

8/18/23 Friday

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Divisions Over Niger Military Takeover Creating New Frays in Franco-American Relationship

The United States and France are once again at odds, this time over how best to respond to the military takeover in Niger last month. While the two allies share a common goal of restoring the ousted pro-Western government, Washington has upset Paris by charting its own path in what the French commonly regard as their own backyard.

French diplomats are furious that their American counterparts are willing to speak with the Nigerien government in power, especially without preconditions, according to reports in Western media. They fear that any kind of engagement will further legitimize the Nigerien military's actions.

So far, Paris has refused to engage with the military government, but Washington hasn't, with acting Deputy US Secretary of State Victoria Nuland traveling to Niamey earlier this month to meet with government representatives.

"Perhaps in order to avoid bloodshed, the US was quickly keen to talk to the putschists," an unnamed French official told US media. "Maybe the better reaction should've been to put some conditions or guarantees before opening those channels."

"We all have the same aim of restoring constitutional order, but with just a couple nuances expressed [between countries]," the diplomat added.

Nuland's visit accomplished little, but the Americans reportedly believe the Nigerien military can still be convinced to yield power. However, Washington has still partially evacuated its Niamey embassy and severed aid to the Sahelian nation, which is among the world's poorest.

"Our focus is on securing the release of President Bazoum and his family, and on a diplomatic path forward under the Nigerien constitution to preserve constitutional order," Adrienne Watson, a spokesperson for the White House National Security Council, said in a statement.

After the military seized power on July 26 and placed the ousted president, Mohamed Bazoum, under house arrest, the new government asked [French forces](#) to leave the country - they refused. As talk grew of a military intervention, either by the US, France, or the West African bloc ECOWAS, the governments of Niger, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Guinea [issued a joint statement](#) declaring an attack on Niger was an attack on all four countries.

That hasn't stopped ECOWAS from pushing ahead with intervention plans, summoning its member nations' standby forces and [holding preparatory talks](#) in Ghana on Thursday. Cote D'Ivoire, Benin, Guinea-Bissau, Senegal, and Nigeria have all shown support for the initiative. Over the last three years, the other three nations - all former French colonies like Niger - have seen coups, uprisings, and revolutions that have deposed unpopular pro-French governments. With the exception of Guinea, the Sahelian countries have seen years of war as French forces waged a [War-on-Terror-style military campaign](#) against Islamist rebels, many of whom have capitalized on the chaos in nearby Libya created by the NATO war that overthrew Muammar Gaddafi in 2011.

The highly unpopular wars, which have succeeded more at killing innocent civilians than they have at quashing the rebels, have been [increasingly opposed by local residents](#), and the new governments have severed their cooperation with French operations after coming to power. Moscow has voiced its support for the Nigerien military government and vocally opposed an intervention to restore Bazoum to power. A [poll earlier this month](#) that mostly sampled residents of the country's capital and largest city, Niamey, found extremely wide support for the coup: 78% support the military's actions and 73% believe it should stay in power for an extended period, or until new elections can be held.

Niger was a French colony until winning its independence in 1960. Despite the formal separation, France has [retained a powerful hold](#) on Nigerien politics and economics, with French companies owning all or part of the three largest uranium mines in Niger, which together supply fuel to nuclear power plants that keep one-third of the lights on in France.

Meanwhile, 90% of the Nigerien population has zero access to electricity, and Niger gets to keep just 13% of the value of the uranium mined there.

This isn't the first time Washington has [stepped on Paris' toes](#) in recent years. Last year, the passage of the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) by the US Congress [provoked outcry from the government](#) of French President Emmanuel Macron, saying it would undermine Europe's attempts at a [clean energy transition](#) by sapping investment away from the continent.

In 2021, the US and UK infuriated France by convincing Australia to sever a massive deal to buy French-made submarines in favor of a plan to supply Canberra with [nuclear-powered submarines](#) made by the US and later by the UK. The deal underpinned the formation of the AUKUS bloc, a thinly-veiled anti-China effort. Paris called the [reversal a "betrayal"](#) and afterward expressed renewed interest in a European Union military force that wouldn't be dependent on the United States.

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California Braces for First-Ever Tropical Storm Watch as Hilary Intensifies to Category 4 Hurricane

Overnight, Hurricane Hilary rapidly intensified off the Mexican Pacific coast, far eclipsing predictions for its maximum strength. Now, southern California has been given its first-ever Tropical Storm Watch by meteorological authorities.

According to [the latest report](#) by the National Hurricane Center (NHC), which is operated by the US National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Hurricane Hilary has maximum sustained winds of 145 miles per hour. The center of its eye is located about 470 miles west of the Mexican port of Manzanillo and 357 miles south of the southernmost tip of Baja California Sur State. The small volcanic island of Isla Socorro, Mexico's most remote possession, is just 64 miles north of the eye's center and being lashed with powerful winds. A day earlier, Hilary had only [just barely reached hurricane strength](#) and meteorologists expected the storm to only strengthen to having sustained winds of just 110 miles per hour. Its

impact on the Pacific coast was also still in question. Now, massive amounts of rain and storm surge are projected to reach far inland, including as much as 10 inches of rain in some areas. Hurricanes can rapidly intensify when passing over extremely warm water, since the weather “engine” that sustains them is based on rising warm, moist air found over tropical waters. Climatologists have warned that global warming is [making the seas warmer](#), which in turn is making hurricanes stronger, too. Several major storms have been observed [experiencing “bombogenesis.”](#) or rapid intensification over a 24-hour period, even when only a few miles off the coast in recent years.

The western coast of Baja California Sur is presently under hurricane warnings and tropical storm warnings, with most of Baja California State being placed under hurricane watch through Sunday. Tropical storm watches line the coast of the Gulf of California and extend northward along the Pacific coast into the United States, reaching as far as Los Angeles, for Monday. Forecasters have predicted “significant and rare impacts” across the arid region, including widespread flooding and high winds. For the low deserts east of the Southern California mountains, it is the first flash flood warning issued in over a decade, according to local media. “Right now, it’s looking like we’ll still have a tropical storm when it moves into Southern California, but it’s going to be weakening pretty quickly,” National Weather Service meteorologist Brandt Maxwell told California media.

“The most important thing will be the heavy rain, which will be widespread, and there’s a distinct risk of flash flooding,” Maxwell said.

A tropical storm impacting the North American Pacific coast this far north is exceedingly rare, with a storm not landing in California since 1939 and a hurricane not hitting Baja since 1997, when Hurricane Nora passed eastward over the peninsula and brought tropical storm conditions to the US state of Arizona.

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Photos: Lake Huron Divers Recover Pieces of WW2 Plane Flown by Tuskegee Airman

A piece of US aviation history is slowly being recovered from the bottom of Lake Huron on the US-Canada border, after which it will be restored and placed in a museum.

On April 11, 1944, 2nd Lt. Frank Moody was flying his Bell P-39 Airacobra fighter aircraft on a training mission over Lake Huron. His squadron, the all-African American Tuskegee Airmen, was based in nearby Selfridge Air Base in Michigan, prior to deployment in Europe. However, an error in the synchronization gear, which should have ensured his machine gun only fired when his airplane’s propeller wasn’t in the way, resulted in his propeller getting shredded when he pulled the trigger. The plane crashed into the lake, and Moody’s body was discovered several months later.

The plane’s wreckage was scattered along the lakebed, where it sat undisturbed until its discovery in 2014. Now, divers are working to slowly lift to the surface as much of the aircraft as they can.

"We're doing some finalizing of mapping things in terms of what all is there," Carrie Sowden, archeological and research director at the National Museum of the Great Lakes in Toledo, Ohio, told US media.

"As we prepare for these major lifts, we're finding all these small pieces. When we're done we're going to have a complete understanding where every single piece came from," she said.

So far they've lifted some of the minor pieces, such as the propeller and machine gun, but their recent lift was one of their biggest yet: the P-39's 1,200-pound engine, which was unusually placed behind the cockpit, and which came to rest 30 feet below the lake's surface.

Photos shared with local media show the engine totally overgrown with freshwater mussels as historians placed it into a cleansing solution to soak.

However, the recovery effort is extremely slow, as the aircraft is scattered over a large area of the lakebed. Once restored, the plane's parts will one day be exhibited at the Tuskegee Airmen National Historical Museum at the Coleman A. Young International Airport in Detroit.

The Tuskegee Airmen were the nation's first all-Black fighter squadron, which served separately from white pilots due to the US military's racial segregation policy that mirrored the segregation in US society at the time. Despite the discrimination they faced, the "Red Tails," as they were called due to the paint designs on their planes, served valiantly in the war, with US President George W. Bush awarding the unit the Congressional Gold Medal in 2007.

"Tuskegee airmen are known for their valor and excellence in fighting the Germans in the air war over Germany in World War II," the museum's president and chief executive, Brian Smith, told US media.

"That story is being told, and has been told, but what we haven't heard are about the accidents in training that the airmen suffered. This is an exhibit that's when it's conserved can tell the story of African Americans - the complete story - from training, combat then what they did after the war."

More than 1.5 million Black Americans served in the US Armed Forces in World War 2, and their experience fighting fascism in Europe and the Pacific, and living in countries that did not segregate white and Black people like in the United States, motivated many Black service members to fight for an end to Jim Crow laws after they returned home from the war.

The US military was desegregated in 1948, three years after the war ended, but desegregation didn't come to wider US society until the 1950s, with discriminatory laws being banned altogether in 1965.

Bell built more than 9,500 of the Airacobras, but they weren't much used by the Western Allies, who needed a higher-flying interceptor than the P-39, which lacked a turbo-supercharger, could reach. However, the Soviet Union received P-39s in enormous numbers, deploying them on the Eastern Front to provide highly effective low-altitude air cover for advancing Red Army forces. Another 14 Tuskegee Airmen were killed during training in Michigan, including four other pilots lost in Lake Huron and one in the St. Clair River, according to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

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US-Japan Plan for Hypersonic Interceptor Part of Declining Empire 'Greasing Palms Overseas'

A former Pentagon analyst told Sputnik that a forthcoming US effort to help Japan develop hypersonic missile defenses is little more than an attempt at shoring up the overseas periphery of a declining US empire with buckets of money for defense contractors.

The US and Japan are expected to announce a program to jointly develop a hypersonic missile interceptor as a counter to ultra-fast weapons unveiled by Russia, China, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) in recent years. The announcement is expected at [a trilateral summit](#) in Maryland to which US President Joe Biden has invited Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida as well as South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol, two of Washington's strongest allies in East Asia.

At the summit, Biden is expected to push the two countries to look beyond their troubled past - in which Korea was a brutally subjugated colony of the Japanese Empire - and [join forces in yet another](#) anti-China bloc in the Indo-Pacific region.

The US and Japan have developed other [anti-ballistic missile weapons](#) before, but hypersonic weapons present a unique challenge since they are faster than most missile interceptors and have the unique ability to dodge and jink during their stealthy glide phase, making most intercept and even tracking attempts [almost impossible](#).

Retired US Air Force Lt. Col. Karen Kwiatkowski, a former analyst for the US Department of Defense, told Sputnik that the program is yet another gift to the military-industrial complex and is a move to strengthen the Pentagon's presence in the region at a time when it's increasing its pressure on China across multiple spectra.

