests is, of course, an open question,” he said. “It is quite obvious that as long as the enemy does not hesitate in choosing the means of destruction - and, despite our efforts to demonstrate goodwill, continues to use them - in fact, the question remains open. Will we continue to adhere to the restrictions that we voluntarily assumed or not? It is obviously a political and military decision by the Russian leadership and the leadership of the Ministry of Defense. We behave as our morals, our tasks and the situation dictate to us. In my opinion, this will not continue forever.”

Korotchenko emphasized that “the enemy himself determines what he is fighting with” and that “we cannot be holier than the Pope” during this conflict.

“If the United States supplies such types of weapons, if Ukraine uses them, if there are no restrictions on the use of such weapons by the enemy - in my opinion, we cannot endlessly be in a situation of non-use of similar types of weapons,” the analyst said.

“In the end, everything is determined by the real situation that develops. We cannot act to the detriment of ourselves. We may not use them for a while, and then, obviously, the question will arise that they will need to be used,” he said. “But once again, this is my expert point of view.”

Korotchenko said that if cluster munitions are to be used by Russian forces, their deployment would be “determined by military expediency” and “only against military targets” who are themselves using such weapons.

“We are not at war with the peaceful population of Ukraine. We do not strike civilian targets. We are destroying either the military infrastructure or the infrastructure that Ukraine relies on to realize its military potential, offensive potential. But if we use any types of weapons, it is only against the enemy, an armed enemy who opposes us on the battlefield,” he explained.

Earl Rasmussen, an international consultant and a retired lieutenant colonel with over 20 years in the US Army, told Sputnik that Russia’s considerations in when or whether to use cluster munitions would include balancing the needs of the tactical situation with a caution for humanitarian concerns.

“Russia has sufficient ammunition to not have to rely on cluster munitions,” he said, noting that “if cluster munitions are used, then the Russians will have to actually move through that area or to deal with the area afterwards. Either when they’re moving forward to obtain more area within Ukraine or for defensive positions or the people living in that area. You’re going to have a large part of the area contaminated, I would like to say, with the cluster munitions. And that becomes very dangerous for civilians as well, especially children. I would be very cautious using them.”

“And so I would think that, unless there is a strategic or tactical reason to, I do not see the Russians actually using them, unless for some reason they need to counter it - not just because the Ukrainians use it. We know why that is, they really don’t care about human life on the civilian side. And it’s the only ammunition they [Ukraine] really have because there’s limited supply of normal artillery ammunition. I would hope that they do not and I would think they would tend not to, but it all depends on the strategic and tactical situation on the ground.”

Rasmussen noted that despite not being a member of the Convention on Cluster Munitions - which is also true of the US, China and several other countries - Russia still carefully considers the “huge humanitarian issue” of deciding to use them.

“I think we all know that there’s a huge humanitarian issue related to cluster munitions and that regardless of whether it’s a low percentage or a high percentage, a certain percentage of [the bomblets] are just duds - they do not go off at the time and they’re embedded basically within the ground for years. We [the Americans] used them in Vietnam, we used them in - probably - Iraq and Afghanistan. And we’re still dealing with people dying from those unexploded munitions.”

“I think from a humanitarian point, the Russians haven’t needed to” use cluster munitions yet, he pointed out.

“Usually you’re going to use cluster munitions when you’re confronting massive troop movements, so using normal artillery doesn’t really make sense. They’re more from dispersing formations and a large counterattack or a large defensive position or offensive position that you’re trying to break up and inflict massive casualties. There’s been no reason from a strategic or tactical point of view for Russia to use them so far. Maybe Bakhmut [Artemovsk], that could have been a potential area. And we’ll have to see what the tactical situation looks like on the ground. I do not think they will.”

He added that if Russia did decide to use cluster munitions, however justified it might be, Moscow would have to consider the perspectives of its partners outside of Europe with a firmer stance against the weapons and how it could maintain a “moral high ground” while doing so.

"I would assume, before they use [cluster munitions] they would be in consultation with their friendly countries like China or Iran or other countries, African countries. They need to try to balance and take the high ground morally to maintain this pseudo-alliance and the neutrality of other countries. So if you go against something that they're against - let's say a lot of these countries are on the treaty and are against cluster bombs, and I can see why African countries would be or Southeast Asian countries would be or Middle East countries would be, because they suffered the result of the colonial use of them - but you've got to look at it from a political foreign policy perspective, I think, unless it was absolutely necessary, taking a moral high ground would be not to use them. And I think that would create a better relationship and continue to hold the support of nonaligned countries."

The retired US Army colonel noted that Washington has never shown such scruples when it comes to deciding what kinds of weapons to use when bombing countries far from home. In contrast, Russia has to live with Ukraine after the conflict is over and see the bombed areas rebuilt, so it has not been so cavalier.

