

9/20/23 Wednesday

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AG Garland Tells GOP-Led House Judiciary Committee Defunding FBI 'Catastrophic' for Security

Appearing before a House panel for the first time since Republicans took control of the chamber in January, US Attorney General Merrick Garland pushed back on several prominent GOP talking points, including efforts to get the top prosecutor impeached for "weaponizing" the Justice Department.

It is also Garland's first appearance before Congress since former US President Donald Trump was [indicted by two federal grand juries](#) on a slew of charges related to his efforts in late 2020 and early 2021 to overturn the results of the November 2020 US presidential election, which Trump lost to now-US President Joe Biden.

During the hearing, Garland was asked by Rep. Jerry Nadler (D-NY) about Republican threats to ["defund" the FBI](#) in the wake of years of investigations into Trump, beginning with the "Crossfire Hurricane" Russiagate probe in 2016 up to the 2021 raid on his Mar-a-Lago estate to seize classified former White House documents.

"I just cannot imagine the consequences of defunding the FBI, but they would be catastrophic," Garland said.

In addition to facing down allegations that the DOJ was behaving politically by prosecuting Trump, Garland also faced claims that it had refused to investigate or prosecute President Biden or his son, Hunter Biden, for alleged corrupt business practices. The Judiciary Committee is now part of a trio of committees leading investigations into the Bidens.

"Our job is not to do what is politically convenient. Our job is not to take orders from the President, from Congress, or from anyone else, about who or what to criminally investigate," Garland said in prepared remarks at the start of the hearing. "As the President himself has said, and I reaffirm here today: I am not the President's lawyer. I will also add that I am not Congress's prosecutor."

Rep. Mike Johnson (R-LA) asked Garland if he "had personal contact with anyone at FBI HQ about the Hunter Biden investigation?"

"I don't recollect the answer to that question," Garland replied, fumbling, before adding that "the FBI works for the Justice Department ... I don't believe that I did. I promised the Senate when I came before it for confirmation that I would leave Mr. Weiss in place and that I would not interfere with his investigation. I have kept that promise."

Earlier this year, Garland [faced steep criticism](#) following [whistleblower allegations](#) from inside the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) that federal prosecutors had interfered with Delaware US Attorney David Weiss' investigation into Hunter Biden - a probe that Weiss also allegedly delayed and subsequently buried after the November 2020 election.

Those accusations were revived on Wednesday by Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH). Garland reminded him that Weiss had been appointed by Trump to head the Hunter Biden probe.

Hunter Biden has been [indicted by Weiss](#) on a number of other charges not related to his business practices, including illegal possession of a firearm and making false statements on a federal firearms form, and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) has opened a [formal impeachment inquiry](#) into President Biden.

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Reserve Keeps Interest Rate Level, Expects Another 25-Point Hike by Year-End

The US has continued to struggle with taming the economic chaos produced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw the central bank tolerate high inflation over fears of disrupting a precarious economic recovery. The shutdowns of 2020 threw 20 million Americans out of work. The Federal Reserve's Open Market Committee (FOMC), which [oversees securities markets](#) for the central bank, convened on Wednesday for the first time in two months, leaving onlookers curious if the bank would decide to raise interest rates once again amid a renewed, albeit slight, rise in inflation.

Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell announced the central bank would "maintain" the [effective federal funds rate](#) (EFFR), also called its interest rate, at its present level of 5.25-5.5%. Powell said inflation was "well above" the Fed's goal but noted it had "moderated somewhat" since last year, adding that the prospect of getting inflation below 2% still had "a long way to go." He added that the Fed expects interest rates to rise another 25 points to 5.5-5.75% by the end of the year, and that by the end of 2025, it would likely fall to around 3.9%.

Ahead of the meeting, US business media reported that there was "virtually no chance" the Fed would raise interest rates at the September meeting.

"There's likely to be a pause here, but a clear possibility that the November meeting is, as they say, a live meeting. I don't think they're ready to say, 'We are now done,'" Roger Ferguson, a former vice chair of the Fed, told one US outlet earlier this week.

"This is the time for the Fed to proceed very cautiously," he added. "In no way should they say we are completely done, because I don't think they really know that just yet, and I think they want to have the flexibility to do one more if need be."

The Fed weighed a number of trends in the US economy, including inflation but also unemployment, gross domestic product, and other factors, in its bid to plot a fiscal path that will reduce inflation without destroying the economy in the process - a task with a great deal of internal tension.

Powell said the FOMC was aware its current fiscal policy was "restrictive" on economic activity and that the economy "faces headwinds," all of which figured into its Wednesday decision.

On the one hand, the 13-month-long trend of slowing inflation has begun to rise again before hitting the Fed's long-stated goal of 2% annual inflation. On the other, the increase in July and August was very slight and [driven by a few key commodity](#) price increases, most notably petroleum fuels.

Unemployment has begun to rise slightly, but is still very close to historic lows, and job growth has similarly slowed but remained positive. Still, investors are continuing to bet that a recession

is on the horizon, and the Fed's own economic projections become increasingly dim after a few months.

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'Lost It in The Weather': Audio Leaked From 'Zombie' F-35 Crash

The F-35 program is the most expensive weapons program the Pentagon has ever undertaken, with a lifetime program cost of \$1.7 trillion and each plane costing between \$80 and \$140 million. Despite the expense, the jet is beset with problems, limiting its utility.

As mystery continues to swirl surrounding the [crash of a US Marine Corps F-35B](#) Joint Strike Fighter in South Carolina earlier this week, audio between dispatch and USMC aircraft describing the incident as it unfolded has been leaked on social media.

Two clips have been circulating since shortly after the September 17 crash, when the debris site had not yet been determined. One is between another F-35B in the air, callsign Swede 12, and air traffic control (ATC) at Charleston International Airport, which shares its facilities with a USMC air base.

The audio doesn't reveal much, aside from the complete confusion on both land and air at the time the plane was lost. In the short clip, ATC can be heard trying to establish contact with Swede 11, which is apparently the callsign of the lost F-35. Unable to do so, ATC informs Swede 12, another F-35 in the air, of the failure to establish contact, and Swede 12 is unable to give exact details about Swede 11's fate.

"As of now, we'll consider your wingman NORDO," the tower tells Swede 12, using the code for a plane without a functioning radio. Curiously, ATC suggests the missing fighter pilot might try to reestablish contact using a cellphone.

At no time during the recording does anyone mention the Swede 11 pilot ejecting or the plane crashing, reflecting [previously learned details](#) that the plane continued on autopilot in a kind of "zombie" mode after the pilot ejected.

The other recording is between Charleston County EMS/Fire responders concerning the ejected pilot, who landed in someone's backyard. The pilot was later hospitalized but released without having suffered major injuries.

Much of the radio chatter is typical, but a few important details can be garnered. At one point, the dispatcher says the pilot's location is about "10 miles out from runway one-five," a likely reference to Charleston International Airport's runway 15. The dispatcher seems to be repeating information told to him, possibly by the pilot.

"He's unsure of where his plane crashed," the dispatcher can be heard saying at one point. "Said he just lost it in the weather."

It's unclear if that means the pilot was forced to eject because of a weather-related incident, or simply didn't see their plane crash because clouds or other weather obscured their view. In a notable item of humor, the EMTs apparently reported the pilot's medical incident as a "fall."