"What surprises me is the willingness of the Japanese to help fund such a program, over the 10-year development forecast of the new missile development, given past history of repeated failures and extensions seen in previous US ballistics missile defense programs in the Pacific," Kwiatkowski said.

"It may be that due to decades of stagflation and an aging and shrinking population, Japan sees this as its only choice for a defense against potential missiles from North Korea and China. While a win for the massive defense industrial establishment in both countries, it represents no real change in the US approach to the emerging multipolar world - a kind of reactionary and politically narcissistic 'global containment' policy. George Kennan must be rolling over in his grave," she said, referring to the mid-20th century US ambassador to the Soviet Union who authored the West's Cold War-era anti-communist "containment" policy.

"Along with the missile program, a Japan-US satellite constellation network to improve early warning and tracking will show results more rapidly," she said, adding that "this surveillance capability will likely expand to include other US allies in the region, including the Philippines, as last year's election of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. has resulted in a pro-US shift, and the US has been working to influence Thai politics as well."

Kwiatkowski noted that a major hurdle for developing a weapon capable of shooting down a hypersonic missile is that one needs to first develop hypersonic missiles, too - something the US has struggled to accomplish.

"Perhaps the US will concurrently successfully develop its own hypersonic missile. Lockheed Martin's aircraft-launched prototype, the Air-Launched Rapid Response Weapon (ARRW) was defunded, and the Pentagon seems to be looking at a ground-launched hypersonic cruise

missile. A February 2023 Congressional Research Service study indicated that the services requested less than \$5 billion for research in this area for FY2023, and double that at \$11 Billion for FY2024. Perhaps this will be an area where AI will be used to simulate the latest Chinese or Russian hypersonic missile technology, which may continue to evolve and advance in coming years," she said.

By contrast to the [lagging US program](#), Russia has [three hypersonic weapons](#) of various types in service, and China has at least two types of the ultra-fast weapons. The DPRK has announced [several tests](#) of such a weapon, but it's unclear if the device is ready for deployment. Iran has also announced successful hypersonic weapons tests.

"This ship/land-to-air missile is a nearly \$1 billion Raytheon program, on the books for a few years now, and I would expect that the Japanese contribution is access to Pacific Ocean exercises and testing. This program, while defensive by description, will increase the 'necessity' for US Navy and Air Force presence in the Japan arena, which when considered with the again-growing US military presence in the Philippines will allow for Pentagon training and practice that triangulates with the South China Sea," the former analyst said. "Japan has also made recent security and trade agreements with the newly elected pro-US Marcos Jr. government in Manila."

Kwiatkowski noted the "logical" statement by Russian President Vladimir Putin that by the time the US can develop a hypersonic interceptor, Russia will have invented something better. Russia was the first nation to develop hypersonic weapons, [having been forced into devising](#) a method to defeat the rapidly growing US ballistic missile defense network after Washington unilaterally abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002.

"Under rational circumstances, the Pentagon should be attempting to buy or steal hypersonic technology, rather than play continual catch-up, wasting years and billions of dollars," she said.

"Under moral and ethical circumstances, we should be taking care of Americans at home, rather than attempting to maintain a global empire using the neocon ideas, and our leftover and decaying military might of the 20th century. But any state, in its decline, takes care of itself and its friends first and last, and for the US this means greasing palms overseas and throwing another trillion or more into the pockets of the defense industrial complex (expanded to include the pharmaceutical and media industries) - which in turn does everything it can to elect the Congress and the president, to keep things profitable for them."

"I think the challenge for the rest of the world is how to peacefully coexist with the US security state as it processes through severe external and internal stresses, its poorly thought-out and irrational military goals, persistent poor political leadership, a cratering fiscal forecast, and a slow rise of anti-war populism at home," Kwiatkowski said. "Unfortunately, this is a most dangerous time for everyone."

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Footage Captures Shocking Moment Engine on Southwest Flight Caught Fire After Take Off

One passenger reportedly remembers thinking, "D***, it's gonna go down!"

A Southwest Airlines flight was recently forced to make an emergency landing moments after taking off from Houston, Texas, once passengers spotted one of the plane's engines had caught fire mid-air.

The plane was initially bound for the popular resort area of Cancún in Mexico before the flight was forced to return to Houston's Hobby Airport just 27 minutes after its initial departure.

Footage of the blaze was shared on social media, revealing how several fireballs shot out from beneath the plane's wing.

Andrew Sandino, a 38-year-old mechanical engineer captured video of the event as he was leaving work, explaining that from the ground one could see the plane spitting fire from its engine while leaving behind a trail of smoke.

"Southwest Flight #307 from Houston Hobby (HOU) to Cancún (CUN) returned to the airport on Tuesday night after experiencing a mechanical issue shortly after takeoff," a spokesperson for Southwest Airlines said in a [statement](#).

"The aircraft landed safely, was taken out of service for review, and a different aircraft continued the flight to Cancun Tuesday evening," the company added. "We applaud the crew for their professionalism, and we appreciate our customers' patience."

However, one customer was so rattled by the terrifying experience, he and his girlfriend decided not to continue their trip to Cancún.

"All I know is it started swinging like left to right, and I thought, I've been on a lot of flights," passenger Coale Kalisek said.

"I think I fly once or twice a month and I knew that wasn't normal and so I opened up my window and I'm sitting next to the engine and that whole engine you see like fireballs coming out of it," added Kalisek, who had been traveling to the resort for vacation with his girlfriend.

"I'm thinking damn, it's gonna go down," Kalisek added.

Kalisek and his girlfriend ultimately rented a car to drive 200 miles back to San Antonio, Texas. This is not the first that Southwest has been splashed across headlines this week. Recently, a judge appointed by former President Donald Trump ordered lawyers for Southwest to receive religious freedom training from a Christian legal [group](#) following the termination and subsequent lawsuit of an employee. The unprecedented ruling is reportedly on hold for the time being.

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US Judge Dismisses Hunter Biden's Misdemeanor Tax Charges

The decision follows Weiss' move to dismiss the charges last week, however, Hunter Biden is expected to face the similar charges in the near future.

A federal judge handling Hunter Biden's case made the decision on [Thursday](#) to dismiss misdemeanor tax charges against the president's son, a move that came not long after his plea deal collapsed and a special counsel was assigned to his ongoing investigation.

The two misdemeanor charges dropped by US District Judge Maryellen Noreika include Hunter's failure to pay his taxes on time in 2017 and 2018.

Special counsel David Weiss had asked that the charges in Delaware to be dismissed so that new charges could be brought in California or Washington, DC. The decision was agreed to by Hunter Biden's lawyers as those charges were attached to a now-defunct plea deal.

Weiss was appointed to lead the case against Hunter last Friday by Attorney General Merrick Garland, a decision [largely criticized](#) by Republicans.

"Appointing David as a special counsel is like keeping the concept of a [Justice Department] protecting Democrats while hunting Republicans," said Senator Tim Scott (R-SC) in an interview with US media last week. "I can't think of a more forceful sign that nothing has changed."

While Hunter had agreed to plead guilty to his misdemeanor charges in exchange for a probation sentence, the deal fell apart during a plea hearing over a separate gun charge as well as questions the judge had about the deal.

"After the hearing, the parties continued negotiating but reached an impasse. A trial is therefore in order," said [prosecutors](#) last week, indicated they would charge Hunter in either Washington, DC or California.

"The Government, in the exercise of its prosecutorial discretion, is considering what tax charges to bring in another district and may elect to bring the same charges set forth in the instant information or different ones," the filing said.

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Rate of US Smokers Maintains Record Low, Survey Finds

Cigarette use remains the leading cause of preventable disease, disability, and death in the US, and accounts for more than 480,000 deaths every year, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

A [Gallup poll](#) released on Friday has revealed that cigarette smoking in the US has held fast to an all-time low that was first reached last year, with survey results finding that only 12% of Americans smoked cigarettes in the past week.

The poll determined that 12% figure is a 1% increase from last year, but is still "significantly lower" than the last eight decades of data collected on the issue.

An analysis of the findings note that between 1944 and 2012, smoking rates in the US were 20% or higher. Rates then hit a historic high in June 1954 with 45% of Americans smoking cigarettes before dropping. Then in April 1972, 43% of Americans were found to be smokers. The percentage of those smoking cigarettes first dropped below 40% in August 1977, until the percentage dropped below 30% in April 1989, with 29% of US citizens smoking.

The poll also found a decline in how much current smokers were lighting up. For instance, the number of smokers who smoke less than one pack of cigarettes per day increased to 71% for data based on the years between 2020 and 2023, while the percentage of those who smoke more than one pack a day decreased to 6%.

In their report, Gallup revealed the major decline is likely due to the fact that fewer young adults are smoking today than in prior decades. Between 2001 and 2003, 35% of young adults said

they smoked cigarettes, that figure then dropped to 10% based on data from between 2019 and 2023.

The survey had also asked respondents about their use of electronic cigarettes or vaping. Some 8% of adults said they smoked e-cigarettes in the past week, a percentage that was “consistent” with what pollsters measured on “three other occasions since 2019.” But while the number of young adults smoking cigarettes is decreasing, those between the ages of 18 and 29 years old are the most likely to smoke e-cigarettes, with 18% in that age range saying they smoke e-cigarettes.

The poll also found that 27% of young adults in that age group said they smoke marijuana. “The fact that Americans generally view cigarettes as the most harmful of the three suggests that public health efforts to discourage cigarette smoking have been getting through,” Gallup concludes in their analysis, but added that public health experts may want to increase their public outreach on the health risks of e-cigarettes and marijuana use.

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Trump's White Flag - Cartoon

The event was first announced just hours after a Georgia grand jury voted to charge the former president earlier this week, alleging a conspiracy to illegally overturn the results of the 2020 election and disrupt a peaceful transfer of power.

On [Thursday](#), former President Donald Trump canceled a press conference he had scheduled for next week via his social media site Truth Social. The press conference was going to be somewhat of a faux defense hearing in which he was planning to unveil a “Large, Complex, Detailed but Irrefutable REPORT on the Presidential Election Fraud which took place in Georgia” in 2020.

According to one [New York](#) newspaper, the report is “more than 100 pages” long and was worked on “for many weeks” by Trump’s team. But Trump’s reason for canceling the event, he explained, was because his “lawyers would prefer” putting the “evidence of Election Fraud & Irregularities in formal Legal Filings,” despite no fraud having ever been substantiated.

“For nearly three years now, anyone with evidence of fraud has failed to come forward — under oath — and prove anything in a court of law,” Georgia Governor Brian Kemp (R) succinctly stated on Monday.

The former president has also made the decision to snub the first Republican primary debate on Wednesday, and instead, participate in an interview with former Fox News host Tucker Carlson, who was fired from his role on Fox. Meanwhile, Ronna McDaniel, the chairwoman of the Republican National Committee, has urged Trump in private to join the debate, desperately doing so even in person when she flew out to meet him at his private club in Bedminster, NJ. “Reagan didn’t do it, and neither did others. People know my Record, one of the BEST EVER, so why would I Debate?” Trump wrote on Truth Social on Thursday, adding that he is polling well ahead of other candidates.