"Western countries, the US specifically, would be going to completely carpet bomb and destroy infrastructure - power, bridges, just flatten cities. Look what we've done to Belgrade, look what we did in Afghanistan, look what we did in Iraq, to Baghdad. I mean, we just went in and just focused, you know, two-three months of bombing - and then we moved in. You basically have destroyed the country before you are even in."

"The difference here is, Russia was looking at one: they wanted to minimize civilian casualties, which typically the West really doesn't care about. And two: they knew that they're going to have to live with them afterwards as well. And you want to provide that capability to develop those regions again as well, although the emotions are running high. They're split back and forth within Ukraine itself. So we'll have to see how that ends up."

He noted the situation in Ukraine, where Russia had clearly hoped the West would quickly come to their senses about the seriousness of Moscow's security red lines after the special operation was launched in February 2022, was "complicated" and "not ideal."

"But Russia has got a more strategic long term perspective, and especially in this case, having to deal with the people as well and help rebuild, especially the four regions that they have, and maybe two or three more regions. Whereas the West really has never gone in to rebuild afterwards, and even if they've pulled out, like in Afghanistan, they've confiscated the reserves of the government. I think the reasoning behind this is completely different."

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Over Half of Americans Doubt Trump Can Get Fair Trial in Georgia - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - Over half of Americans doubt that former US President Donald Trump can get a fair trial in the 2020 election meddling case in Georgia, a YouGov America poll showed.

On Monday, a Fulton County grand jury in the state of Georgia indicted Trump with 13 criminal charges related to alleged attempts to overturn the results of the 2020 election. The former president and 18 associates have until noon on August 25 to voluntarily surrender.

Thirty-one percent of respondents do not believe that Trump will have a fair trial, and another 27% are not sure, according to the poll released on Tuesday.

A total of 42% think that Trump has a chance for a fair trial.

Republicans (61%) are more likely to say Trump will not get a fair trial, while Democrats (70%) tend to trust the judicial system in the former president's case.

Meanwhile, 41% percent of Americans see the investigation into Trump's alleged attempts to overturn the 2020 presidential election in Georgia as a serious effort to find out what really happened.

Thirty-one percent consider it a politically-motivated attempt to embarrass Trump, and another 13% think that the probe was equally motivated by both of these factors.

When asked if Trump was involved in an attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 election prior to the official certification of electoral votes, 53% replied in the affirmative, 25% disagreed, and 21% are not sure.

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Javelin Venture Gets \$116.9Mln Contract Boost to Make More Launch Units - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - The Raytheon-Lockheed Martin Javelin joint venture (JV) has received a more than \$116 million modification contract extension to construct more Javelin missile lightweight command launch units for the US Army, the Defense Department announced.

"Raytheon-Lockheed Martin Javelin JV, Tucson, Arizona, was awarded a \$116,986,051 modification ... contract for lightweight command launch units," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

Work on the contract will be performed in Tucson in the US state of Arizona over the next three and a quarter years with an estimated completion date of November 30, 2026, the release said.

The US Army Contracting Command located at Redstone Arsenal in the US state of Alabama will be the contracting activity overseeing work on the contract, the release added.

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Marinette Marine Wins Contract Boost to Design, Build New Navy Frigates - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - The Marinette Marine Corporation has received a more than \$80 million contract boost to design and build new Constellation-class combat frigates for the US Navy, the Defense Department announced.

"Marinette Marine Corporation [of] Marinette, Wisconsin is awarded an \$80,267,282 ... modification ... contract to exercise options for engineering and class support requirements and to fund projects for the frigate surface combatant industrial base and workforce development," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

The company will then use its expanded resources to work on detailed design and construction of the Constellation-class guided-missile frigate, the release added.

Constellation-Class Guided-Missile Frigates are planned to be the US Navy's next generation small surface combatant warships, providing increased combat-credible forward presence with the multi-mission capability to conduct air warfare, anti-submarine warfare, surface warfare, electronic warfare, and information operations, according to published reports.

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Raytheon Wins \$322Mln Deal to Build Tube-Launched Missiles for US Army - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - Raytheon Land and Air Defense Systems has won a \$322.5 million contract to build Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wireless-Guided 2B Missiles for the US Army, the Defense Department announced.

"Raytheon Land and Air Defense Systems, Tucson, Arizona, was awarded a \$322.5 million ... contract to procure Tube-Launched, Optically-Tracked, Wireless-Guided 2B Missiles," the Defense Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

Work on the project will be performed in Tucson over the next three years, with an estimated completion date of September 30, 2026, the release said.

The US Army Contracting Command, located at the Redstone Arsenal in the US state of Alabama, will be the contracting authority overseeing work on the project, the release added.

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US Official Says Premature to Say Number of Hawaiian Wildfires Victims

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) – US authorities consider it too early to determine the total number of victims of wildfires in the Hawaiian island of Maui, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Human Health Services Jonathan Greene said on Tuesday.