On Tuesday, two days after the crash, aerial footage emerged of a stretch of forest with downed trees and disturbed earth, which was [reported to be the crash site](#). However, there was no sign of any large parts of the aircraft.

Begun as the X-35 program in 2000, the first F-35 flew in 2006 and its three variants were introduced across the USMC, Air Force, and Navy between 2015 and 2019. The stealthy jet has also been exported to a number of US allies and partners, with the most recent buyers including the [Czech Republic](#) and [South Korea](#). Some versions are cleared to carry nuclear bombs and are replacing legacy nuclear-capable aircraft in NATO, such as the Panavia Tornado.

It is by far the most expensive weapons program in the Pentagon's history, with present estimates for the lifetime program cost exceeding \$1.7 trillion. The aircraft is incredibly expensive, with Lockheed Martin struggling to keep its price below \$80 million each.

Despite the cost, the F-35 has been [beset by major problems](#) from the outset, some of which are too expensive to fix and which limit its operational abilities, such as tail panels that overheat at supersonic speeds, a sensitivity to being struck by lightning, and an internal weapons bay that's too small to carry some of its central weapons, like the Small Diameter Bomb II.

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Don Jr.'s Hacked X Account Sends Fake Message That Donald Trump Died

The hacker's posts also zeroed in on US President Joe Biden, North Korea, and YouTuber Logan Paul.

Donald Trump Jr.'s X/Twitter account appeared to be hacked early Wednesday by an individual with a wicked sense of humor, momentarily wrecking havoc across the internet before the messages were deleted.

"I'm sad to announce, my father Donald Trump has passed away. I will be running for president in 2024," the apparent hacker wrote at 8:25 a.m. on Wednesday.

The hacker then announced that Don Jr. was backing the crypto-personality Richard Heart (real name Richard Schueler) and said he was "innocent" after the figure had been charged with allegedly carrying out unregistered securities offerings.

"Richard Heart is innocent, when I become president I am going to burn the SEC," the message timestamped at 8:28 a.m. read, referring to the Securities and Exchange Commission.

The hacker then tweeted: "This just in: North Korea is about to get smoked."

"Some interesting messages with Jeffrey Epstein..." another tweet read, referring to the convicted sex offender and US financier Jeffrey Epstein, who died in 2019 after he committed suicide in a Manhattan jail cell.

The tweets continued: "F*** @JoeBiden Stupid A** [racial slur]."

What seemed to be the hacker's last tweet, according to one report, was a reference to Logan Paul, a YouTuber-turned-influencer, and professional wrestler. "I also f***** your girl btw @LoganPaul," the tweet read, most likely referring to Paul's fiancée Nina Agdal, a Danish model.

The tweets appeared to have been deleted about an hour after they first went up. Although Don Jr. did not make a statement on the platform regarding the hacking, Andrew Surabian, a spokesperson for former US President Donald Trump wrote: "FYI: This is obviously nor true. Don's account has been hacked."

Early on Wednesday, Eric Trump wrote a tweet poking fun at his brother regarding the incident: "What was @donaltrumpjr password? Don2024?"

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Life Finds a Way: Lahaina Banyan Tree Displays New Leaves After Devastating Wildfires

Hawaii experienced devastating wildfires in early August, leaving at least 97 people dead and scorched debris in its wake.

Lahaina's 150-year-old banyan [tree](#), a point of pride for the Hawaiian region, was badly damaged in early August by wildfires that burned through the island of Maui, prompting many to believe that the historic tree was thought to be lost.

But this week, Hawaii's Department of Land and Natural Resources shared a hopeful video of the banyan tree—a *Ficus benghalensis*, or banyan fig—on social media. In the video, bright green leaves can be seen sprouting on the tree amid scorched foliage.

"Historic Lahaina banyan tree showing additional signs of recovery," the account wrote. "Groups of leaves are sprouting on the Lahaina Banyan Tree. Arborists, volunteering their time and expertise to saving the 150-year-old tree, indicate these are positive signs for its long-term recovery."

Timothy Griffith, a county arborist, told local [reporters](#) he found at least a dozen new shoots on both the aerial root props and main limbs anywhere from six to 20 feet up in the tree. Griffin adds that it was a "welcome sight" and hopes it is the start of more to come.

Steve Nimz, another local arborist, inspected the tree and did not find any significant signs of singeing, charring or cracking on the main trunk, or most of its more than 40 aerial roots. He also found live tissue in the tree's cambium beneath the bark layer, and also found that the soil beneath the tree did not appear burned.

"[The tree] is kind of in a coma," Nimz told a US news [outlet](#). "So, it's just like when you're in a coma, they give you intravenous fluids in your veins and they keep your vital signs going until they see you blink or move a finger or something. So, we're doing the same thing with the tree." Workers jumped to save the tree, with volunteers arranging for water tankers to start regular watering programs just days after the fire. A new association was also formed in order to care for the tree, which involves Maui arborists, landscapers, and dozens of volunteers who have worked to revive the tree after the fire. Aerating the soil, and giving the tree water and regular servings of nutrients have resulted in its improved health.

The tree was originally a gift from Indian missionaries, who planted it in Lahaina in 1873, marking the 50th anniversary of the first American Protestant mission. The tree's planting was requested by Queen Keopuolani, and was designated as an "Exceptional Banyan Tree." The

beloved tree is 60-feet tall and spans 1.94 acres in length, and its site has been used for weddings, view renewals, honeymoon photos and funerals.

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Scientists Discover Which Age People Are Happiest

The researchers have discovered a hidden key to happiness, but you may have to wait a few more years to see for yourself.

A team of international researchers have attempted to answer the question of when one is happiest in life, and according to their findings, a child's life satisfaction decreases between the ages of nine and 16, but slightly increases until its peak at the age of 70.

"We focused on changes in three central components of subjective well-being," explains professor Susanne [Bücker](#). "Life satisfaction, positive emotional states and negative emotional states."

Life satisfaction then dropped off again until the age of 96.

The researchers believe this decline is a result of changes to the body during puberty, as well as social shifts during that time. The decline in life satisfaction following age 70 may be due to physical illnesses or poor physical performance, deteriorated health and diminished social contacts, including the deaths of loved ones, Bücker said.

Positive emotional states, however, continually decline from the age of nine until the age of 94. While negative emotional states fluctuated slightly between ages 9 and 22, then declined until age 60 before increasing again.

"Overall, the study indicated a positive trend over a wide period of life, if we look at life satisfaction and negative emotional states," Bücker said, summarizing the results.

The researchers—who are from the German Sport University Cologne, Ruhr University Bochum, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz and the universities of Bern and Basel in Switzerland—examined the subjective well-being over the entire lifespans of 460,902 participants.

From that group, they pulled 443 samples and examined people's descriptions of how they felt about themselves during different stages of their lives.

The findings were published in the journal [Psychological Bulletin](#).

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Taylor Swift Fans Crash Google's '1989' Vault Puzzle Ahead of Album Re-Release

The latest Swiftie-induced crash is not the first to have ever happen; in fact, fans of the American singer-songwriter previously overwhelmed Ticketmaster and AMC Theatres after

individuals attempted to first snag tickets to the musician's Era's Tour, and more recently for movie tickets to the "Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour" concert film.

Taylor [Swift](#) fans, more popularly known as "Swifties," have crashed yet another search engine, this time bringing down a special feature set up specifically for them by Google and the pop star herself.