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Photos: Giant Chunk of Ice Crashes Through Roof of Massachusetts Home

The chunk of ice weighed about 20 pounds, and damaged the home of a Massachusetts couple, which suspect the ice fell from an airplane while en route to the nearby Boston Logan International Airport.

A Massachusetts couple was [recently](#) left shocked and stunned when they experienced what sounded like an “explosion” after a 15 to 20-pound (6 to 9-kilogram) chunk of ice smashed through their roof, causing extensive damage in the process.

Luckily, the couple, as well as their children, were not hurt in the process.

“We heard an explosion, basically,” said the homeowner. “The loudest pop, bang I’ve ever heard.” Within moments, they heard debris rolling down the roof, prompting them to believe the house had been struck by lightning.

When the couple stepped outside to investigate, they discovered a piece of ice and debris scattered around the backyard as well as the roof of their home. Using flashlights they pinpointed the damage, and found a hole where the ice had struck that was about 18 inches to 2 feet in diameter and even wider when viewed from inside their attic.

The couple believes the ice chunk fell from an airplane that was en route to Boston Logan International Airport.

An investigation into the incident remains ongoing by the US Federal Aviation Administration.

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Political Violence in Ecuador Rooted in Neoliberalism, 'Subservience to the US'

Last week, Ecuadorian presidential candidate Fernando Villavicencio was assassinated after a campaign event. One Colombian national was killed in a firefight with police and six other Colombians were arrested a day later for allegedly being involved. Two other political assassinations have occurred in Ecuador since.

The recent killing of Ecuadorian political figure Fernando Villavicencio has underscored “the reality that Ecuador is now what you’d describe as a failed state,” political commentator and socialist activist Phil Kelly told Sputnik on Wednesday.

Kelly [told](#) Sputnik Radio's Political Misfits that while Villavicencio’s role in the political situation in Ecuador has been overblown since his assassination, the government did try to benefit from the assassination.

"It was interesting that in the week of this assassination there was immediate attempts by the political establishment in Ecuador to pin this murder on Rafael Correa and the left," Kelly said. "Of course it is not and the family of Villavicencio have laid the blame firmly at the door of the government."

The cause of the rising violence and influence of Colombian cartels in Ecuador, Kelly said, is the return to neoliberal policies after Correa left office, saying that crime in the country is up "500%" since Lenin Moreno came into office in 2017. [Note: as of 2022, homicides in Ecuador have increased from 5.6 per 100,000 in 2016 to 25.9, a 362.5% jump.]

Kelly indicated that Ecuador and other Latin American countries that are seeing an increase in cartel activities will be unable to deal with them as long as they continue down the neoliberal path.

"I think the important thing when we discuss cocaine and the cartel as they are in Latin America, as cancerous as they are in any society, they are in fact a sideshow or symptom of the real addiction within Latin America among some people and that's an addiction to the US dollar, an addiction of some across Latin America to be 'good little Yankees' who are a small sliver of the population," Kelly said, adding that many leaders are "happy to forgo their sovereignty in subservience to the US."

Kelly says the main story in the upcoming Ecuadorian elections is leftist candidate Luisa Gonzalez, who is running for the Citizen Revolution Movement headed by former President Rafael Correa and is leading in the polls.

Asked if there is anything Ecuador can do to stop the growing cartel influence in the country, Kelly reiterated that nations must assert their sovereignty. "At the end of the day, until countries in Latin America assert their sovereignty, until they take control of their own destiny, they won't be able to deal with these groups," he said.

"The cartels will not be dealt with by the mainstream political establishment in Latin America, we need to see change, we need real fundamental change and political alternatives before these groups can be dealt with in the way they need to be."

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Google's DeepMind Developing AI That Can Give Life Advice

The new AI life advice feature by Google is sure to be the most controversial. The project aims to be able to offer advice to a variety of complex situations, intimate questions and relationship advice.

Google's AI DeepMind division is developing a project that can give life advice to users, as well as tutoring, planning and more than a dozen other personal and professional tasks, US media reported on Wednesday.

Google is partnering with Scale AI, a \$7.3 billion startup that will test the tools, part of that testing will include if the bot can offer relationship advice and diet plans.

US media released a sample of what they say is an ideal type of prompt the project may be able to tackle:

"I have a really close friend who is getting married this winter. She was my college roommate and a bridesmaid at my wedding. I want so badly to go to her wedding to celebrate her, but after months of job searching, I still have not found a job. She is having a destination wedding and I just can't afford the flight or hotel right now. How do I tell her that I won't be able to come?"

The move towards advice-focused chatbots represents a shift for DeepMind. In December, Google's AI experts presented a slide deck to executives claiming that users who take advice from AI could experience "diminished health and well-being" and warned they may become too attached to the bots.

Still, life advice and mental health help from AI has been off to a shaky start. In June, the National Eating Disorder Association had to cancel plans to replace its support staff with an AI chatbot named Tessa after it gave harmful advice to users, including that recovery from an eating disorder can be accomplished while continuing to lose weight.

And in January, the founder of the therapy program KoKo admitted to providing more than 4,000 users advice generated by ChatGPT without informing them, angering both mental health advocates and AI professionals.

Meanwhile, Google stresses that while they are testing these projects, there is no guarantee that they will ever see public use.

"We have long worked with a variety of partners to evaluate our research and products across Google, which is a critical step in building safe and helpful technology," a Google DeepMind spokesperson said in a statement. "At any time there are many such evaluations ongoing. Isolated samples of evaluation data are not representative of our product road map."

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'Saving' Democracy - Cartoon

Former US President Donald Trump was indicted for the fourth time late Monday over alleged efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election in Georgia.

As the indictments pile up, Trump continues to hold a healthy lead over all of his Republican primary opponents for the 2024 nomination, making him the most likely challenger to current US President Joe Biden.

Trump has repeatedly claimed the trial is a "witch hunt" and says it is Biden attempting to jail his primary political opponent. Now, it appears Americans also have concerns about the case.

According to a new poll, only 42% of Americans believe Trump will receive a fair trial in Georgia. Additionally, 44% of Americans believe the case is at least partially politically motivated, but that concern hasn't stopped Democrats from gleefully cheering on every indictment, long-term consequences be damned.

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Shooting in South Seattle Leaves Three Casualties, Several Injured – Police Department

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – The Seattle Police Department (SPD) said on Monday it was investigating a shooting in the southern part of the city that left three deceased and several others injured.

“Detectives are investigating a shooting that left two victims deceased and multiple injured at a South Seattle business Sunday morning,” the SPD statement said. A third victim transported to the Harborview Medical Center, a woman, was later pronounced dead.

On early Sunday, police were dispatched to South Seattle, answering multiple 911 dials over a shooting in a business located in the 2200 block of Rainier Avenue South. Three gunshot wound victims were found on the scene.

Law enforcement officers attempted to save the lives of the wounded pending the arrival of medics from the Seattle Fire Department, the statement said, noting that two male individuals were pronounced deceased on the scene.

Multiple other wounded individuals reached HMC as police officers were responding to the shooting, the statement pursued, noting that one of those remained in critical condition.

The Homicide Unit will oversee the investigation, the statement said.

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Biden May Meet With Saudi Crown Prince at G20 – Reports

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – US President Biden may meet with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on the sidelines of the G20 summit next month, Axios reported, citing four unnamed sources.

While sources emphasized that it has not been confirmed, a meeting could help move along the countries' negotiations on providing US security guarantees to Saudi Arabia in exchange for the Gulf state's normalization of ties with Israel.

The National Security Council said there is no meeting to announce.

Officials previously told Axios that the White House would like to wrap up the talks before Biden becomes overwhelmed by his re-election campaign.

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Trump Holds 'Commanding Lead' in Iowa Presidential Race – Poll

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump holds a “commanding lead” over other Republicans in the presidential race in the US state of Iowa, a new poll by Des Moines Register, NBC News, and Mediacom Iowa Poll revealed on Monday. The poll occurred on August 13-17 among 406 likely 2024 Republican caucusgoers.

The poll showed that 42% of potential caucus participants would vote for Trump, which is twice more than the second Republican candidate, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis (19%). All others, including Tim Scott, former US Envoy to the UN Nikki Hailey, and ex-Vice President Mike Pence, received the support of less than 10% of potential voters.

Almost two-thirds, or 63%, reassured that they support Trump as their first or second choice in the caucuses or are actively considering him. That footprint is on par with the 61% who say the same for DeSantis, the poll said.

Sixty-six percent of Trump supporters said they are already made their choice, while 34% noted they can change their opinion in the future. Among those who consider DeSantis as the first candidate, 69% said their "mind is made up", and 31% "could be persuaded."

Legal problems, that Trump is facing now, do not affect his leadership. Moreover, his position became stronger when a grand jury in Georgia indicted him. The poll showed that before the indictment, Trump led DeSantis 38% to 20%. After the grand jury's decision, his lead grew to 43% over DeSantis' 18%.

Iowa is the first US state to vote in the Republican primary elections and is often viewed as a bellwether state indicating the political direction of the country.

Republican caucuses in Iowa will be held on January 15, 2024.

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At Least 114 Dead, 850 Others Still Missing After Maui Wildfires – Mayor

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) - At least 114 people have died and about 850 more are missing after record-breaking wildfires on the island of Maui in Hawaii, Maui County Mayor Richard Bissen said in a video published on Monday.

"It was my sad duty to report that 114 individuals have been confirmed deceased 27 individuals have been identified and 11 families have been notified," Bissen said. "There are currently 850 names on the list of missing persons."

On a positive note, Bissen said that of the 2,000 missing at the beginning of the search, more than 1,285 have been safely located.

The mayor expects that over time, the number of missing people may decrease while the number of identified will increase.

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 were forced to block roads and suspend public transport. Hundreds of locals were evacuated from the area.

Earlier in August, Biden declared a major disaster in Hawaii, making additional federal resources available to help combat the ongoing wildfires on the islands.

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

US Envoy to Visit Indonesia, Philippines to Discuss Investments in Clean Energy-State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – US envoy responsible for global infrastructure and investment Helaina Matza will visit Indonesia and the Philippines to discuss clean energy and electric vehicle supply chains, the State Department said on Monday.

“Acting Special Coordinator for the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGI) Helaina Matza will travel to Jakarta and Manila, August 21-31, to advance ongoing PGI-led efforts to facilitate strategic infrastructure investments in electric vehicle supply chains, clean energy solutions for captive power, connective transportation corridors, and trusted digital networks, the statement said.

Matza will meet with government officials in both countries. She also plans to discuss the issue with private sector and civil society partners to discuss potential infrastructure financing, it added.

The PGI is working to expand its global economic corridor approach and identify quality, sustainable infrastructure opportunities in the Indo-Pacific, according to the statement.

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Americans Rate Dallas Safest Big City – Poll

WASHINGTON, August 21 (Sputnik) – Americans consider Dallas the safest big city in the United States to live in or visit, according to a Gallup poll released Monday.

Seventy-four percent of respondents surveyed from July 3-27 saw Dallas as safe, the highest rating among 16 choices of large cities. Boston was second at 72%, while Seattle trailed third at 63%.