"At this time, it is premature to be able to say what the total number of victims will be," Greene told reporters.

He described the search mission as "very difficult" and urged people to keep calm despite the situation. "Patience will be incredibly important because of the number of victims," he added.

On Monday, Maui County said in a press release that the death toll of the wildfires has increased to 99 after the authorities searched a quarter of the island's territory.

The wildfires in Hawaii broke out due to dry and hot weather and are exacerbated by strong

winds brought by Hurricane Dora. The fire destroyed several settlements, including the popular tourist town of Lahaina. The authorities are forced to block roads and suspend public transport. Hundreds of local residents were evacuated from the area.

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Ex-Trump Chief of Staff Meadows Seeks to Move Georgia Case to Federal Court - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) - Former White House chief of staff Mark Meadows will seek to move his state criminal case in Georgia to a federal court, ABC News reported citing a court document.

On Monday night, a Fulton County grand jury approved charges against former President Donald Trump, Meadows, and 17 other associates in connection to District Attorney Fani Willis' investigation into their alleged efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election results in Georgia.

Meadows' attorney argues, the report said on Tuesday, that his client's case should be moved to a federal court because he is accused of actions he allegedly took as a federal official and as a result based on federal law.

Meadows' lawyer, George Terwilliger, claims in the court filing that Meadows did nothing criminal, but only carried out legal duties as a White House chief of staff, the report said. The Supremacy Clause of the US Constitution prohibits this kind of state interference in a federal official's duties.

Former US federal prosecutor Ronald Sievert told Sputnik earlier in the day that moving the state case in Georgia into a federal court may not be possible given that the case is in connection to elections administered in the state.

The report also said Meadows intends to file a motion to dismiss his case.

The Fulton County District Attorney told reporters on Monday night that the grand jury issued arrest warrants for the 19 defendants named in the indictment, but they all have until August 25 to voluntarily surrender.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 16 (Sputnik) -

NIGER DEVELOPMENTS

\* The United Nations continues its support for the mediation efforts in Niger to free the country's ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

\* The United States believes that the window for a diplomatic resolution in Niger remains open,

but warns that it closes every day, US State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said.

#### HAWAII WILDFIRES

\* The number of fatalities from the fires on the Hawaiian island of Maui has increased to 99, according to new data published by the Maui County.

\* The White House is engaged in "active conversations" about US President Joe Biden's potential trip to Hawaii after the deadly wildfires on the island of Maui, Principal Deputy Press Secretary Olivia Dalton said on Tuesday.

\* Biden said that he will travel to Hawaii at a time when his visit will not disrupt ongoing recovery efforts from the wildfires.

#### INTERNATIONAL SECURITY CONFERENCE IN MOSCOW

\* The US strategic bomber aviation forces have stepped up activities near the borders of Russia and China, Russian General Staff Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) head Igor Kostyukov said on Tuesday.

\* The United States is planning to establish a network of Washington-controlled alliances in the Asia-Pacific region and reshape the Association of Southeast Asian Nations' (ASEAN) security systems to deter Russia and China, Kostyukov said.

\* North Korean leader Kim Jong Un emphasized during a meeting with Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in late July that Pyongyang intends to further develop security cooperation with Moscow, North Korean Defense Minister Hyon Yong Chol said.

\* The possibility of starting a nuclear war on the Korean peninsula is not the question, but the question is who will start it and when, Hyon Yong Chol said.

#### UKRAINE CONFLICT

\* Russia's air defense systems destroyed a Ukrainian drone over the Belgorod Region at 2:00 p.m. GMT on Tuesday, the Defense Ministry said.

\* Ukraine has lost up to 230 soldiers in the Donetsk area over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

\* The Russian forces have caused significant damage to Ukraine's military-industrial complex by hitting key industry enterprises with high-precision weapons, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

\* The Russian military prevented an attempt by a Ukrainian sabotage group to cross into the Bryansk Region, Governor Alexander Bogomaz said.

#### RUSSIA-VENEZUELA RELATIONS

\* A Venezuelan delegation discussed with the Russian arms exporter Rosoboronexport the possibility of acquiring new weapons systems, Venezuelan Defense Vice Minister Renier Urbaz Fermin told Sputnik on Tuesday.

\* Venezuelan Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino Lopez may soon pay a visit to Russia and meet with the country's leadership, Fermin told Sputnik.

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Fulton County Clerk of Courts Says Published Trump's Indictment Due to 'Mishap'

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) – The Fulton County Clerk of Courts said in a statement on Tuesday that it did publish an indictment charging former US President Donald Trump and his associates with multiple counts related to an attempt to overturn the 2020 election results, but it happened due to a “mishap” while conducting a trial run of the system.

On Monday, Reuters reported that a document from the Fulton County District Attorney's Office was published online showing charges against Trump before being taken down. Following the reporting, the Fulton County Clerk's office said that the document circulating online showing alleged criminal charges against former US President Donald Trump was fictitious and no documents had been filed.