The collaboration between Google and Swift is part of an Easter egg for fans, in anticipation of her upcoming album "1989 (Taylor's Version)," her fourth album that she has since re-recorded. The online feature was a pop-up animation in Google's search bar that prompted fans to solve a series of puzzles that would ultimately reveal tracks from Swift's upcoming re-recording. Fans clicked through a set of 89 puzzles - with 33 million individual puzzles being completed - in order to "open Taylor's vault." Some of those questions were about Swift, including her zodiac sign, while others were puzzles about track lyrics from the original album.

As it turned out, the search engine was unable to keep up with the massive amount of Swifties, with some fans complaining the puzzles were not popping up for them.

"Swifties, the vault is jammed! But don't worry, there are no blank spaces inside. We're in our fix-it era and will be out of the woods soon," Google wrote on their X account, referencing Swift lyrics in their message to fans.

In the end, fans were able to mobilize and eventually open Swift's vault revealing four of her re-recorded vault tracks: "Is It Over Now?," "Now That We Don't Talk," "Say Don't Go" and "Suburban Legends."

[Swift's](#) album "1989 (Taylor's Version)" is expected to be released on October 27.

Swift first began releasing re-recorded music in April of 2021, after the process first began in 2019. The new recordings come after her old record label Big Machine Records, which she left in 2018, was sold to music manager Scooter Braun. Braun took over the rights to all the master recordings of Swift's past music, with the artist calling it her "worst case scenario."

Swift switched to Republic Records in 2018 and negotiated to own the rights to all her music going forward. She is now sidestepping the 42-year-old Braun, and is re-recording her old songbook.

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Rupert Murdoch to Step Down as Fox, News Corp Chairman in November – Letter

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - Rupert Murdoch will step down as chairman of Fox and News Corp in November, Fox News reported Thursday, citing a letter to colleagues.

"I am writing to let you all know that I have decided to transition to the role of Chairman Emeritus at Fox and News," Murdoch wrote. "For my entire professional life, I have been engaged daily with news and ideas, and that will not change. But the time is right for me to take on different roles, knowing that we have truly talented teams and a passionate, principled leader in Lachlan who will become sole Chairman of both companies.

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Baku to Deliver Message of 'Peace' to UNSC Amid Nagorno-Karabakh Crisis - Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - Azerbaijan will call for "peace" at the upcoming UN Security Council meeting on Nagorno-Karabakh, Azerbaijani Ambassador to UN Yashar Aliyev told Sputnik.

The emergency meeting of the United Nations Security Council will take place on September 21.

When asked what their message will be at the meeting, Aliyev said, "Peace."

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Almost 30 Republican Lawmakers Reject White House's \$24Bln Ukraine Aid Request - Letter

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) – A group of Republicans lawmakers rejected on Thursday a \$24 billion White House budget request for additional assistance to Ukraine, citing a lack of accounting transparency and clarity of strategy, according to a letter addressed to the director of the Office of Management and Budget.

“It would be an absurd abdication of congressional responsibility to grant this request...until we receive answers to the questions above and others forthcoming—we oppose the additional expenditure for war in Ukraine included in your request,” the letter concluded.

The letter, led by Sen. J.D. Vance and Rep. Chip Roy and signed by 23 House members and six senators, argued that Congress was unaware of how much the US had truly spent to date on the conflict, pointing to a lack of transparency exemplified by a recent \$6.2 billion accounting error on the Ukraine Presidential Drawdown Authorities. It also noted that a \$5 billion request for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative greatly exceeded the recent \$300 million authorized by the Senate and House for the program for the fiscal year 2024.

The letter argued that recent White House statements implied an “open-ended commitment to supporting the war in Ukraine of an indeterminate nature, based on a strategy that is unclear, to achieve a goal yet to be articulated to the public or the Congress.” It questioned the progress of Ukraine's counteroffensive and the White House’s strategy, definition of victory, and exit plan.

The letter comes as Volodymyr Zelenskyy is visiting the United States for the second time since the conflict with Russia began. He is meeting US President Joe Biden at the White House and with lawmakers on Capitol Hill on Thursday and is expected to lobby for additional aid.

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Canada Sanctions 3 Members of Haitian Economic Elite – Global Affairs

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - Canada has imposed sanctions on three individuals from Haiti's "economic elite" over their alleged involvement in significant acts of corruption, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) said on Thursday.

"The Honourable Mélanie Joly, Minister of Foreign Affairs, today announced that Canada is imposing additional sanctions under the Special Economic Measures (Haiti) Regulations in response to acts of significant corruption," the GAC statement said. "These latest sanctions target 3 members of the Haitian economic elite."

The sanctioned individuals are businessmen Marc Antoine Acra, Carl Braun and Jean-Marie Vorbe, the statement said, adding that effective today they would be inadmissible to enter Canadian soil.

GAC said Ottawa had reasons to believe the sanctioned businessmen have been encouraging violence and instability throughout the country by enabling corruption and the illegal activities of armed gangs.

The statement added that Canada remains committed to supporting efforts to address political security and the humanitarian crises affecting the Haitian people.

Since November 2022, Canada has imposed sanctions against 28 individuals over their alleged roles in the country's turmoil.

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Hungary to Veto Any EU Sanctions on Russian Nuclear Energy - Szijjarto

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - Any EU attempt to impose sanctions on Russian nuclear energy would be vetoed by Hungary, Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told Sputnik.

"But they can't because it would be against our national interests and we would veto it," Szijjarto said on the margins of the UN General Assembly.

He added there are "continuous attempts" to target Russian nuclear energy with sanctions.

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US Intelligence Believes Ukrainian Military Demoralized, Has No Chance of Victory - Hersh

(Adds details in paras 5-7)

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - The US intelligence community believes that the Ukrainian armed forces are demoralized and have no chance of a victory, but there is no discussion in Kiev or the White House of a ceasefire, US journalist Seymour Hersh said on Thursday, citing a US official with access to current intelligence.

"There are significant elements in the American intelligence community, relying on field reports

and technical intelligence, who believe that the demoralized Ukraine army has given up on the possibility of overcoming the heavily mined three-tier Russian defense lines and taking the war to Crimea and the four oblasts seized and annexed by Russia. The reality is that Volodymyr Zelensky's battered army no longer has any chance of a victory," Hersh wrote in a new post on his Substack account.

Still, there is no talk in Kiev or the White House of a ceasefire and no interest in peace talks, Hersh said.

The Ukrainian claims of incremental progress in the offensive are "all lies," the US intelligence official was quoted as saying by Hersh.

After weeks of big casualties and poor progress, major elements of the Ukrainian army virtually canceled the offensive, the official observed.

"The war is over. Russia has won. There is no Ukrainian offensive anymore, but the White House and the American media have to keep the lie going," he said.

If the Ukrainian army is ordered to continue the offensive, the military would mutiny as they are not willing to die any more, Hersh cited the official as saying.

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UNGA Talks on Russia-Ukraine Peace Would Be 'Biggest Pleasure' - Iraqi Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told Sputnik that he would be delighted if there were any talks at the UN General Assembly this week to facilitate peace between Russia and Ukraine.

"The biggest pleasure will be when people here talk about peace, especially between Russia and Ukraine, because that's what we need and that's what the world needs," Hussein said on the margins of the UN General Assembly.