Most cities' ratings fell within the 41-61% range, while Chicago and Detroit received the lowest ratings, at 27% and 26%, respectively.

Results varied greatly by partisanship; Dallas and Miami aside, Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents were much more likely, by an average of 29 percentage points, than Republicans and Republican-leaning independents to perceive a city as safe.

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Asia, Africa, Latin America Have Growing Interest in New Forms Of Payment - APEC Envoy

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) - The countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America have increasing interest in new forms of payment, Russia's senior official at APEC, Ambassador Marat Berdyev told Sputnik.

"There is a growing interest in new forms of payment in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. ASEAN is intensifying the dialogue on the use of national currencies, since last year there has been an agreement on digital border trading in local financial instruments," Berdyev said. "In the EAEU, according to preliminary data, already more than 90% of transactions are carried out in the currencies of the member states of the Union, while the ruble is reasonably in the lead."

Berdyev spoke after High-ranking officials and ministers held meetings in Seattle where they addressed food security and energy matters among other issuers as part of the third Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings.

Berdyev pointed out that APEC, like other specialized multilateral formats, does not remain aloof from the problems of global finance.

"These include, among other things, growing inflationary pressure, high levels of debt, a lack of resources to finance global development, market volatility, and a crisis in the banking sector of some developed countries," he said. "Under these conditions, the world economic system is going through a period of adaptation to new challenges and threats."

Berdyev went on to say that there can be seen a decline in the use of the US dollar, which is increasingly perceived as an unreliable asset.

"The countries of the world's majority are reducing the share of 'toxic' currencies (first of all, the US dollar and the euro) in their foreign trade and financial transactions," he said. "This trend is caused by the sanctions 'voluntarism' of the collective West, which, with its unilateral and illegitimate restrictive measures, has undermined confidence in the American-centric financial system. There are also the consequences of the irresponsible financial policies of many developed countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, when they launched a printing press to cover the budget deficit, provoking "bubbles" in the commodity markets, and then consumer inflation and a decline in living standards."

Berdyev underscored that Strengthening the role of national currencies is an objective process.

"Political reasons against the backdrop of the 'sanctions war' launched by the United States probably still prevail, but economic logic cannot be discounted either. Suffice it to recall the exorbitant debt accumulated by the Americans, the endless excesses around the budget deficit," he said. "According to statistics, the share of the dollar in the total volume of international payments through SWIFT in January 2023 decreased to 41.7%. According to the IMF, its share in reserves reached its lowest level in 27 years at 58.36%."

"Settlements are increasingly dynamic in yuan (the weight of the Chinese currency in trade contracts from March 2021 to March 2023 increased from 1.9% to 4.5%), Indian rupees, currencies of Arab and other developing countries. The Russian ruble is becoming more and more popular and attractive, especially in the Eurasian space," he added.

In response to sanctions, Russia has accelerated efforts to switch to national currencies in trade. In February and March, the yuan replaced the US dollar as the most traded currency in Russia.

In April, the International Monetary Fund said the US dollar has depreciated since October 2022 but remains stronger than it has been since 2000.

The same month, World Bank President David Malpass said that the US dollar's dominance has been put into question by competitors such as blockchain technology and the Chinese

yuan.

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Russia Opposes West's Attempts to Politicize Work of Bretton Woods Institutions - Envoy

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) - Moscow is opposed to attempts by Western nations to politicize the work of the Bretton Woods Institutions, Russia's senior official at APEC, Ambassador Marat Berdyev told Sputnik.

"Together with partners and like-minded people, we oppose the attempts of Westerners to politicize the work of the Bretton Woods Institutions," Berdyev said. "They should remain purely expert platforms aimed at ensuring international cooperation in the financial sector."

The Bretton Woods institutions do not reflect the reality of the global economy, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said in April.

As for the reforms of multilateral financial institutions, primarily the IMF and the World Bank, Berdyev went on to say, the world community has yet to determine their direction and main parameters.

"Any changes should be worked out in universal formats on a transparent, non-discriminatory basis, take into account the financial characteristics of various countries, and have real benefits for developing states," he said.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in June called the international financial system "outdated" as it has failed to provide developing countries with a global safety net and can no longer meet the needs of the 21st century.

The UN chief explained that the international financial system, built in the aftermath of World War II, was in crisis as it reflected "the political and economic power dynamics of that time," when over three-quarters of today's countries were not present at the establishment of the majority of the Bretton Woods institutions, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the United Nations and the Security Council.

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Russia Expects Real Redistribution of IMF Quotas to Underrepresented Nations - Envoy

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) - Moscow expects the timely completion of the IMF quotas review and that they will indeed be redistributed in favor of underrepresented nations, including China, Russia's senior official at APEC, Ambassador Marat Berdyev told Sputnik.

"We look forward to the timely [before December 15 this year] completion of the 16th general review of IMF quotas and their real redistribution in favor of 'underrepresented' countries, primarily China and other developing countries," Berdyev said. "Any other reform options, including maintaining the status quo in terms of votes in the IMF or implying their symbolic

redistribution will become an illustration of the West's unwillingness to give up its dominant positions in the Bretton Woods Institutions that have already become an anachronism."

As for the reforms of multilateral financial institutions, primarily the IMF and the World Bank, Berdyev went on to say, the world community has yet to determine their direction and main parameters. "Any changes should be worked out in universal formats on a transparent, non-discriminatory basis, take into account the financial characteristics of various countries, and have real benefits for developing states," he said.

In early June, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, speaking about Policy Briefs on Our Common Agenda, said that reforms to the IMF quotas were needed and the representation of the developing nations in both the IMF and the World Bank should be expanded to address injustices and systemic bias in the international financial architecture and proposed a representative apex body to oversee the entire system.

Berdyev spoke after high-ranking officials and ministers held meetings in Seattle where they addressed food security and energy matters among other issues as part of the third Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings.

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

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APEC Interested in Russia's Proposal on Measures to Counter Sanctions - Envoy

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) - The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) is interested in Russia's proposal to counter sanctions and boost trade in national currencies, Russia's senior official at APEC, Ambassador Marat Berdyev, told Sputnik.

"During informal communication with counterparts, senior officials, I suggested a possible discussion in APEC of the feasibility of working out measures to combat sanctions and expand the practice of payments and settlements in national currencies, which was met with a certain degree of interest," Berdyev said in a statement.

There is a growing interest in new payment formats in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Also, a dialogue on the use of national currencies is intensifying in ASEAN, and an agreement on digital cross-border trade in local financial instruments has been in force since last year, the diplomat added.

In the EAEU, according to preliminary data, already more than 90% of transactions are carried out in the currencies of the member states of the Union, while the ruble is reasonably in the lead.

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US Wants to Replace Inclusive Cooperation in Asia-Pacific With West-Centric Format - Envoy

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) - The United States is ramping up its efforts to replace inclusive collaboration in the Indo-Pacific region with the Western-centric formats, Ambassador-at-Large, Senior Official in APEC from Russia Marat Berdyev told Sputnik.

"We see the buildup of US efforts to replace the inclusive nature of cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region with Western-centric formats of interaction in line with the American 'Indo-Pacific' project," Berdyev said. "We are convinced that the new dividing lines in the Asian region will create barriers to the practical ties between the APEC economies and the normal functioning of added value chains."

Berdyev pointed out that the prerequisites for such a negative scenario are already visible against the backdrop of attempts by the United States and its allies to reshape the trade and investment agenda in the Asia-Pacific region by promoting alternative mechanisms for the so-called framework economic interaction in the Indo-Pacific region.

Berdyev spoke after High-ranking officials and ministers held meetings in Seattle where they addressed food security and energy matters among other issues as part of the third Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings.

8/21/2023 1:30:00 AM -04:00

Russia's full-fledged participation in apec important to resist west's effort to shift focus away from economic integration - envoy to sputnik

Sputnik

8/21/2023 1:25:00 AM -04:00

New Dividing Lines in asia will hinder economic ties among apec economies, formation of Added value chains - Russian envoy to sputnik

Sputnik

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West Increases Level of Confrontation in APEC, Brings Geopolitics Into It - Russian Envoy

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) - The West is increasing the level of confrontation in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) by bringing into the platform geopolitical discussions that are far beyond the scope of the forum, Russia's senior official at APEC, Ambassador Marat Berdyev told Sputnik.

"The current international situation negatively impacts the forum [APEC]. Western members of the forum are actively raising the level of confrontation in the APEC platform, trying to bring into the discussions geopolitical topics that go far beyond the scope of the organization," Berdyev said in a statement.

Berdyev noted that a number of Russia-friendly APEC members are in favor of strict adherence to the basic principles and norms of the forum and focus on the tasks of economic integration. Russia also seeks to prevent the shift away from the economic integration component of this association.

Along with participation in the G20, BRICS, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), work in APEC is one of the key areas of Russian multilateral diplomacy aimed at the removal of all unreasonable barriers and building an effective environment across the entire continent, Berdyev added.

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Russia Will Consider US Infringement When Deciding Representation At APEC Summit - Envoy

(Updates with additional, background info in paras 5-8)

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) - Moscow will consider Washington's undermining of the rights of the members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) when making a decision on its representation at the upcoming Leaders' Summit in November, Ambassador-at-Large, Senior Official in APEC from Russia Marat Berdyev told Sputnik.

"Washington continues to 'lose face' as a responsible participant in international communication, a negotiable player. We note the growing appetites of the American side, in particular, its inappropriate behavior and infringement of other economies, particularly, Hong Kong," Berdyev said. "Of course, such somersaults of the Americans do not go unnoticed, forcing many countries to strive for the accelerated establishment of a multipolar world, independent of Western structures and whims. We will take this approach of Washington into account when deciding on the level of Russia's representation at the Forum's summit in November"

Berdyev stressed that Russian insistently demands from the host side the fulfillment of the entire range of obligations as the Chairman of the Forum.

"We hope that common sense will prevail in preparing the summit meeting and its outcome documents, and priority will be given to achieving consensus agreements in the interests of all APEC economies," he said. "In general, we regret that the destructive decisions of the Americans have a negative impact on the productivity of APEC, and we hope that this important regional cooperation platform, which has passed many years of testing for strength and relevance, will return to constructive functioning at the end of the current cycle."

Berdyev went on to say that ahead is the presidency of Peru and South Korea, and Russia has already established a substantive dialogue with colleagues from Lima, who are going to look for a "common denominator" and focus on collective efforts to strengthen the economic and integration potential.

"In this context, we plan a number of specific joint initiatives and projects, including the engagement of Russian business and academic circles," he added.

High-ranking officials and ministers just finished meetings in Seattle where they addressed food security and energy matters among other issuers as part of the third APEC Senior Officials' and

Ministerial Meetings.

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

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Several Russian Delegates Did Not Get US Visas To Attend APEC Meeting in Seattle - Envoy

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) -A number of Russian delegates did not get a US visa to take part in the third Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings in Seattle, Ambassador-at-Large, Senior Official in APEC from Russia Marat Berdyev told Sputnik.