“[M]idday on August 14, 2023, a media outlet utilizing the Fulton County Press que obtained a docket sheet and shared it with other media outlets who then released the sample working document related to ... Trump reporting that an indictment had been returned by the Special Grand Jury in Fulton County Georgia,” the statement said. “Upon learning of the mishap, Fulton County Clerk of Superior and Magistrate Courts, Che Alexander, immediately removed the document.”

At the same time, the Fulton County Clerk of Courts acknowledged that the trial run of the system using some pre-existing charges resulted in the docketing of an actual indictment but nevertheless called the document “fictitious,” as it lacked a signed “true” or “no” bill, or an official stamp with Clerk Alexander's name.

The office also clarified that it is a normal practice for media outlets to get a copy of a court filing before it is published and this was the case on August 14.

A Fulton County grand jury in the state of Georgia indicted former President Donald Trump with 13 criminal charges related to an investigation alleging he attempted to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. Eighteen other associates were also charged in the indictment, including Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani and former Trump chief of staff Mark Meadows.

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis said in a press conference that a grand jury issued arrest warrants against the 19 defendants named in the 41-count indictment, including against former President Donald Trump, in an election interference case, but they will all have an opportunity to voluntarily surrender by August 25.

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Canada Troops Can Now File Sex Misconduct Complaints Directly With Rights Body - Ministry

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Members of the Canadian armed forces (CAF) will now be able to file sexual harassment and misconduct complaints directly with the country's human rights watchdog, National Defense said on Tuesday.

"Effective immediately, any Canadian Armed Forces members who have experienced sexual

harassment, sexual misconduct or any other form of discrimination based on sex/gender while performing their duties have a new path to justice available to them. They can choose to bring their complaint directly to the Canadian Human Rights Commission (CHRC)," the ministry said in a statement.

The CHRC operates independently from the government of Canada, the statement noted.

The changes implement recommendations made in the Independent External Comprehensive Review (IECR) led by former Supreme Court Justice Louise Arbour.

Canadian soldiers will now be able to lodge complaints through the existing processes, or directly turn to the CHRC, the statement said, adding that CAF members would not be required to have exhausted the internal CAF grievance and harassment processes.

CAF considers the modernization of the complaint process a key part of cultural change required in the country's military, the statement continued.

In April 2021, Arbour was tasked with leading the IECR to investigate the causes of sexual harassment and misconduct in the Canadian military, notably by reviewing policies, procedures, programs, practices, and culture.

In December 2022, then Minister of National Defense Anita Anand announced that CAF would be implementing the recommendations of the Arbour report to address sexual harassment and misconduct.

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Pentagon Says Cannot Confirm Ukraine Grain Export Talks, US Not Operating in Black Sea

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Tuesday that she is unable to confirm reports of the United States engaging with Turkey and Ukraine on alternative grain export routes, following the collapse of the Black Sea grain deal.

"I just have not seen those reports, so I just can't really comment on any more specifics on that," Singh said during a press briefing, when asked about the reports.

There are no US assets operating in the Black Sea, Singh added, in response to a question about the overall situation there.

Earlier on Tuesday, The Wall Street Journal reported that the US, Turkey, Ukraine and neighboring countries are in talks to boost the use of alternative grain export routes. The talks come following Russia's refusal to renew the Black Sea Grain Initiative.

Last week, Russian Ambassador to the US Anatoly Antonov said the door for the resumption of the grain deal remains open should barriers between Russia's agricultural exports and the global market be removed.

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## Trump Could Face Jail Time If Convicted on Georgia Charges, No Pardon - Ex-Prosecutor

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump could face jail time if convicted on election interference related charges in the state of Georgia and no pardon would be available, former US federal prosecutor Ronald Sievert told Sputnik on Tuesday.

On Monday night, a Fulton County grand jury indicted Trump on 13 criminal charges related to District Attorney Fani Willis' investigation into an alleged attempt to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election in Georgia. A total of 41 charges were issued to the defendants in the indictment.

"If there is just one knowing illegal act in that 98 pages then Trump could be convicted, face jail time and can not be pardoned by a president," Sievert said.

Trump faces 13 criminal charges himself for his alleged role in the scheme to overturn election results in Georgia.

Regarding Trump's charges in Georgia, Sievert said people have a right to challenge elections and there should be no charges in an indictment where challenges were made in good faith within the law.

"The District Attorney has overcharged," Sievert said.

Moreover, Sievert expressed concern about Democrats' use of the US legal system to go after a political opponent.

"This use of our legal system to stretch to find every possible charge against an opposition political candidate is a great concern for the US," Sievert said. "Note these indictments by Democrats in Democratic jurisdictions. This is not good."

Moreover, if Trump seeks to move the state case in Georgia into a federal court, that may not be possible, according to Sievert.