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Iraq Hopes for Progress in Talks With Turkey to Resume Kurdish Oil Exports - Top Diplomat

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Iraq hopes for progress in ongoing contacts with Turkey to resume Kurdistan oil exports through the Iraqi-Turkish pipeline, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told Sputnik.

"Still, the Turkish position is well known. They are until now refusing to allow the oil from Kurdistan to be exported through the pipeline ... We will see how the negotiation will continue and I hope that we will reach some results," Hussein said on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

The discussions on the matter between Baghdad and Ankara are continuing, he added.

In March, Turkey halted the flow of Kurdish oil through the Iraqi-Turkish pipeline. It came after the Paris-based International Chamber of Commerce ruled in favor of Iraq in a long-running legal battle. The arbitration court found that Turkey had violated a joint agreement by allowing the Kurdistan Regional Government to export oil to the port of Ceyhan without Baghdad's consent.

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US-Iran Tension Affects Entire Region, Prisoner Swap Deal 'Good Step' - Top Iraqi Diplomat

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The prisoner exchange deal between the United States and Iran is a positive step in their bilateral relationship, considering that tensions between the two countries affect the entire Middle East region, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told Sputnik.

"This is a good step towards starting a new stage of discussion and negotiation," Hussein said on the margins of the UN General Assembly. "I hope they will continue their negotiation so that there will not be tension between these two countries because the conflict between both countries affected the entire region and directly the political and security situation in Iraq."

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Iraq Committed to Security Pact With Iran, Expects Same From Tehran - Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Iraq is committed to a new security agreement with Iran and expects the same from Tehran, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told Sputnik.

"The Iraqi side is committed to the agreement. So, we are also expecting the Iranian side to also be committed to the agreement and that means not talking about violence and not using violence for attacks against Iraqi Kurdistan," Hussein said.

The foreign minister said he managed to reach an understanding on the matter during his trip to Tehran on September 13, where he had a chance to meet with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and discuss the terms and deadlines for the disarmament of Kurdish militias.

Under a border security agreement struck in March, Iraq began moving Iranian Kurdish armed groups out of the border area and into camps set up in the Kurdish-majority governorates of Erbil and Sulaymaniyah.

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Iraqi Prime Minister Plans to Visit US Later in 2023 - Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani plans to accept the US invitation to visit Washington later this year, Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told Sputnik.

"He [US Secretary of State Antony Blinken] extended this invitation, so we are going to work on it and I hope that my prime minister can make it this year," Hussein said.

Hussein pointed out that there is no plan or specific date yet for the visit and this will be discussed with US counterparts.

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Sanctions Prevent Iraq From Seeking Russia's Help in Repairing Old Weapons - Top Diplomat

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Iraq is interested in Russia's expertise in repairing old weapons systems, but international sanctions obstruct such cooperation, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told Sputnik.

"We don't have, in fact, military cooperation with Russia. But of course, in the past, most of the weapons that have been used by the Iraqi army were Russian. So now and then we need to repair these weapons. And we need some expertise but because of sanctions, we cannot do it,"

Hussein said on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

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Iraqi Foreign Minister Say Intends to Meet With Lavrov in 'Next Few Days'

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told Sputnik that he intends to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in the "next few days."

"I'm going to meet His Excellency Minister [Sergey] Lavrov in the next few days," Hussein said in comments on Iraq's trade relationship with Russia and the ongoing search for ways to pay Russian companies doing business in the country.

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Iraq Seeks Legal Ways Around Sanctions, Transactions With Russia Difficult - Top Diplomat

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Iraq is experiencing difficulties in processing transactions with Russia due to Western sanctions but is looking for legal ways to work around them, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told Sputnik.

"There was a trade relationship with Russia and there are Russian companies working in Iraq. Of course, they must be paid, so in this area our banks or our government have got some difficulties to pay because of the sanctions," Hussein said on the margins of the UN General Assembly. "We are searching for ways, of course legal ways, and I'm going to meet His Excellency Minister Lavrov in the next few days."

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Iraqi Prime Minister Plans to Visit Moscow This Year - Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al Sudani will visit Moscow before the end of the year, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told Sputnik.

"There is a plan for the Iraqi prime minister to visit Moscow. It will be this year, within a few months," Hussein said on the margins of the UN General Assembly.

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

Maliki Says Saudis Cannot Broker Israel-Palestine Talks Given Riyadh Aligns With Palestine

(Updates headline, lede, quote, adds more info, background)

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki told Sputnik Saudi Arabia is not able to mediate talks with Israel because Riyadh supports the Palestinian position.

Some experts expressed the view that Riyadh may help revive the peace talks between Palestine and Israel.

"The Saudis stand with the Palestinian rights, supporting the Palestinian position and so.... they are not you know, mediating," Maliki said on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

Relations between Palestine and Israel have been adversarial since the latter's founding in 1948. Palestinians seek diplomatic recognition of their independent state on the territories of the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, which is partially occupied by Israel, and the Gaza Strip.

The Israeli government refuses to recognize Palestine as an independent political and diplomatic entity and continues to build settlements in the occupied areas despite objections from the United Nations.

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US, European Countries Caused Trampling Upon JCPOA Agreement - Iranian President

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - The United States and the European countries remain behind the impasse regarding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said at a press conference.

"The differences that the agreement was trampled upon by the United States and the European side, they fail to live up to their commitments, but the only party to that agreement that fully lived up to our commitments as shown and certified 15 times has been the Islamic Republic of Iran," Raisi said on Wednesday.

In 2015, Iran signed a nuclear agreement with the United States, China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and the European Union. The agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), stipulated lifting sanctions imposed on Iran in exchange for restricting the country's nuclear program.

However, President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement in 2018, reimposing comprehensive sanctions on Iran. Tehran reacted by reducing its obligations under the agreement, including those concerning nuclear research, centrifuges and uranium enrichment levels.

In December 2021, talks on the resumption of the JCPOA were resumed, but a year later progress on the agreement became largely frozen.

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Raisi Says Iran Ban on Inspectors Not Aimed at IAEA Itself, But Those Who Undermine Trust

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - Withdrawal of accreditation of certain International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors is not targeting the organization itself but distrustful individuals, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said at a presser.

"You're certainly well aware that over 15 times the Islamic Republic of Iran has had no transgressions and it is completely peaceful nuclear pursuit and technology and with regards to individuals who may undertake actions aimed at undermining the level of trust the Islamic Republic has in them. Then we are really taking only aim at those specific individuals. not inspections themselves. So we will not," Raisi said on Wednesday.

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Iran's President Says Military, Economic Cooperation With Russia to Last Well Into Future

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - Relations between Iran and Russia have been functioning already for some time and will last into the future, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi said at a press conference.

"They have been going as I said for a considerable amount of time and they will last well into the future. So mutual exchange of the senior defense officials made in Iran or be occurring in Russia is to support these exchanges in these collaborations and cooperations now what results this visit yielded. We must of course, wait for the result to be announced from the Joint Forces Command of the Iranian armed forces or the Russian Federation ministry," Raisi said on Wednesday.

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Grossi Says Officials Attending UNGA Gaining Better Understanding of IAEA's Work

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik), Lenka White - The officials and diplomats attending the UN General Assembly have a better understanding of the large scope of work the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is doing on behalf of the world in comparison to a year ago, Director General Rafael Grossi told Sputnik.