"Within the framework of the third series of meetings of senior officials of the Forum, representatives of several Russian departments could not attend the relevant meetings. A number of delegates did not receive visas at all, and in some cases, entry permits were issued during or after the main meetings," Berdyev said. "The current situation creates serious

obstacles to our full-fledged participation in the activities of APEC under the American chairmanship and cannot but affect the effectiveness and credibility of the US shift."

Berdyev spoke after High-ranking officials and ministers held meetings in Seattle where they addressed food security and energy matters among other issuers as part of the third Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings. The APEC Economic Leaders' Week will take place in San Francisco in November.

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US Completely Reneged on Non-Discrimination Commitments as APEC Chair - Russia's Envoy

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) - The United States, which serves as the APEC host of 2023, has totally disregarded its non-discrimination commitments, Russian Ambassador and Senior Official for APEC Marat Berdyev told Sputnik.

"The Russian side agreed to the US 'shift' in APEC in 2023, after receiving US assurances that they would strictly comply with all the chairman's obligations to the economies participating in APEC. Particular attention was paid to confirming the Chairmanship's readiness to ensure non-discriminatory access for all delegations to events without 'double standards' and arbitrariness," Berdyev said. "Unfortunately, the Americans, accustomed to living in captivity of their own exclusivity, once again completely disavowed these promises by their actions."

Berdyev pointed out that this concerns both the organization of the work processes and the content of APEC's agenda this year.

"Of course, we had no great illusions about Washington's ability to keep its word, but we proceeded from the premise that this would have a sobering disciplinary effect and deter the American authorities from direct violations of the APEC rules," he added.

High-ranking officials and ministers just finished meetings in Seattle where they addressed food security and energy matters among other issues as part of the third Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings. The APEC Economic Leaders' Week will take place in San Francisco in November.

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Russia Hopes APEC Returns to Constructive Cooperation After US Chairmanship Ends - Envoy

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) - Moscow hopes the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) returns to constructive functioning after the US chairmanship ends, Russia's senior official for APEC Marat Berdyev told Sputnik.

Berdyev stressed that Russia insistently demands from the host side the fulfillment of the entire range of obligations as the Chairman of the Forum.

"We hope that common sense will prevail in preparing the summit meeting and its outcome

documents, and priority will be given to achieving consensus agreements in the interests of all APEC economies," he said. "In general, we regret that the destructive decisions of the Americans have a negative impact on the productivity of APEC, and we hope that this important regional cooperation platform, which has passed many years of testing for strength and relevance, will return to constructive functioning at the end of the current cycle."

8/21/2023 12:00:00 AM -04:00

Russia hopes apec will return to constructive regional cooperation after us chairmanship ends - envoy to sputnik

Sputnik

8/20/2023 11:05:00 PM -04:00

APEC Concerned by West's Anti-Market Policies, Russian Oil Price Cap - Russian Envoy

(Adds details, background)

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) - Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) economies are concerned by the West's anti-market measures against Russia including the oil price ceiling, Russia's senior official for APEC Marat Berdyevev told Sputnik.

"The use of anti-market measures by Western countries toward Russia, including the so-called oil price cap, certainly causes concern," Berdyevev said.

They, together with an unprecedented number of illegal unilateral restrictions, short-sighted macroeconomic and unbalanced energy and climate policies of developed countries, have played a key role in destabilizing global energy markets, he stressed.

"They led to the redistribution of global energy flows and increased transaction costs, provoked excessive price volatility and created serious risks to energy security," the envoy stated.

However, contrary to the mantras about adherence to market mechanisms, he added, Westerners have resorted to illegal restrictions not for the first time -

"It is enough to recall the examples of Iran, Venezuela, and Syria," he added. "Such a hypocritical policy undermines international trade and hurts the prospects for economic growth in the world."

Today the tip is directed against Russia and others, and tomorrow it may turn against other objectionable states and cover not only energy carriers, but also other groups of goods. the envoy said.

In December 2022, the G7 countries, Australia, and the EU imposed a price cap of \$60 per barrel on Russian crude oil transported by sea, blocking the transport of oil bought at higher prices. In retaliation, Russia prohibited selling its oil to countries supporting the price cap mechanism.

Berdyevev spoke after High-ranking officials and ministers held meetings in Seattle where they addressed food security and energy matters among other issues as part of the third Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings. The APEC Economic

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APEC Concerned by West's Anti-Market Policies, Russian Oil Price Cap - Russian Envoy

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US Continuously Engages in Anti-Russia Rhetoric in APEC - Envoy

SEATTLE, August 21 (Sputnik) - The United States continuously uses anti-Russian rhetoric at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) while prompting many other delegations to anticipate the day that this obsession finally ends, Ambassador-at-Large, Senior Official in APEC from Russia, Marat Berdyev, told Sputnik.

"The United States still cannot give up anti-Russian rhetoric in the APEC format. The most faithful allies obediently echo them," Berdyev said. "However, these escapades are gradually fizzling out. An obedient minority echoes Washington's microphone. On the sidelines, many delegations admit that they are looking forward to the end of this American obsession."

In 2022, Berdyev noted, the Thai presidency made every possible effort to prevent the forum from taking illegitimate decisions that circumvent the fundamental principle of consensus.

"Today, however, we are witnessing an absolutely opposite approach, which bears little resemblance to the usual collegial principle of APEC functioning," he added.

Berdyev spoke after high-ranking officials and ministers held meetings in Seattle where they addressed food security and energy matters among other issues as part of the third Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Senior Officials' and Ministerial Meetings. The APEC Economic Leaders' Week will take place in San Francisco in November.

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US Air Force Says Had 17 Deaths at a Base This Year, Most Over Natural Causes or Accidents

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The US Air Force confirmed to Sputnik that seventeen personnel, including civilian and service members, have died at Tinker Air Force Base in Oklahoma so far this year, mostly due to natural causes or accidents.

Earlier this week, Military.com reported that officials at the base refused to provide the causes of deaths. The report, citing an unnamed source, said there was speculation that some of the deaths were the result of suicide or covid.

"Tinker Air Force Base experienced 17 deaths since January of this year," Tinker Installation Commander Col. Abigail Ruscetta said in a statement on Friday. "Eleven of the lost uniformed and civilian Airmen died as a result of natural causes or accidents."

The other six remaining deaths are a result of other causes, some of which remain under investigation, most of which were civilians, Ruscetta said.

Tinker Air Force Base offers different forms of support, mental health counselors, chaplains, and Military Family Readiness professionals.

Ruscetta noted that workforce at Tinker Air Force Base includes civilian and uniformed Airmen and Sailors, as well as contractors.

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US Weather Service Says Hurricane Hilary Will Weaken to Storm Before Hitting California

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - Hurricane Hilary will weaken in strength to a tropical storm prior to making landfall on the coast of California this weekend, the US National Weather Service (NWS) said in an advisory.

"Hurricane Hilary will weaken to a tropical storm as it approaches Southern California this weekend. Flash flooding will be possible across the whole region, with rare and dangerous flooding possible across the mountains and deserts," the advisory said on Friday.

Areas of southwestern California, including the cities of San Diego and Los Angeles, may experience extreme rain and wind as a result of the storm, the advisory said. Residents should listen to local officials for recommended preparedness actions, including the possibility of evacuation, according to the advisory.

A tornado event is also possible in extreme southwestern California, the advisory added.

The adverse weather conditions prompted US space company SpaceX to postpone a launch of its Falcon 9 launch vehicle carrying Starlink satellites, due to impacts on recovery operations in the Pacific Ocean.

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

On Camp David Summit, Chinese Embassy Says Blocs in Asia-Pacific to Be Met With Vigilance

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - Beijing, in response to the trilateral summit in Camp David, believes attempts to form various exclusionary blocs in the Asia-Pacific will be met with vigilance and opposition from regional countries, Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu told Sputnik.

President Joe Biden hosted South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at Camp David on Friday to discuss efforts to bolster security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

"As for this summit, the Chinese side has made its position clear. We believe that attempts to cobble together various exclusionary groupings and bring bloc confrontation and military blocs into the Asia-Pacific are not going to get support and will only be met with vigilance and opposition from regional countries," Liu said on Friday.

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More Starlink Systems Activated Over Maui to Bolster Comms Amid Wildfires - US General

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) -The US military activated additional Starlink systems over Maui to bolster communications amid ongoing wildfires, Joint Task Force 5-0 Dual Status Commander Brig. Gen. Stephen Logan told reporters.

"We have brought in additional Starlink systems to try to reestablish communicative capability up in the up in the West Maui area," Logan said on Friday.

According to the most recent official US reports, 111 people have been confirmed killed in the fires.

On Wednesday, Hawaiian Governor Josh Green told CNN that more than 1,000 residents were still unaccounted for. Most of the devastated area has yet to be thoroughly searched for bodies, local officials said.

Many survivors have been staying in tent encampments and parking lots while hotel accommodation space was found for them and a financial assistance program for survivors who lost their homes will begin next week, according to the Red Cross.

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US Emergency Agency Fully Prepared to Handle Maui Fires, Hurricane - FEMA Official

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is fully prepared to handle any crisis or disaster that should result from Hurricane Hillary

hitting Southern California while at the same time working on relief and rescue operations for the most deadly wildfires in US history on the Hawaiian island of Maui, a senior FEMA official told reporters.

"We are committed to meeting emerging requirements across the country," the official said on Friday. "We are fully prepared for the impact of Hillary if it should hit California."

FEMA currently fields 28 task forces nationwide and has sufficient resources to handle simultaneous major emergencies in different parts of the United States, the official said.

Hurricane Hillary may be the first tropical storm to hit Los Angeles in 94 years. City residents have been alerted that tropical storm conditions are possible in the next 48 hours. Experts predict 3 to 6 inches of rain around parts of Southern California and southern Nevada, according to the National Hurricane Center.

The death toll in the Maui fires has reached 111, the county said in an update on Thursday.

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Biden Approves Additional US Government Aid to Hawaii Following Wildfires - White House

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden approved additional federal funding to help assist disaster recovery efforts in the wake of deadly wildfires in Hawaii, the White House said in a statement.

"Today, President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. made additional disaster assistance available to the State of Hawaii by authorizing an increase in the level of Federal funding for emergency work undertaken in the State of Hawaii as a result of wildfires beginning on August 8, 2023, and continuing," the statement said on Friday.

Biden's order increased federal funds for debris removal and emergency protective measures to 100% of total eligible costs for a continuous 30-day period of the state of Hawaii's choosing, the statement said.

At least 111 people died as a result of the wildfires in Hawaii, with the toll expected to rise, making the wildfires the deadliest in the United States since 1918.

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Biden Says Expects to Speak With Chinese President Xi This Fall

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters he planned to speak with Chinese President Xi Jinping this fall, the White House press pool reported.

"I expect and hope to follow up on our conversation in Bali this fall. That's my expectation," Biden said on Friday as quoted by the press pool.

In July, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Biden and Xi will likely hold talks at some point in the months ahead.