As it deals with a federal election, there is an argument to get it into a federal court, but since elections are actually administered by states, the argument may not work, Sievert said.

Trump's attorneys called the indictment "flawed and unconstitutional."

Trump's attorney's said the process leading up to the decision to indict Trump and 18 other associates was "shocking and absurd, starting with the leak of a presumed and premature indictment before the witnesses had testified or the grand jurors had deliberated and ending with the District Attorney being unable to offer any explanation."

On Monday afternoon, Reuters reported that a document from the Fulton County District Attorney's Office was published online previewing charges against Trump before being taken down.

Trump lawyer Rudy Giuliani, in a statement prior to the official release of the indictment, suggested that the former US president's legal team should file a motion to dismiss this case for a constitutional due process violation for publicly issuing an indictment before the grand jury had actually signed one.

Sievert said the incident is a real issue, but a technical one that can be corrected.

The Fulton County District Attorney told reporters on Monday night that the grand jury issued arrest warrants for the 19 defendants named in the indictment, but they all have until August 25 to voluntarily surrender.

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Ex-FBI Agent Pleads Guilty to Conspiring to Violate US Sanctions on Russia - Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Former FBI Special Agent Charles McGonigal pleaded guilty to conspiring to violate US sanctions imposed on Russia and to commit money laundering by providing services to sanctioned Russian tycoon Oleg Deripaska, the Justice Department said on Tuesday.

"Charles McGonigal, a former special agent in charge of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Counterintelligence Division in New York, pled guilty to conspiring to violate the International Emergency Economic Powers Act and to commit money laundering in connection with his 2021 agreement to provide services to Oleg Deripaska, a sanctioned Russian oligarch," the Justice Department said in a press release.

McGonigal helped investigate Deripaska and other Russian businessmen when he was an FBI agent and in 2021 conspired to provide services in violation of the sanctions imposed on the Russian businessman in 2018, the release said.

More specifically, McGonigal agreed to investigate Deripaska's rival in return for concealed payments, the release added.

The charge of conspiring to violate the sanctions regime and to commit money laundering carries a maximum sentence of five years in prison, according to the release.

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Biden Says Will Visit Hawaii Soon When He Will Not Disrupt Recovery Efforts

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he will travel to Hawaii soon when his visit will not disrupt ongoing recovery efforts from the wildfires.

"My wife Jill and I are going to travel to Hawaii as soon as we can," Biden said during a speech in Milwaukee. "I don't want to get in the way... I want to go make sure we got everything they need. Want to be sure we don't disrupt the ongoing recovery efforts."

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Biden Says Reassured Hawaiian Governor of Federal Support Amid Deadly Wildfires

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Tuesday that he reassured Hawaiian Governor Josh Green of the availability of federal assistance following deadly wildfires in the island state.

The president spoke with Green after a call with Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator Deanne Criswell about the fires, which have claimed at least 99 lives.

"I reassured the Governor that Hawaii will continue to have everything it needs from the federal government, and directed Administrator Criswell to keep surging resources and personnel as long as it takes," the statement said.

Biden declared a major disaster in Hawaii last week due to the deadly wildfires, opening up additional federal resources to help address the situation.

Earlier on Tuesday, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Olivia Dalton said that the White House is actively engaged in conversations about a potential trip by Biden to Hawaii.

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Senior US Arms Control Official to Visit Romania, Poland August 16-23 - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - A senior US arms control official will visit the United Kingdom, Romania and Poland from August 16-23 to discuss nonproliferation and assistance to Ukraine, among other relevant issues, the State Department said in a press release on Tuesday.

"Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Bonnie D. Jenkins will travel to Bucharest, Deveselu, London, Rzeszow and Warsaw from August 16 to August 23, 2023," the release said.

In Warsaw, Jenkins will meet with counterparts from the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discuss ongoing collaboration, including nonproliferation and assistance to Ukraine, the release said.

In addition, Jenkins will also visit Rzeszow where she will meet with US troops and observe the ongoing work to support Ukraine amid the conflict with Russia, the release said.

Jenkins will then travel to Romania, where she will meet with government officials to discuss bilateral cooperation on civil nuclear partnership and strengthening Euro-Atlantic security, the release said.

Jenkins will also visit the US Aegis Ashore Missile Defense System in Deveselu, the release added.

In London, Jenkins will engage with government officials and civil society, according to the release.

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UN Continues Support for Mediation Efforts to Free Niger President Bazoum - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, August 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations continues its support for the mediation efforts in Niger to free the country's ousted President Mohamed Bazoum, UN

spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Tuesday.

"We are continuing our efforts supporting the ECOWAS [Economic Community of West African States], the African Union mediation. Our special representative is in contact with all relevant parties, but nothing to share with you at this point," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

Dujarric added that in this context, the newly appointed UN Special Representative Leonardo Santos Simao visited Liberia on Monday to establish effective channels of communication with the country's authorities as well as the diplomatic corps' representatives.