"What I see is a general understanding much wider than before of the essential work that the agency [IAEA] is doing on behalf of everyone," Grossi said on Wednesday.

One of the principles is that the IAEA is not taking sides and it tries to ensure the safety and

security of others, he added.

Earlier today, Grossi had a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov with whom, among others, discussed the safety around the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP).

Grossi participated in the United Nations General Assembly high level week which kicked off on September 19. It is a place where world leaders gather and Grossi conducts many bilateral meetings with heads of states, including one taking place in New York City's subway with the Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs.

The IAEA is based in Vienna. Its core issues, at the moment, is the monitoring of the situation around ZNPP, dealing with Iran's nuclear capabilities or inspecting the release of the Fukushima water into the sea. But the IAEA also has other roles, such as it supports the member states in establishing quality healthcare, expanding global access to cancer care and works on various scientific researches.

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Iraqi Foreign Minister Says Ties With Russia 'Strong' Despite Western Sanctions

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik), Lenka White - Iraq continues to have strong relations with Russia despite the comprehensive Western sanctions and changes in the political environment after Moscow started its special military operation in Ukraine, Iraqi Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein told Sputnik.

"The war in Ukraine affected the whole political environment because it is well known there are sanctions against Russia, but the ties are still strong and there is a plan for the Iraqi prime minister to visit Moscow," Hussein said on the margins of the UN General Assembly.

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US Senate Confirms General Charles Brown to Be Next Joint Chiefs Chairman

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - The US senate confirmed Air Force General Charles Brown to be the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The senate confirmed Brown's nomination with a 83-11 vote on Wednesday evening.

Brown, who serves as the chief of staff of the US Air Force, will replace current Joint Chiefs Chairman General Mark Milley.

Milley's four-year term is set to expire in the coming days once Brown is sworn in.

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Biden Issues Order to Hold Norfolk Southern Accountable for Ohio Derailment - White House

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden issued an executive order promising to hold Norfolk Southern accountable after one of its trains suffered a toxic derailment in Ohio earlier this year, the White House said in a press release.

On February 3, a train hauling 20 cars from Norfolk Southern with hazardous materials derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, causing a big fire and forcing officials to burn vinyl chloride inside five of the tanker cars to avoid a catastrophic explosion. The accident released toxic chemicals and despite repeated assurances that the air and water are safe, residents in the area have told Sputnik of recent health impacts, including headaches, burning skin and irritated eyes, as well as fears of long-term health risks such as cancer.

"As part of his commitment to the people of East Palestine, President Biden is today issuing an Executive Order to ensure that Norfolk Southern continues to be held accountable for this disaster, to address any of the disaster's long-term effects, and to ensure federal assistance is available to affected communities should needs develop that are not met by Norfolk Southern," the statement said on Wednesday.

FEMA has been asked to appoint a Federal Disaster Recovery Coordinator within the next five days who will be responsible for overseeing long-term recovery efforts and assessing long-term effects from the derailment in collaboration with Federal, State, and local governments, the release said.

The order stipulates that agencies involved in the disaster recovery process report back to the president regarding the status of recovery and cleanup said the release.

The order also directs the Environmental Protection Agency to continue to direct the removal of contaminated soils, wastewater, and debris from the derailment site and ensure that the remaining contamination is addressed. The EPA is to provide a detailed report to the president within 30 days about the recovery status, in addition to overseeing that Norfolk Southern continues to comply with environmental standards.

Additionally, the order directs the Department of Health and Human Services to provide the President with a report within 60 days summarizing public health testing and assessment that has been conducted thusfar, as well as collaborate with the CDC on addressing health conditions related to the disaster.

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Saudi Crown Prince Says Reforming Security to Ensure Khashoggi Crime Not Repeated

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in a Fox News interview that he is implementing security reforms to ensure crimes like the killing of US columnist Jamal Khashoggi do not happen again.

"We try to reform the security system to be sure that these kinds of mistakes doesn't happen again, and we can see in the past five years, nothing of those things happened," Salman said in the interview aired on Wednesday.

Salman said everyone involved in Khashoggi's murder is serving a substantial time in prison. Khashoggi was killed in October 2018 by a team of Saudi agents inside the country's consulate in Istanbul.

US intelligence determined that Salman had approved an operation to murder the columnist. President Joe Biden met with Salman in Jeddah in July 2022, during which time he raised Khashoggi's murder. Salman said at the time that he does not feel personally responsible for the murder and took action against those who were.

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McCarthy Says US House Republicans 'Very Close' to Stopgap Government Funding Plan

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy said during a press conference that House Republicans are nearing a plan to temporarily fund the US government and avoid a potential shutdown.

"We're very close there. I feel I just got a little more movement to go there," McCarthy said on Wednesday, when asked how close House Republicans are to a plan.

Congress must pass a government funding measure before the end of the month to avoid a shutdown. House Republicans have proposed legislation to extend government funding through the end of next month, in addition to border security measures.

Senate leadership is seeking to include aid for Ukraine in any government funding measure. However, McCarthy and other Republican lawmakers have proposed addressing the issues separately.

McCarthy has expressed a desire to pass a short-term government funding measure in order to give lawmakers more time to pass standard appropriations bills. The House of Representatives will consider a rule for a Defense Department appropriations bill on Thursday, McCarthy said.

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US Government Appoints Lead Inspector General for Ukraine Aid Oversight - Statement

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - The US government has appointed a lead inspector general for oversight of aid to Ukraine, a group of Senate Republicans said in a statement.

The Biden administration appointed Defense Department Inspector General Robert Storch to the role, the statement said on Wednesday.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, Foreign Relations Committee ranking member Jim Risch, Armed Services Committee ranking member Roger Wicker and Appropriations Committee vice chair Susan Collins joined in the statement.

"The appointment of a lead inspector general, which I have advocated for, will enhance the important transparency and accountability work they are doing and ensure no resources are

wasted," Risch said in the statement.

The appointment of a lead inspector general will help coordinate oversight and increase transparency into Ukraine aid, Collins said. Congress has appropriated nearly \$50 million towards oversight of Ukraine aid, Collins added.

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Saudis Have Good Relations, Critical Trade With Russia and Ukraine - Crown Prince

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - Saudi Arabia has good relations with Russia and Ukraine, and Riyadh has taken a few steps to attempt to resolve the conflict between them, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in a Fox News interview.

"In Saudi Arabia, we have a good relation with Russia and also we have good relations with Ukraine," Salman said in the interview aired on Wednesday. "We have amazing and critical trade with Ukraine and Russia."

Saudi Arabia does its best to push for steps to resolve this problem between Russia and Ukraine, Salman added.

In early August, Saudi Arabia hosted a peace conference to discuss with other countries the prospects of peace in Ukraine. Russia did not attend the conference.

The countries of the collective West have imposed comprehensive sanctions on Russia over its special military operation in Ukraine and provided Kiev with more than \$150 billion in weapons, financial and other aid. Russia has repeatedly said the provision of weapons and munitions to Ukraine only serves to prolong the conflict.

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Grossi Says Will Discuss IAEA Inspectors Ban by Iran Atomic Energy Organization Next Week

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - The decision by the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran to withdraw International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors will be discussed next week in Vienna, IAEA Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi told Sputnik.