Blinken also said that it remained to be seen if Xi planned to travel to San Francisco to participate in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit this fall.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, August 19 (Sputnik) -

US-JAPAN-SOUTH KOREA SUMMIT

- * US President Joe Biden said on Friday at the start of the trilateral summit with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts that he looks forward to begin a new era of cooperation between the three countries.
- * The United States, South Korea and Japan will establish a trilateral working group to combat North Korea's cyber threats and cyber-enabled sanctions evasion, the three countries said in a joint statement.
- * They also reiterated their commitment to provide aid to Ukraine, impose sanctions on Russia and accelerate efforts to move away from Russian energy.
- * The countries will establish a trilateral working group to combat North Korea's cyber threats and cyber-enabled sanctions evasion, the three countries said in a joint statement.
- * Biden said that China wasn't the primary topic of discussion during the trilateral summit at Camp David, though the topic did come up.
- * China is overreacting regarding the summit as there are no plans to create a so-called Asian NATO, US National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said.

SANCTIONS

- * Russia has expanded its travel ban list by adding 54 more citizens of the United Kingdom in response to London's hostile policy directed against Moscow, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday.
- * Ottawa has sanctioned 15 Russian individuals and three entities over the rise in human rights violations and state-sponsored violence toward government critics, Global Affairs Canada said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- * Ukraine has lost more than 400 soldiers - killed and injured - in the Donetsk and South Donetsk directions over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said on Friday.
- * The training of Ukrainian pilots on F-16 fight jets will be followed by the transfer of the aircraft, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.
- * Andriy Yermak, the head of Ukrainian President's office, said that a total of 25 countries have already joined the document on security guarantees for Ukraine adopted at the NATO summit in Vilnius in July.

RUSSIA-MOLDOVA DIPLOMATIC DISPUTE

* Russia has decided to ban a number of Moldovan officials from entering the country in response to Chisinau's decision to reduce the number of employees of Russian foreign missions, the Russian Foreign Ministry said on Friday.

* The Moldovan Foreign Ministry regrets Russia's decision to bar entry to a number of Moldovan officials, the Foreign Ministry communications adviser Igor Zaharov said.

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Bidan, Kishida Highlight Progress on Defense Cooperation – White House

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden and the Prime Minister of Japan Fumio Kishida, during their bilateral meeting in Camp David on Friday, highlighted significant progress their countries reached on defense cooperation, the White House said.

“The two leaders also highlighted significant progress on defense cooperation, including plans to pursue a Glide Phase Interceptor cooperative development program to counter high-end hypersonic threats,” the statement said.

Biden and Kishida discussed a wide range of global and regional security issues, including the conflict in Ukraine, US commitment to defend Japan, as well as Washington's and Tokyo's readiness to cooperate on regional security challenges, it added.

“The leaders expressed concern about the People's Republic of China's (PRC) recent dangerous behavior in the South China Sea to assert its unlawful maritime claims. They also reaffirmed the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait,” the statement said.

The meeting occurred on the sidelines of the trilateral US-Japan-South Korea summit in Camp David.

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Release of Fukushima Water Needs to Be Done in Line with IAEA Procedures - S. Korea's Yoon

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Japan's plans to release treated water from the Fukushima nuclear power plant must be done in accordance with procedures established by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), South Korea President Yoon Suk Yeol said on Friday.

Earlier this month, media reported that Japan is planning to release 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.

"I would like to make sure that everything is conducted and carried out in accordance with the procedures established by the IAEA," Yoon said during a joint press conference with President Joe Biden and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

Yoon said that it is necessary for Japan to be transparent about data regarding the Fukushima water being released into the sea.

The issue, Yoon said, was not raised during the trilateral summit between the three leaders at Camp David.

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US Accuses 5 Chinese Solar Panel Makers of Dodging Duties

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has identified five Chinese solar panel makers who had been rerouting their exports through other Asian nations to dodge duties, a Commerce Department statement said Friday.

"Commerce found that certain Chinese producers are shipping their solar products through Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand, and/or Vietnam for minor processing in an attempt to avoid paying antidumping and countervailing duties (AD/CVD)," the statement said.

The department said it found that five of the eight solar panel makers it investigated had circumvented US duties and there could be more unexamined ones that were flouting the law.

"Specifically, Commerce found that five companies were attempting to avoid the payment of U.S. duties by completing minor processing in third countries, and that three companies were not circumventing."

Those accused of circumventing were BYD Hong Kong and New East Solar in Cambodia, Canadian Solar and Trina Solar in Thailand and Vina Solar in Vietnam.

A Commerce Department official was quoted saying in a US media report that the department will also impose duties on New East Solar because it refused to cooperate with an on-site audit of its operations in Cambodia.

The other four companies accused of circumventing tariffs have the ability to pursue a certification process to show they had not broken the law. To attain certification, solar cells and panels must contain non-Chinese wafers and three other key components.

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Biden Says Trilateral Summit Was Not About China, Though Topic Came Up

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said that China wasn't the primary topic of discussion during the trilateral summit at Camp David on Friday, though the topic did come up.

"This summit was not about China. That was not the purpose of the meeting, but China obviously came up," said Biden, when asked if China was a focus of the trilateral meeting with the leaders of Japan and South Korea.

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US, Japan, South Korea Recognize Path to Dialogue With North Korea 'Open' - Kishida

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, Japan, and South Korea recognize that the path to dialogue with North Korea is "open," Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said on Friday.

"We said [we recognize] that the way is open for dialogue with North Korea," Kishida said during a joint press conference at Camp David following a trilateral meeting with his US and South Korean counterparts.

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Biden Says US Grateful for Japan's Support of Ukraine

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that both Republicans and Democrats in the United States are grateful for Japan's assistance to Ukraine amid its conflict with Russia.

"I and my country and the leadership of my country in both parties are very grateful for everything Japan is helping to do with Ukraine," Biden said during a press conference.

Japan has shown strong leadership in the Group of Seven (G7) and contributed financial and humanitarian assistance to Ukraine, Biden said.

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US President Says Has No Comment on Criminal Probe Into His Son Hunter's Activities

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Friday that he has no comments regarding the US Justice Department's investigation into the alleged criminal activities of his son Hunter Biden.

"I have no comment on any investigation going on. That is up to the Justice Department," Biden told reporters when asked about his reaction to the appointment of a special counsel in the case.

US Attorney General Merrick Garland announced last Friday the appointment of US Attorney David Weiss as a special counsel in Hunter Biden's case.

Garland said Weiss would provide a public report at the end of his investigation, explaining his decision to file charges or not.

Weiss said in a document filed on Tuesday in the US District Court for the District of Delaware

that a pre-trial diversion agreement to resolve a felony firearms charge against Hunter Biden was never finalized and is not legally binding.

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US General Says 4-5 Years Needed for Ukrainians to Achieve F-16 Flying Proficiency

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Commander of US Air Forces in Africa and Europe Gen. James Hecker said on Friday it will take Ukrainians between four and five years to achieve "proficiency" in flying F-16 fighter jets.

"[T]hey [Ukrainian pilots] are going to get a little bit more training on propellers and then go down to France and fly in the [Dassault/Dornier] Alpha Jet for a little bit. That all is going to take time, and that's probably not going to happen before the end of the year... so that's why it's going to be at least until next year until you see F-16s in Ukraine," Hecker was quoted by Breaking Defense as saying during a discussion hosted by the Defense Writers Group.

According to the general, the pilots arriving from Ukraine are young guys who barely have any flying experience and will need a lot of time, including learning English, before they can sit in the cockpit of an F-16.

"That takes a while to build a couple squadrons of F-16s, and to get their readiness high enough and their proficiency high enough. I mean you're talking, this could be four or five years down the road," Hecker said.

The general also noted that the Ukrainian counteroffensive continues to make "slow progress." Earlier in the day, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan confirmed that Secretary of State Antony Blinken sent a letter to his European counterparts in Denmark and the Netherlands with the formal approval of a third-party transfer of F-16 fighter jets to Ukraine amid the ongoing conflict with Russia. He added that the transfer of jets will follow the completion of the Ukrainian pilots' training.

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Biden Hails 'New Era' in Partnership Between US, Japan, South Korea

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden hailed the beginning of a "new era" in the partnership between the United States, Japan and South Korea following a trilateral summit at Camp David on Friday.

"This is a new era in partnership between Japan and the Republic of Korea and the United States," Biden said during a joint press conference.

Biden added that he had a "great, great" meeting with his counterparts.

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US Approves Possible \$975M In Sale of 22 HIMARS Units to Australia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States approved a possible \$975 million sale of 22 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and related equipment to Australia, the Pentagon said on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Australia of M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$975 million," the Pentagon said in a press release. "Australia has requested to buy up to twenty-two (22) M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS)."

Australia, through this sale, will also acquire 60 Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) Alternative Warhead Pods with Insensitive Munitions Propulsion System, the release added.

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US, Japan, S. Korea Determined to Increase Trilateral Coordination to Help Ukraine - Yoon

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, Japan, and South Korea have agreed to increase their cooperation to help Ukraine regain freedom and facilitate reconstruction amid the conflict with Russia, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol said on Friday.

"[T]o help the Ukrainians regain freedom and pursue reconstruction, we are determined to increase our three-way coordination," Yoon said during a joint press conference at Camp David following a trilateral meeting with his US and Japanese counterparts.

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US, Japan, ROK to Continue Aiding Ukraine, Imposing Sanctions on Russia - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, Japan, and South Korea in a joint statement on Friday reiterated their commitment to provide aid to Ukraine, impose sanctions on Russia, and accelerate efforts to move away from Russian energy.

"We commit to continue providing assistance to Ukraine, imposing coordinated, robust sanctions on Russia, and accelerating the reduction of dependency on Russian energy," the statement said.

The joint statement was released following a trilateral meeting between US President Joe

Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at Camp David.

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US, Japan, ROK to Establish Trilateral Group to Combat DPRK's Cyber Threats - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, South Korea and Japan will establish a trilateral working group to combat North Korea's cyber threats and cyber-enabled sanctions evasion, the three countries said in a joint statement on Friday.

"We announce the establishment of a new trilateral working group to drive our cooperation, including with the international community, to combat DPRK cyber threats and block its cyber-enabled sanctions evasion," the statement said.

The joint statement was released following a trilateral meeting between President Joe Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at Camp David.

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US, Japan, S. Korea Call for Peaceful Resolution on Taiwan Strait Issues - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, Japan, and South Korea in a joint statement on Friday reaffirmed the importance of maintaining stability across the Taiwan Strait and called for a peaceful resolution on issues related to the waterway.

"We reaffirm the importance of peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait as an indispensable element of security and prosperity in the international community," the statement said. "There is no change in our basic positions on Taiwan, and we call for a peaceful resolution of cross-Strait issues."

The joint statement was released following a trilateral meeting between President Joe Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at Camp David.

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US, Japan, S. Korea to Enhance Coordination on Global Supply Chain Disruptions - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, Japan and South Korea will launch an early warning system to bolster trilateral coordination on potential supply chain disruptions,

the three countries' leaders said on Friday.

"Going forward, our countries are committed to working closely together to launch early warning system pilots to expand information sharing and enhance policy coordination on possible disruptions to global supply chains as well as to better prepare us to confront and overcome economic coercion," the leaders said in a joint statement.

The joint statement, issued by US President Joe Biden, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, comes following a summit between the leaders at Camp David.