Last week, the ECOWAS leaders agreed during the summit in Abuja to activate a standby force to potentially force the Nigerien military to reinstate Bazoum.

The move came after ECOWAS' ultimatum to the Nigerien military to restore the constitutional order in the country expired.

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US Believes Window Remains Open for Diplomatic Resolution in Niger – State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) – The United States believes that the window for a diplomatic resolution in Niger remains open, but warns that it closes every day, State Department spokesperson Vedant Patel said on Tuesday.

"We continue to believe that that window is open, but of course every day, every minute that [Nigerien] President [Mohamed] Bazoum and his family continue to be detained, and every day that Niger's democracy is not respected, that window closes," Patel told reporters.

He pointed out that Washington remains hopeful of finding a diplomatic resolution to the situation and maintains close contact with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) on the issue.

"We want to see and ensure that President Bazoum and his family are kept safe, we want to see them released, and we want the hard earned democracy in Niger respected," Patel said.

Bazoum was ousted in late July. Most Western leaders and ECOWAS have condemned the coup. In early August, ECOWAS members drew up a plan for a possible military intervention in Niger.

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Concrete Security Initiatives Expected From US-Japan-South Korea Summit - Blinken

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday that new concrete security initiatives are expected from President Joe Biden's trilateral meeting with his counterparts from Japan and South Korea later this week.

Biden will host Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol for a one-day summit at Camp David in Maryland on Friday.

"I don't want to get ahead of what will happen on Friday, but I think you'll see some very concrete measures that we're taking to enhance our capacity, to provide for our security as these three countries, and also more broadly, security in the Indo-Pacific region," Blinken said during a press briefing.

The three leaders will have an opportunity to discuss and to strengthen cooperation on a variety of shared priorities, including physical security, economic security, humanitarian assistance, finance, global health, and critical and emerging technologies, Blinken added.

On Monday, media reported that the United States, Japan and South Korea are expected to announce new plans at the summit for expanded military cooperation on ballistic missile defenses and technology development amid growing concern about North Korea's nuclear program.

Blinken said he talked with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts on Tuesday morning to continue to lay the groundwork for Friday's summit.

Friday's summit will mark the first visit by foreign leaders to Camp David since 2015, and it's the first standalone summit ever between the three countries, according to Blinken.

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#### US Retail Sales Grow Twice More in July Than June, Raising Fed Watch

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - US retail sales beat expectations last month by growing twice more than in June, according to Commerce Department data on Tuesday that also raised expectations for the Federal Reserve to consider another rate hike in September to quell inflationary pressure from extraordinary spending.

Consumer spending accounts for at least 70% of the US economy and Americans' purchases on food, fuel and merchandise are among things that add to inflation, aside from their wages.

Retail sales grew by 0.7% in July versus a 0.2% expansion in June, the Commerce Department reported. Economists on Wall Street had expected a growth of just 0.4% last month.

"The higher reading... [marks] the fourth month in a row of gains and highlights the ongoing strength of the US consumer," economist Adam Button said in a post on the ForexLive forum.

Demand for goods, food and other items has remained resilient among Americans despite aggressive interest rate hikes by the Fed to tame inflation. The central bank has added 5.25% to rates over the past 18 months from a previous base of just 0.25%.

The Fed's next decision on rates is on September 20. Following the retail sales data for July, the expectation among money market traders for a rate hike of another 0.25% next month stood at 12% from a previous forecast of below 10%.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, stood at 3.0% year-on-year for its smallest expansion in two years. In June 2022, the CPI stood at a four-decade high of more than 9%. The Fed's target for inflation is just 2% per annum.

The Fed has identified sterling jobs growth and correspondingly higher wages - as well as trillions of dollars of relief spending over the 2020 coronavirus outbreak - for the runaway inflation from a year ago. While the pandemic spending is over, jobs and wage growth have

continued to fuel inflation, prompting the Fed to keep adding to interest rates.

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Hunter Biden Agreement to Resolve Felony Firearm Charge Unapproved, Non-Binding - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - A pre-trial diversion agreement to resolve a felony firearms charge against Hunter Biden was never finalized and is not legally binding, US Special Counsel David Weiss said in a document filed Tuesday in the US District Court for the District of Delaware.

“In sum, because Ms. [Margaret] Bray, acting in her capacity as the Chief United States Probation Officer, did not approve the now-withdrawn diversion agreement, it never went into effect and, therefore, none of its terms are binding on either party,” the filing said.

On Sunday, Biden’s attorneys filed a court document expressing their belief that the agreement was still valid despite a related plea deal on tax offenses collapsing.

Last week, the government filed a document claiming that the prosecution and defense teams reached an “impasse” on both the plea deal and diversion agreement.

US Attorney General Merrick Garland also appointed David Weiss to serve as a special counsel for the Hunter Biden case last week.