"I am going to be discussing this next week. We have the General Conference of the IAEA like the general assembly here in New York, but in Vienna, and I will have the opportunity to meet with the president of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, and we will be discussing just this. I think this is a measure that should be redressed, and this inspector should be made available for us to do our job," Grossi said when asked what steps he would take to revert the situation.

Grossi said that he does not know how he can give the world assurances that everything is okay if the IAEA is deprived of the instrument allowing it to do so, further adding that he hopes for Iran to backtrack and continue its cooperation with the organization.

On Saturday, the IAEA said Tehran had decided to withdraw the designation of some of the

agency's most experienced inspectors involved in verification activities under a safeguards agreement of the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. The IAEA condemned the move, while Tehran said it was allowed under the agreement.

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Schumer Says US Govt. Shutdown, Lack of Funding for Ukraine Would Devastate Kiev - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - A US government shutdown or a failure by Congress to include Ukraine aid in a funding measure would quickly devastate the country and its ability to fight with Russia, US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer reportedly said.

A shutdown or lack of new Ukraine aid would be "very quick and devastating," Schumer said on Wednesday, according to The Messenger.

Ukraine runs a strong risk of defeat without more aid, Schumer added.

Lawmakers are currently attempting to fund the US government before the end of the month to avoid a shutdown. Senate leadership has expressed a desire to include Ukraine aid in a government funding measure, while House Republicans have opposed the idea.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is set to meet with lawmakers on Thursday to discuss the importance of continuing US support for Ukraine.

Schumer's statement came following a classified, all-Senators briefing on Ukraine by US officials including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Mark Milley.

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IAEA Chief Gives Lavrov Evaluation on Situation at ZNPP, Says Engagement 'Indispensable'

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - Continued engagement on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) is indispensable, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director Rafael Grossi told Sputnik when asked about his discussion with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

"I gave him my evaluation of how we see the situation. Of course, engagement is indispensable. We must continue working there, and I think that it's a day-to-day effort. We can never say that the security or the safety of the facilities is assured for as long as the conflict goes on. So these kind of regular, I would say direct meetings are indispensable," Grossi said.

The IAEA chief met with a Russian delegation to discuss the situation at the ZNPP on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

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IAEA May Return to ZNPP by Year End, Moment to Be Determined by Circumstances - Grossi

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is considering the possibility of returning to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (ZNPP) by year end, but the exact moment depends on circumstances, Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi told Sputnik

"We are following the situation at the nuclear power plant constantly, which means that our evaluations can change and must be adapted to what we see on the ground, and what we see on the ground is increased military activity. What we see on the ground is not a relaxation of the situation, so we are considering the possibility of returning there, but the exact moment will depend on the concrete circumstances," Grossi said on Wednesday when asked if a visit by year end was possible.

The IAEA chief met with the Russian delegation to discuss the situation at the ZNPP on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly.

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Saudi Crown Prince Says BRICS Not Group Against West, Welcomes Invitation to Join

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in a Fox News interview that BRICS is not a bloc formed against the United States and other Western nations and he welcomed the invitation for Saudi Arabia to join the group.

"No BRICS is not about political alignments ... if we continue for one decade without being part of group inside the G20, that could really create obstacles for us economically," Salman said in the interview aired on Wednesday. "So, BRICS has options, they invite us and we welcome that, and BRICS is not a group against America or the West."

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US Senator Paul Says Will Oppose Expedited Passage of Any Funding Measure With Ukraine Aid

(Updates with more details in paras 6-9)

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - US Senator Rand Paul said in a statement that he will oppose the expedited passage of any government funding measure that includes further aid for Ukraine, as Congress works to secure funding and avoid a shutdown before the end of the

month.

"Today, I'm putting congressional leadership and [US President Joe Biden] on notice that I will oppose any effort to hold the federal government hostage for Ukraine funding. I will not consent to expedited passage of any spending measure that provides any more US aid to Ukraine," Paul said on Wednesday.

Last month, Biden sent a request to Congress for \$24 billion in further assistance to Ukraine. The request comes as Congress attempts to secure funding for the US government before the end of the month.

US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has said that he wants lawmakers to consider any Ukraine aid separately from a government funding measure. However, the Senate is poised to attempt to include it in their funding plan.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is set to meet with lawmakers, including McCarthy, on Thursday to make the case for further support of the country amid its conflict with Russia.

It appears as though the conflict in Ukraine will be another "endless quagmire" funded by US taxpayers, Paul said in an op-ed for The American Conservative. The longer the conflict continues, the greater the risk that miscalculation or intentional escalation draws the United States into direct conflict with Russia, Paul said.

Moreover, Ukraine suffers from corruption, including since the beginning of its conflict with Russia, Paul said.

"Some say it's [the conflict] to save democracy. They should be honest with themselves and the rest of us. Ukraine is far from a shining example of democracy," Paul said.

The oath of office taken by every lawmaker requires them to place the interests of US citizens first, Paul said. The senator encouraged his fellow members of Congress to follow his lead and oppose efforts to "hold the federal government hostage" for Ukraine aid.

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Prince Albert II Tells UNGA World Can Not Ignore Potential Dangers of 'Digital Tools'

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - Prince Albert II of Monaco said in a speech at the UN General Assembly that the world cannot ignore the potential dangers from the use of "digital tools" despite the fascination from how they simplify people's lives.

"We are, of course, fascinated by the advantages provided by digital tools that simplify our daily life, but we cannot ignore the potential dangers," Prince Albert II said on Wednesday.

The prince said people have a shared duty to act and mitigate the potential dangers and called for establishing an AI global governance framework as well as developing ethical guidelines for using AI.

In addition, the prince expressed support for the ongoing initiatives aimed at forming a high-level advisory body within the United Nations to address global AI governance.

"This requires common efforts and courage in the solid multilateral system which is faithful to the values and principles in charge of the United Nations," he said.

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Hunter Biden Initial Appearance on Gun Charge Rescheduled to October 3 - US Court Order

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - The initial court appearance and arraignment for Hunter Biden on a firearms charge is rescheduled to October 3, according to a court order from US Magistrate Judge Christopher Burke.

"The Court... hereby orders that the Initial Appearance and Arraignment will be continued until October 3, 2023 at 10:00 a.m. in Courtroom 2A," the order, filed Wednesday, said.

Earlier in the day, the court denied a request by Biden to appear via video conference and initially scheduled the first proceedings for later this month.

Last week, the court released a three-count indictment against Biden for firearm-related charges, for which he faces up to 25 years in prison if convicted. The indictment alleges that Biden lied on a firearm background check form about his use of illegal drugs.

The charges come following the collapse of a pretrial diversion agreement and plea deal that would have resolved the firearms charges, as well as misdemeanor tax charges.

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White House on Reports Iran Slowing Uranium Enrichment Says 'That's A Good Thing'

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said that it would be a "good thing" for everybody if Iran has actually decided to slow down its uranium enrichment program as media reports suggest.

"If reports are true, and they [Iranians] have slowed down their spending of centrifuges, that's a good thing for everybody," Kirby said during a press briefing Wednesday.

According to media reports, starting in the summer Iran significantly slowed down the rate at which it enriches uranium to 60% purity or from 9kg to 3kg per month. Additionally, Iran has reportedly diluted some of its 60%-enriched uranium stockpiles to a lower level.

In 2015, Iran signed a nuclear agreement with the United States, China, Russia, France, the United Kingdom, Germany and the European Union. The agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) stipulated lifting sanctions imposed on Iran in exchange for restricting the country's nuclear program.