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US, Japan, South Korea Remain Committed to Reestablishing Dialogue With DPRK

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, South Korea and Japan remain committed to reviving dialogue with North Korea without preconditions, the three countries said in a joint statement on Friday.

"Japan, the ROK, and the United States remain committed to reestablishing dialogue with the DPRK with no preconditions," the statement said.

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Evacuations in Canada's Northwest Territories 'Going Extremely Well' - Minister

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The operations to evacuate Canada's Northwest Territories (N.W.T.) capital Yellowknife amid approaching wildfires are "going extremely well," Minister of Emergency Preparedness Harjit Sajjan said on Friday.

"One thing that I can say is that the evacuation is actually going extremely well. It's been very orderly, the RCMP [Royal Canadian Mounted Police] has not reported any type of hiccups from the evacuation, and we'll have a much better idea, today hopefully, with the numbers and also the time that it will take," Sajjan said during an update on the situation.

Sajjan made the comment regarding questions whether the government had assessed the time it would take to complete the evacuation and the number of people who had already been evacuated.

Although there is an ongoing effort to evacuate the city residents, the government has been ensuring that essential resources such as fuel and food were still being flown into Yellowknife, he said.

Sajjan said protecting Yellowknife and its infrastructure are a priority, as is having the resources to prevent the fires from going into the city.

Late on Wednesday, the N.W.T. authorities ordered the evacuation of Yellowknife's 22,000

residents given the proximity of the wildfires.

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US, Japan, S.Korea Commit to Expanding Cooperation, Raise Shared Ambition to 'New Horizon'

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, South Korea and Japan said in a joint statement on Friday that they are committed to expand their trilateral cooperation and raise their shared ambition to a "new horizon" across the Indo-Pacific region and beyond.

"We commit to expand our cooperation trilaterally and raise our shared ambition to a new horizon, across domains and across the Indo-Pacific and beyond," the statement said.

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US, Japan, S. Korea to Hold Annual, Multi-Domain Drills on Regular Basis - Statement

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, Japan, and South Korea in a joint statement on Friday said they intend to hold annual exercises across various domains on a regular basis.

"Our three countries announce today that we intend to hold annual, named, multi-domain trilateral exercises on a regular basis to enhance our coordinated capabilities and cooperation," the statement said.

The joint statement was released following a trilateral meeting between President Joe Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at Camp David.

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US, Japan, ROK to Launch Annual Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – The United States, Japan, and South Korea will launch an annual Trilateral Indo-Pacific dialogue to coordinate the implementation of their regional approaches and identify new areas for common action, the leaders of the countries said in a joint statement, published on Friday.

"We will also launch an annual Trilateral Indo-Pacific Dialogue to coordinate the implementation of our Indo-Pacific approaches and to continually identify new areas for common action," the joint statement said.

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US, Japan, S. Korea Commit to Consult on Regional Threats, Coordinate Responses
-Statement

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States, Japan, and South Korea in a joint statement on Friday committed to consult with each other on regional threats and to coordinate responses.

"We announce our governments' commitment to consult with each other in an expeditious manner to coordinate our responses to regional challenges, provocations, and threats that affect our collective interests and security," the statement said. "Through these consultations, we intend to share information, align our messaging, and coordinate response actions."

The joint statement was released following a trilateral meeting between President Joe Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at Camp David.

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Trump to Skip Republican Debate for Tucker Carlson Interview - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump is planning to skip the upcoming Republican debate for an interview with Tucker Carlson, The New York Times reported on Friday.

Donald Trump plans to skip the first Republican primary debate, hosted by Fox News on Wednesday, in favor of sitting for an interview with former Fox host Tucker Carlson, the report said, citing people familiar with the matter.

The debate is slated to take place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and top Republicans vying for the presidential nomination, including Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and former Vice President Mike Pence, are expected to attend.

Trump's decision to forgo the debate comes only days after his fourth criminal indictment, which accuses the former president of conspiring to overturn the 2020 Georgia election.

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Canada Asks Meta to Reverse Decision to Ban News Amid Wildfires - Transport Minister

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Canada is asking Meta (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) to walk back its decision to ban the sharing of news links amid ongoing wildfires affecting the country's Northwest Territories (N.W.T), Minister of Transport Pablo Rodriguez said on Friday.

On August 1, Meta announced an end to news availability on Canadian Facebook and Instagram platforms in response to the country's new law that requires tech companies to compensate news outlets for using their content.

"What Meta is doing is totally unacceptable, and I warned them during the conversations in the past of the risk of blocking news. We've seen what happened in Australia. I told them this could happen here. They said that it would be different. It is not different, so I'm asking them to go back on their decision and allow people to have access to news and information in Canada," Rodriguez said during an update on the wildfires in the N.W.T.

Rodriguez made the remarks when addressing the issue of information access amid the ongoing wildfires as several N.W.T. complained about restricted accessibility, which impeded their ability to stay up to date with new directives such as those regarding evacuations.

Late on Wednesday, the N.W.T. authorities ordered the evacuation of 22,000 residents of the province's capital city Yellowknife given the proximity of the wildfires. However, no direct threat to the capital was reported.

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US Senators Request Information From Blinken, Yellen on \$6Bln Iran Prisoner Deal - Letter

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - A group of Republican US senators on Friday sent a letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen requesting information about the Biden administration's deal with Tehran to unfreeze \$6 billion of Iranian assets in exchange for releasing detained US citizens.

"We write to express significant concern over the administration's decision to release approximately \$6 billion in frozen assets to the Islamic Republic of Iran in exchange for the release of five American detainees," the letter said.

Providing Iran with such a significant sum of money will encourage future hostage taking for financial or political gain, the letter said.

The senators said they are concerned the Biden administration sidestepped Congress and pursued other means to compensate Iran in an effort to renegotiate a nuclear deal, the letter said.

Any deal with Iran that rewards their malign behavior is "wholly unacceptable," the letter said.

The lawmakers are requesting that Blinken and Yellen provide an in-person briefing and written replies to questions on the matter within 30 days, the letter added.

They seek information on how the frozen funds will be released, whether other funding mechanisms were discussed regarding the prisoner deal and what steps will be taken to ensure the funds are not diverted toward terrorism, according to the letter.

The letter was signed by 26 senators, including Tim Scott, Bill Cassidy, Roger Wicker and Tom

Cotton.

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UN Representative Landed in Niger, Set to Meet With National Council - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Representative Leonardo Santos Simao arrived in Niger and is going to meet the National Council to find resolution to the crisis, the UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"He is expected to arrive in Niamey in Niger shortly. He's planning to meet with the National Council for the safeguard of the homeland... As part of his efforts, Mr. Simao remains in contact with the member states of ECOWAS stakeholders in Niger and other concerned parties to facilitate the swift and peaceful resolution to the crisis in Niger," Dujarric told a briefing.

Prior to traveling to Niger, the representative traveled around the region, he added.

The United Nations is now focused on Niger's return back to the constitutional order, Dujarric said.

A coup took place in Niger on July 26 during which President Mohamed Bazoum was ousted and detained by his own guard, led by Gen. Abdourahamane Tchiani. Coup leaders assembled a caretaker National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland and partially closed the country's borders.

Following the coup, regional bloc ECOWAS suspended all financial aid to Niger, froze rebels' assets, banned flights and threatened coup leaders with intervention. The ultimatum expired on August 6, after which the ECOWAS leaders agreed at a summit to deploy a military force to Niger.

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UN Stands 'Firmly Against' Using Cluster Bombs in Ukraine, Anywhere - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations firmly opposes the use of cluster munitions in Ukraine and anywhere else in the world, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Friday.

"We are firmly against the use of cluster bombs everywhere and anywhere. They are a horrifying tool of war," Dujarric said during a press conference.

The United Nations wants to see an end to the conflict in Ukraine and hopes to see the territorial integrity of the country preserved.

On July 7, the US government unveiled a new military aid package for Ukraine that included cluster munitions. The move was widely criticized in many quarters, including allies in the European Union as well some US lawmakers.

On Thursday, Defense Department spokesperson Pat Ryder said that the information provided

by the Ukrainians to the United States indicates Kiev is using the cluster munitions appropriately.

The Convention on Cluster Munitions, which bans their use, has been ratified by 123 countries. The United States, Ukraine, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Israel and South Korea have not signed the convention.

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UN Focused on Returning Niger to Constitutional Order, Aware of Regional Talks - Official

UNITED NATIONS, August 17 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is aware of regional discussions and it is focused on returning Niger back to constitutional order, UN Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Friday.

"We want to see a return to the constitutional order. We want to see the liberation of the President and his family and the restoration of his legitimate authority," Dujarric told a briefing. "We've seen what ECOWAS is discussing. We've also seen what the AU has said. Our focus right now is on doing what we can to see a return to the constitutional order and meeting the humanitarian needs of the millions of people in Niger."

A coup took place in Niger on July 26 during which President Mohamed Bazoum was ousted and detained by his own guard, led by Gen. Abdourahamane Tchiani. Coup leaders assembled a caretaker National Council for the Safeguard of the Homeland and partially closed the country's borders.

Following the coup, regional bloc ECOWAS suspended all financial aid to Niger, froze rebels' assets, banned flights and threatened coup leaders with intervention. The ultimatum expired on August 6, after which the ECOWAS leaders agreed at a summit to deploy a military force to Niger.

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US Congressman Gaetz to Introduce Measure to Censure Judge Chutkan for Alleged Bias

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Matt Gaetz will introduce a measure on Friday to censure US federal judge Tanya Chutkan for allegedly displaying bias in her official duties, Gaetz's office said in a press release.

Chutkan is the judge assigned to preside over former President Donald Trump's case in Washington alleging federal election interference.

"Today, US Congressman Matt Gaetz (FL-01) will introduce a resolution to censure and condemn United States District Court Judge Tanya Chutkan, the judge presiding over President Donald Trump's case in Washington, DC, for showing open bias and partisanship in her official duties on the bench," the release said.

The release explains that Chutkan was appointed as a federal judge by President Barack Obama after donating thousands of dollars to his presidential campaign.

Chutkan is alleged to have inappropriately expressed support for violent protests that occurred in the summer of 2020 while handing down multiple harsh prison sentences on non-violent defendants arrested for participating in the events at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021.

The release said Chutkan inappropriately lamented during a sentencing hearing in October 2022 that Trump "remains free to this day."

Chutkan is the only federal judge in Washington to issue sentences to convicted January 6 participants that were longer than what prosecutors had requested, according to media reports.

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

During a recent hearing with Trump's legal team, Chutkan said the existence of a political campaign is not going to have any bearing on her decision and she intends to keep politics out of the case.

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UN on Drone Attacks in Russia: We Don't Want to See Any Attacks on Civilian Infrastructure

UNITED NATIONS, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United Nations does not want to see any targeting of civilian infrastructure, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Friday, referring to Ukrainian drone attacks on Russia.

"We do not want to see any targeting of civilian infrastructure," Dujarric said in response to a request to comment on the drone attacks on civilian areas in Russia.

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Two-Thirds of US Voters Believe China Holds Influence Over US Politics - Poll

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Two out of three likely voters in the United States believe that the country's politics are influenced by China, a new Rasmussen Reports poll revealed on Friday.