The tax and firearms charges against Biden come amid broader investigations by US lawmakers into alleged criminal activity by the Biden family, including foreign influence peddling and bribery.

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US Would Welcome Decrease in Iran’s Nuclear Program, Separate From Prisoner Deal - Blinken

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - The United States would welcome a reduction in Iran’s nuclear arms program, although the matter would be negotiated separately from an ongoing prisoner release agreement, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

“I can’t confirm the reports that you’ve cited,” Blinken said during remarks to the press, when asked about reports that Iran has slowed the pace at which it is accumulating enriched uranium. “What I can say is of course we would welcome any steps that Iran takes to actually deescalate the growing nuclear threat that it has posed since the United States got out of the Iran nuclear agreement.”

However, there is no agreement between the US and Iran on nuclear matters at this time, Blinken also said, in response to questions about whether the decreased accumulation is linked to a recent deal with Tehran to release US detainees.

The release of five US citizens from prisons in Iran to house arrest are an “entirely separate”

matter from nuclear negotiations, Blinken said.

The Biden administration's opposition to Iran developing nuclear weapons remains steadfast, Blinken added.

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**Blinken Says US Satisfied With Japan's Plan to Discharge Water From Fukushima NPP**

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is satisfied with Japan's plan to discharge treated radioactive water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant later this year, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday.

"With regard to the release of water from Fukushima: we are satisfied with Japan's plans, which are safe and in accordance with international standards," Blinken said during remarks to the press.

Japan has coordinated with the International Energy Agency (IEA) and their plans are in compliance with IEA nuclear safety standards, Blinken said.

Earlier this month, Japanese media reported that Japan is planning on releasing the treated water into the sea between late August and early September. The Fukushima plant was damaged by an earthquake and tsunami in March 2011, causing three nuclear reactors to melt down.

The matter is reportedly set to be discussed during an upcoming trilateral meeting between the US, Japan and South Korea. However, the South Korean Foreign Ministry refuted reports that a joint statement will include support for the plan, which faces some opposition in South Korea.

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**White House Says No Reason to Expect Government Shutdown**

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - The White House said Tuesday that it does not see a reason for a government shutdown at the end of September.

"We don't believe that there's any reason we should have to have a government shutdown," Principal Deputy Press Secretary Olivia Dalton said at a press briefing.

The Biden administration, she added, had worked in good faith to negotiate a bipartisan budget agreement. It had upheld its end of the bargain and it expected Republicans to continue upholding theirs.

If congressional Republicans pushed the situation toward a shutdown, the White House believes they could work it out, Dalton said.

House Speaker Kevin McCarthy told members of his conference in a call Monday night that they will try to push for a continuing resolution to extend current funding until early December,

allowing time past the September 30 deadline to complete fiscal 2024 appropriations, Roll Call reported, citing sources familiar with the conversation said.

After the call, Congressman Tony Gonzales, a Republican, tweeted that "it's clear" both President Joe Biden and McCarthy "want a government shutdown, so that's what Congress will do after we return in September."

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Blinken Urges US Congress to Pass Supplemental Funding for More Ukraine Aid 'Right Away'

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) -US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Tuesday that he is calling on Congress to pass a supplemental for additional assistance for Ukraine.

"I urge Congress to pass this legislation funding, the supplemental funding... right away," Blinken said.

On Thursday, the White House Office of Management and Budget released a supplemental funding request to Congress in the amount of \$40 billion, including \$24 billion in additional assistance for Ukraine. The request also includes funding for disaster relief and World Bank programs.

A new CNN poll published earlier in August revealed that a majority of Americans, 55%, oppose Congress authorizing additional funding to support Ukraine in the conflict with Russia.

White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said with regard to the funding request and the poll that the American people understand the stakes in providing support to Ukraine.

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Blinken Says Nothing About Overall US Approach to Iran Has Changed

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - The United States' policy on Iran has not changed in the wake of an agreement between the Washington and Tehran to exchange prisoners, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters on Tuesday.

"Nothing about our overall approach to Iran has changed," Blinken said. "We continue to pursue a strategy of deterrence, pressure and diplomacy."

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White House Says Having 'Active Conversations' About Biden Visit to Hawaii After Wildfires

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - The White House is engaged in "active conversations" about US President Joe Biden's potential trip to Hawaii after the deadly wildfires on the island of Maui, Principal Deputy Press Secretary Olivia Dalton said on Tuesday.

"We are currently having active conversations about when a visit to Hawaii might be possible," Dalton said during a press briefing.

On Monday, Maui County said in a press release that the death toll of the wildfires has increased to 99 after the authorities searched a quarter of the island's territory.

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US Congressman Don Bacon Says Was Among Targets in Alleged China Email Hack

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Congressman Don Bacon said on Monday that his personal and political email accounts were attacked by a China-based cyber actor along with those of US government agencies, including the departments of State and Commerce.