However, President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the agreement in 2018, reimposing comprehensive sanctions on Iran. Tehran reacted by reducing its obligations under the agreement, including those concerning nuclear research, centrifuges, and uranium enrichment levels.

In December 2021, talks on the resumption of the JCPOA were resumed, but a year later progress on the agreement became largely frozen.

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NSC Spokesperson Kirby Says No Such Thing as US 'Blank Check' for Ukraine Exists

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) - National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby told reporters that there is no such thing as a "blank check" for Ukraine given that all US assistance for Kiev is done in consultation with Congress.

"There is no such thing as a blank check for Ukraine because every single thing that we're providing to Ukraine is done in full consultation with members of Congress," Kirby said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the day, US Senator Rand Paul said that he would oppose the expedited passage of any government funding measure that includes further aid for Ukraine, as Congress works to secure funding and avoid a shutdown before the end of the month.

Last month, President Joe Biden sent a request to Congress for \$24 billion in further assistance to Ukraine. The request comes as Congress attempts to secure funding for the US government before the end of the month.

US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has said that he wants lawmakers to consider any Ukraine aid separately from a government funding measure. However, the Senate is poised to attempt to include it in its funding plan.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is set to meet with US lawmakers, including McCarthy, on Thursday to make the case for further US support for Ukraine amid the conflict with Russia.

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European Council Chief Calls on China to Convince Russia to End Operation in Ukraine

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - European Council President Charles Michel during a UN Security Council meeting called on China to join Western nations in persuading Russia to end its special military operation in Ukraine.

"I'd like to particularly speak to the esteemed Chinese representative - you have warned Russia against the use of nuclear weapons and we welcome this, and now we are asking you let's go further, let's join forces to persuade Russia to end this criminal war that is hurting so many, let's join forces to convince Russia to respect the principles of the UN Charter," Michel said on Wednesday.

Earlier in the meeting, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told the UN Security Council that Western countries lack arguments for a substantive, fact-based conversation on the conflict in Ukraine and therefore avoid it altogether.

The rhetoric of Russia's Western opponents is full of slogans and big words, such as invasion, aggression and annexation, the top Russian diplomat added.

Western countries have imposed sweeping sanctions on Russia over its military operation in Ukraine, providing Ukraine with more than \$150 billion in arms and financial aid. Moscow has repeatedly said that it is open to peace negotiations as long as Kiev recognizes the territorial gains made by Russian forces since February 2022.

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UPDATE - Fed Keeps US Rates Unchanged; Warns of Hike By Year-End And "Whenever Appropriate"

(Changes headline and lede; adds comments, context and details in paragraphs 1-18)

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve on Wednesday left US interest rates unchanged for September but said it will raise them when necessary, including before the year-end, to try and bring inflation back to its desired target of 2% per annum from current levels of above 3%.

"We are prepared to raise rates further, if appropriate," Fed Chairman Jerome Powell told a news conference after announcing the central bank's latest decision on rates. "The fact that we decided to maintain the policy rate at this meeting doesn't mean we have decided that we have or have not at this time reached that stance of monetary policy that we are seeking."

The Fed had raised interest rates 11 times between February 2022 and July 2023, adding a total of 5.25 percentage points to a prior base rate of just 0.25%.

"The Committee seeks to achieve maximum employment and inflation at the rate of 2 percent over the longer run," the US central bank said in a policy statement after a meeting of its Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC.

Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, rose a second month in a row due to high fuel prices for a year-on-year growth of 3.7%, placing renewed pressure on inflation fighters at the Fed.

The CPI hit 40-year highs of more than 9% in June 2022 before falling to as low as 3.0% by June this year. Since then, it has been on the rise, adding a rounded-up 0.7% over the past two months, as high global oil prices bumped up fuel costs at home.

Economists warn the inflation in energy prices, and their impact on gasoline cost at US pumps, could push the Fed to be aggressive with policy just as the central bank seems intent on allowing the interest rate increases it had levied over the past 18 months to work on lowering inflation.

Global oil prices, led by UK-based crude benchmark Brent, hit 10-month highs of above \$95 per barrel this week, rising from under \$72 in June, as energy traders responded to production cuts by major crude exporters Saudi Arabia and Russia.

Powell said the threat from energy-fueled inflation was real.

"The process of getting inflation sustainably down to 2%, has a long way to go," the Fed chair said. "What we decided to do was maintain a policy rate and await further data. We want to see convincing evidence, really, that we have reached the appropriate level. We have seen progress [in fighting inflation] and we welcome that. But we need to see more progress before we will be

willing to reach that conclusion.”

Aside from its policy statement for November, the Fed also released a closely-watched Summary of Economic Projections, where it is seen as projecting interest rates to close the year at a high of 5.6%.

If true, that would leave the door open for the central bank to add as much as a full percentage point to the current peak interest rate level of 5.5%. The Fed has two more policy meetings left for the year — in November and December — to carry out its projections.

Some economists worry that the Fed, in its razor focus on inflation, could end up pushing the economy into a recession.

Powell tried to allay those concerns on Wednesday by assuring that the Fed was aiming for a “soft-landing” instead for the economy, where the risks of a slowdown was minimal versus the gains against inflation.

“We will continue to make our decisions meeting by meeting based on the totality of the incoming data and the applications for economic outcome and inflation as well as the balance of risks,” he said. “Given how far we have come, we are in a position to proceed carefully as we assess the incoming data and the evolving outlook and risks. Real interest rates now are well above mainstream estimates of the neutral policy rate, but we are mindful of the inherent uncertainties in precisely gauging the stance of policy.”

The US economy, measured by its Gross Domestic Product, or GDP, grew 2.1% for all of 2022, slowing from a 5.9% expansion in the previous year, as exports and consumer spending declined.

So far for 2023, GDP has expanded by an annual rate of 2.1% in the second quarter, versus an earlier estimate of 2.4%.

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UN Should Do More to Promote Palestine-Israel Peace, Not Doing Enough - Foreign Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki told Sputnik on Wednesday that the United Nations should do more to promote peace between Palestine and Israel, but at the moment it does not do enough.

"They should do more, they have to do more, unfortunately they're not doing enough," Maliki said regarding the United Nation's role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, September 21 (Sputnik) -

NAGORNO-KARABAKH

- * Russian President Vladimir Putin and Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan discussed over the telephone the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and Moscow-Yerevan relations, the Armenian government's press office said on Wednesday.
- * Putin welcomed the agreement to end hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Kremlin said.
- * Azerbaijan has achieved all its goals during the 24 hours of "anti-terrorist measures" in Nagorno-Karabakh, President Ilham Aliyev said.
- * The position of the Armenian leadership on the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh gives hope for reaching a peace agreement between Yerevan and Baku, Aliyev said.
- * Russian peacekeepers have evacuated 3,154 people, including 1,428 children since start of hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, the Defense Ministry said.