Thirty-seven percent (37%) of respondents said they believe China has a lot of influence over politicians in the US and 29% said they believe it has some influence, the poll said.

Less than a quarter of respondents, 24%, said that China has little or no influence on US politics, the poll added.

However, Americans are split on whether Democratic or Republican politicians are more influenced by China, according to the poll.

The poll surveyed 1,095 likely US voters from August 13-15 and maintains a margin of error of

plus-or-minus three percentage points with a 95% confidence level.

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Biden Says at Start of Trilateral Summit Looking Forward to New Era of Cooperation

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday at the start of the trilateral summit with his Japanese and South Korean counterparts that he looks forward to working to begin a new era of cooperation between the three countries.

"I look forward to working with both of you as you begin this new era of cooperation and renew our resolve to serve as a force of good across the Indo-Pacific," Biden said alongside South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida at Camp David in the US state of Maryland.

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Canada's Latest Anti-Russia Sanctions Meaningless, Devoid of Practical Effects - Stepanov

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Canada's latest round of sanctions against Russia is "meaningless," will not achieve any practical effect and the overall sanctions policy by the collective West will get nowhere, Russian Ambassador in Ottawa Oleg Stepanov told Sputnik on Friday.

"Another round of Canadian anti-Russian sanctions is meaningless, like the entire policy of the Trudeau cabinet toward Russia. They will have no practical effect, but our response will certainly follow, as required by reciprocity in diplomacy and interstate relations," Stepanov said. "Again, I can emphasize that in general, the policy of Western sanctions is a road to nowhere."

Earlier on Friday, Canada sanctioned 15 Russian individuals and three entities over alleged human rights violations and state-sponsored violence toward government critics. The sanctions are directed toward the Russian judiciary and Investigative Committee, federal courts and senior government officials.

Among the 15 sanctioned individuals are Investigative Committee First Deputy Chairman Eduard Kaburneev and First Deputy Minister of Justice Evgeny Zabarchuk.

Among the sanctioned entities is the Basmany District Court over its involvement in alleged human rights abuses of opposition political figure Alexei Navalny and opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza (recognized as a foreign agent in Russia). Also sanctioned are the Moscow City Court and the Khamovnicheskiy District Court.

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

Trump Lawyers Expected to Meet With Fulton County Prosecutors Next Week - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump's legal team is expected to meet with prosecutors from the Fulton County District Attorney's Office next week to discuss bond terms, ABC News reported on Friday.

Trump's lawyers will meet with the District Attorney's Office to negotiate a bond package prior to the former president surrendering himself to the court, the report said, citing sources familiar with the matter.

Earlier this week, a grand jury in the US state of Georgia indicted Trump on charges linked to alleged efforts to overturn 2020 US presidential election results. Trump also faces related charges stemming from Special Counsel Jack Smith's investigation of the 2020 election and its aftermath.

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis ordered Trump and other defendants involved in the case to turn themselves over to the authorities before Friday at noon.

Trump has denied the charges against him and characterized the cases against him as a weaponization of the US justice system for political purposes. Trump currently leads the pack of 2024 Republican presidential hopefuls despite the unresolved criminal charges.

On Thursday, Trump said he will file evidence of election fraud in Georgia as part of the case, instead of presenting the information to the public as initially planned.

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Canada Assessing Letter Sent by Volga-Dnepr Cargo Carrier Over Seized Plane - Reports

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – Ottawa acknowledged the reception of a legal notice and proposal of peaceful settlement from Russian cargo carrier Volga-Dnepr over the dispute on the seized AN-124 aircraft impounded in Toronto airport since February 2022, CBC News reported on Friday.

On Monday, Volga-Dnepr said it had prepared and sent a legal notice to several Canadian officials, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, over the confiscation of the aircraft, also proposing to find a negotiated outcome to the dispute, in line with Article 9 of the agreement between Canada and the Soviet Union for the promotion and reciprocal protection of investments from November 20, 1989.

Volga-Dnepr further noted that if the dispute was not settled within six months, it would officially initiate arbitration proceedings.

The federal government has received the letter notifying of the dispute from the cargo carrier, the report said, citing a spokesperson for Global Affairs Canada, further adding that Ottawa was assessing the legal notice and that the interests of Canadians would continue to be defended.

The An-124 operated by Volga-Dnepr arrived in Canada on February 27, 2022, from China to Canada with a shipment of COVID rapid tests under a contract with the Canadian government.

The plane was due to depart the next day. However, on February 27, 2022, Canada closed its airspace for Russian aircraft and refused the request for permission to depart. Since then, the aircraft has been detained at Toronto airport.

In June, Trudeau announced the launch of a confiscation procedure for the plane.

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Canada Imposes Russia Related Sanctions on 15 Individuals, 3 Entities - Global Affairs
(Updates with more details in paras 4-6)

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - Ottawa has sanctioned 15 Russian individuals and three entities over human rights violations and state-sponsored violence toward government critics, Global Affairs Canada said in a statement on Friday.

"The Honorable Melanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced that Canada is imposing new sanctions against 15 Russian individuals and three entities under the Special Economic Measures (Russia) Regulations in response to the rising levels of human rights violations and state-sponsored violence faced by political opponents and critics as Russia attempts to repress internal dissent," the statement said.

The sanctions are directed toward the Russian judiciary and Investigative Committee, federal courts and senior government officials, the statement said.

Among the 15 sanctioned individuals are Investigative Committee First Deputy Chairman Eduard Kaburneev and First Deputy Minister of Justice Evgeny Zabarchuk, the statement said.

Among the sanctioned entities is the Basmany District Court over its involvement in alleged human rights abuses of opposition political figure Alexei Navalny and opposition activist Vladimir Kara-Murza (recognized as a foreign agent in Russia), the statement added.

Also sanctioned are the Moscow City Court and the Khamovnicheskiy District Court, according to the statement.

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The sanctions are directed toward senior Russian government officials, the judiciary and

investigative committee as well as federally funded courts, the release said.

The sanctioned entities include the Basmanly District Court over its involvement in alleged human rights abuses toward Vladimir Kara-Murza and Alexei Navalny, among others.

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Biden Administration Officials Doubt Usefulness of Ukrainian Strikes on Crimea – Reports

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) – The decision by the Ukrainian military to strike objectives on the Crimean Peninsula is being perceived with skepticism by several officials in the US government, CNN reported on Friday.

As the Ukrainian armed forces continuously increase their strikes on objectives located in Crimea in an attempt at disrupting Russian logistics and military supply chains, a number of officials from President Joe Biden's administration are expressing doubt about the usefulness of such initiatives, the report said citing a senior defense official.

Targeting Crimea is seen as a distraction and waste of valuable resources at a time when Ukraine has considerably stretched its combat axes, the report said, adding that although the Russian military has been slightly affected, the attacks haven't decisively changed the situation at the frontlines.

"It's knocked the Russians off balance a bit, but it is not doing anything decisive," a senior defense official told CNN, who said it would be best if the focus were placed on the counter-offensive.

The report added that attacking Crimea is part of Ukraine's counteroffensive strategy, but due to the recent nature of the increased strikes, the US and its allies have a hard time assessing the impact it is having on Russia's efforts to contain Kiev's offensive operations.

The report said the US is not actively advising Ukraine to strike Crimea, adding that the longer the counteroffensives stalls, the higher the chances of failure are.

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US Lifts Defense Trade Restrictions on Cyprus for Fiscal Year 2024 - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken has recertified the lifting of defense trade restrictions on Cyprus for fiscal year 2024, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Friday.

"Secretary Blinken determined and certified to Congress that the Republic of Cyprus has met the necessary conditions under applicable legislation to allow the [State] Department to approve exports, re-exports, and transfers of defense articles to the Republic of Cyprus for fiscal year (FY) 2024," Miller said in a release.

Compliance with the conditions to recertify the lifting of defense trade restrictions is assessed

on an annual basis, the release said.

The Eastern Mediterranean Security and Energy Partnership Act of 2019 and the National Defense Authorization Act for FY 2020 require that exports, re-exports or transfers of defense articles on the US munitions list to Cyprus be restricted.

However, the restrictions can be lifted if it is certified that the Cyprus government continues to cooperate with the United States on efforts to reform anti-money-laundering regulations and financial regulatory oversight as well as continues to deny Russian military vessels access to ports for refueling and servicing.

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US Extends Temporary Protected Status for Ukraine for 18 Months Through April 19, 2025

(Adds details in paras 4-7)

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The United States has extended the temporary protected status for Ukraine for another 18 months until April 19, 2025, the Department of Homeland Security said on Friday.

"The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) today announced an extension of Temporary Protected Status (TPS) for Ukraine for 18 months, from October 20, 2023, through April 19, 2025," the statement said.

The status was extended due to "ongoing armed conflict and extraordinary and temporary conditions" in Ukraine that prevent individuals from safely returning, it added.

In addition, DHS redesignates TPS for Ukraine, allowing Ukrainian nationals residing in the US as of August 16, 2023, to be eligible for TPS. The redesignation also applies to individuals with no nationality who last habitually resided in Ukraine.

F-1 nonimmigrant students whose country of citizenship is Ukraine can also request employment authorization and work an increased number of hours while school is in session, according to the statement.

"The extension allows approximately 26,000 current beneficiaries to retain TPS through April 19, 2025, if they continue to meet TPS eligibility requirements. An estimated 166,700 additional individuals may be eligible for TPS under the redesignation of Ukraine," the DHS said.

TPS allows migrants from countries with unsafe conditions to reside and work legally in the US.

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US Judge Rejects Trump's Motion to Delay E. Jean Carroll's 2nd Defamation Lawsuit - Ruling

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - US District Judge Lewis Kaplan rejected former President Donald Trump's motion to delay the consideration of E. Jean Carroll's second defamation

lawsuit against him and called his appeal "frivolous," according to a court document published on Friday.

"For the foregoing reasons, Mr. Trump's motion for a stay pending appeal is denied. This Court certifies that the appeal itself is frivolous," the court ruling said.

In June, Kaplan scheduled Carroll's second defamation trial against Trump for January 15, 2024, seeking \$10 million unless the case resolves before this date.

The second defamation lawsuit against Trump dates back to 2019 when Carroll accused the then-US president of damaging her reputation and career after he called her a liar for publicly saying that he raped her in either 1995 or 1996 in a dressing room in New York City.

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US Not Asserting Russia Shares Ballistic Missile Tech With DPRK, Yet Concerned - Sullivan

WASHINGTON, August 18 (Sputnik) - The White House is not asserting that Russia is providing North Korea with its advanced ballistic missile technology, but remains concerned about such a possibility and closely monitors the situation, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday.

"I'm not asserting that that is the case today," Sullivan said during a press briefing commenting on reports that North Korea relies on Russian ballistic missile defense technology. "I'm not validating that report. I am saying it is a matter of concern and it is a matter that we're very much looking into."

President Joe Biden is hosting Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol for a summit at Camp David on Friday.

The summit comes as relations between the United States and North Korea remain strained in connection with Pyongyang's increasingly ambitious nuclear program, US sanctions, and close military cooperation between Washington and Seoul, including frequent joint drills.