"We now know that besides key targets in State Department, the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] hacked into my personal and political email account," Bacon said on X (formerly Twitter).

On Monday, Bacon expressed gratitude to the FBI for notifying him that China allegedly hacked his personal and campaign emails from May 15 to June 16 by utilizing a vulnerability in Microsoft software.

Bacon, a Republican from Nebraska, said he believes that he was targeted because of his support for the Uyghurs in China, for being vocal about the alleged human rights abuses in Tibet and in Hong Kong as well as for backing the independence of Taiwan.

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

On August 2, a group of US House Republican lawmakers sent a letter to the secretaries of State and Commerce, Antony Blinken and Gina Raimondo, saying that they have started an investigation into the breach of email systems and requested briefings on the matter.

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Trump Faces 91 Criminal Charges Across 4 Indictments, More Than 700 Years in Prison

(Update: adds details in paras 9-10)

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump is facing a total of 91 criminal charges laid out in four separate indictments, which collectively carry a sentence of more than 700 years in prison.

Trump was indicted on 40 felony charges linked to his alleged mishandling of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago, which is set to go to trial in May 2024. Trump was also charged with

four crimes connected to his alleged role in efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 US presidential election.

On Monday, a grand jury in the state of Georgia also indicted Trump on 13 more charges linked to his actions following the 2020 election.

Moreover, Trump is facing 34 charges for making alleged hush money payments to pornography actress Stormy Daniels and others.

If convicted on all 91 criminal charges, Trump could face a maximum sentence of more than 700 years in prison, although it is unclear how the sentences would be served or if he would be imprisoned at all.

Prior to the Georgia indictment, Trump claimed to be facing up to 561 years in prison for the first three indictments.

In addition, Trump is facing civil action by the state of New York for alleged improper financial conduct, as well as a sexual abuse and defamation case brought by writer E. Jean Carroll.

Trump has repeatedly condemned the charges against him, characterizing the cases as a weaponization of the US justice system against him in the lead up to the 2024 US presidential election. Trump currently leads the pack of Republican candidates seeking the party's nomination despite the ongoing criminal cases.

The outcome of the 2024 election could also hold implications for the federal cases against Trump. If Trump were elected as president before federal trials against him conclude, the cases could potentially be dismissed. Trump could also potentially pardon himself if convicted on charges prior to the election.

However, Trump's ability to stop state-level cases is limited. Trump would also be unable to pardon himself of crimes for which he was convicted in New York or Georgia.

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Yellen Says Was Not Aware Mushrooms She Ate in China Had Hallucinogenic Properties

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said on Tuesday that she was not aware the meal she ate at a restaurant during her recent trip to China contained hallucinogenic mushrooms.

"So, I went with this large group of people and the person who had arranged our dinner and the order [said] there was a delicious mushroom dish. I was not aware that these mushrooms had hallucinogenic properties. I learned that later," Yellen told CNN.

Yellen also told the network that she and the other guests did not feel ill or awkward after consuming the meal.

In addition, the Treasury Secretary said she had read that mushrooms would not cause any adverse effects if cooked properly.

"I'm sure they were [cooked properly] at this very good restaurant," Yellen said, "All of us enjoyed the mushrooms [at] the restaurant and none of us felt any ill effects from having eaten them."

During her visit to Beijing from July 6-9, Yellen held talks with top Chinese economic policymakers in an attempt to improve strained diplomatic and trade relations between the United States and China.

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Hunter Biden Attorney Asks to Withdraw From Case Due to Potential Role as Witness - Filing

WASHINGTON, August 15 (Sputnik) - One of Hunter Biden's attorneys is requesting withdrawing from defending the president's son on tax and firearms charges due to a potential need to appear as a witness in forthcoming legal proceedings, according to a motion filed in the

US District Court for the District of Delaware on Tuesday.

"Christopher J. Clark, having appeared in this matter for Defendant Robert Hunter Biden, hereby moves for leave to withdraw as counsel in the above-captioned matter," the filing said.

"Based on recent developments, it appears that the negotiation and drafting of the plea agreement and diversion agreement will be contested, and Mr. Clark is a percipient witness to those issues."

Delaware state policies restrict lawyers from acting as an advocate at a trial in which the lawyer is likely to be a necessary witness, the filing said.

Hunter Biden will continue to receive legal representation from other firms, the filing added.

Biden faces tax evasion and firearms charges, which were set to be resolved by a plea deal and pre-trial diversion agreement. However, the arrangement collapsed and the parties have since reached an impasse in attempting to reach a new deal.

Last week, US Attorney General Merrick Garland announced the appointment of David Weiss as a special counsel tasked with investigating the Hunter Biden case.

The case comes amid investigations by US House of Representatives lawmakers into alleged criminal activity by Joe and Hunter Biden, including bribery and foreign influence peddling.