UN HIGH-LEVEL MEETINGS

- * Risks of a global conflict are on the rise, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on Ukraine on Wednesday.
- * Russian envoy to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia asked UN Security Council president why he proposed giving the floor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.
- * Azerbaijani Foreign Minister Jeyhun Bayramov told Sputnik he will personally participate in a UN Security Council meeting on Nagorno-Karabakh on September 21.
- * The parties involved in the Ukrainian conflict should exercise restraint and not escalate tensions, Chinese Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Ma Zhaoxu said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- * There has been no change in the United States' position to refrain from sending long-range ATACMS missiles to Ukraine, a Pentagon official told Sputnik on Wednesday.
- * Hungary advocates for direct peace talks between those involved in the Ukraine conflict, and they should be launched as soon as possible, Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told Sputnik.
- * Ukraine has lost up to 175 soldiers in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
- * US President Joe Biden will affirm the lasting nature of the United States' support for Ukraine in the upcoming meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said.

BIDEN-NETANYAHU MEETING

- * Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Wednesday that he believes Israel and Saudi Arabia can forge a "historic peace" under US President Biden's leadership.
- * Biden invited Netanyahu to Washington before the end of this year to continue their trend of direct collaboration, the White House said.

GRAIN TRADE

- * Ukrainian Ambassador to Poland Vasyl Zvarych explained to Warsaw Kiev's position on the unacceptability of Poland's unilateral ban on the import of Ukrainian grain, Ukrainian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Oleg Nikolenko said on Wednesday.
- * Russia and Turkey are maintaining the necessary contacts on technical issues regarding the

supply of 1 million tonnes of grain, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko said.

RUSSIA-CHINA TALKS

* Russia and China share the position on the creation of a multipolar world, this was confirmed by the last visit of Chinese Leader Xi Jinping to Russia, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Wednesday.

* China is ready to continue to strengthen business cooperation with Russia, coordination in the world, and protect common interests, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said.

* Wang Yi informed Putin on his talks with Russian Security Council Secretary Nikolai Patrushev and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

* Putin said that he accepted the invitation of Chinese President Xi Jinping to visit the Asian country in October as part of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.

US FEDERAL RESERVE

* The Federal Reserve said on Wednesday it was leaving interest rates unchanged for September although it still planned a hike before the end of the year in a bid to bring inflation back to its long-desired target of 2% per year from current levels of above 3%.

* Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said that the process of getting US inflation down to 2% has a long way to go.

* The US Federal Reserve is prepared to raise interest rates further if appropriate, Powell said.

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Palestine's Top Diplomat Says Saudis Cannot Help Revive Israeli-Palestinian Peace Talks

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Saudi Arabia cannot do anything that will help revive peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki told Sputnik.

"I don't see how such Saudi dimension could contribute to the revival of talks between Israel and Palestine," Maliki said on the margins of the UN General Assembly. "The Saudis are not really brokers."

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Palestinian Foreign Minister Says Plans to Visit Moscow to Meet Lavrov After UNGA

UNITED NATIONS, September 21 (Sputnik) - Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki told Sputnik on Wednesday that he still intends to visit Moscow to meet with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov after their planned meeting was postponed until after the United Nations General Assembly.

"There is a pending visit by me to Moscow to meet with Lavrov. We scheduled that last month but for changes in the schedule of Lavrov we decided to postpone it until after the General Assembly," Maliki said.

He also said he hopes to see Lavrov at the UN General Assembly before the Palestinian delegation leaves New York on Thursday.

"Usually we do meet every year, but until this moment it's not really scheduled. I hope it will happen before we leave," he said.

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Sandu Says Moldova Bid for EU Membership Way to Protect Peace, Goes Beyond Politics

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Moldovan President Maia Sandu said on Wednesday that her country's quest for European Union membership serves as a fundamental safeguard for liberty, peace and democracy, extending beyond political considerations.

"Moldova's EU membership is not just a political choice. It is the only way to protect our liberty, peace and democracy," Sandu said in her speech at the UN General Assembly.

Sandu emphasized the importance of a fair and diligent approach to EU membership, urging the European Commission and the bloc's member states to provide support given Moldova's commitment.

The Moldovan president extended her plea for support beyond the EU borders, especially encouraging countries with strong democratic foundations to rally behind Moldova's membership bid.

"[Countries] who have long reaped its benefits and understand its worth," Sandu said.

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Palestinian Foreign Minister Says Abbas Will Visit Russia This Year, Cannot Reveal Date

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki told Sputnik that President Mahmoud Abbas will visit Russia this year but cannot reveal details about the trip.

"There's a pending visit [of] my president to the Russian Federation soon," Maliki said on the margins of the UN General Assembly.

Maliki said the visit will take place this year but could not disclose the exact date of the trip.

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Palestine Regrets Quartet on Hold As Members Prevent Russia's Participation - Maliki

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Palestine regrets that the Middle East Quartet is no longer active because its member countries do not want Russia to participate in the peace process, Palestinian Foreign Minister Riyad al Maliki told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"Everybody knows why the Quartet is not meeting because the other elements that compose the Quartet, they don't want Russia to take any part, so this is really unfortunate for the time being," Maliki said on the margins of the UN General Assembly. "I hope one day we'll be able to revive the Quartet.

Maliki said that without the Middle East Quartet — which comprises the UN, US, EU and Russia — the Israeli-Palestinian peace process is not moving anywhere.

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Kirby Says Cannot Explain Timing of Senate Military Confirmations, Calls Action 'Good'

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Wednesday that he is unable to explain the timing of the Senate's decision to confirm three US military nominees, although he is supportive of the action.

"I can't even begin to answer that question," Kirby said during a press briefing, when asked about the delay in Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer's decision to file cloture on the nomination. "It's esoterically just good that the Senate is going to move forward and confirm these three officers."

However, the three confirmations do not solve the "larger problem" of holds by US Senator Tommy Tuberville on military nominees, Kirby added. Tuberville has placed holds on military confirmations using unanimous consent processes for months, although Schumer has always been able to bring nominees to the floor through regular procedure, which takes more time.

Tuberville placed the hold on batching confirmations in response to Defense Department policies allowing reimbursements for servicemembers who receive abortions.

"Democrats are taking the same action they could've taken months ago," Tuberville said in a statement.

Schumer filed cloture on the confirmations of Gen. Charles Brown as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Eric Smith as Commandant of the Marine Corps and Gen. Randy George as Chief of Staff of the Army.

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Hunter Biden Initial Court Appearance Set for September 26 - Filing

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's son, Hunter, is set to make an initial court appearance for firearms charges on September 26, according to a court document filed on Wednesday.

"An initial appearance and arraignment in this matter is scheduled for September 26, 2023 at 10:00 a.m. in Courtroom 2A," the filing said.

The filing also denied a motion by Hunter Biden to appear by video conference.

The filing was signed by US Magistrate Judge Christopher Burke of the US District Court of the District of Delaware.

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Saudi Arabia Will Have to Get a Nuclear Bomb If Iran Obtains One - Crown Prince

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - Saudi Arabia will have to obtain a nuclear weapon if Iran is able to develop one, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman said in an interview on Wednesday.

"If they get one, we have to get one," Salman told Fox News regarding Iran potentially developing a nuclear bomb.

Salman also said that day by day, Israel and Saudi Arabia are getting close to normalizing relations.

Saudi Arabia recently suspended the US-brokered efforts to normalize relations with Israel because Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is unwilling to make concessions to the Palestinians.

Salman emphasized that the Palestinian issue is very important for normalizing relations with Israel.

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US Senator Fetterman Says Will Wear Suit if House Republicans Fund Government, Aid Ukraine

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - US Senator John Fetterman said on Wednesday that he will wear a suit on the Senate floor if the House of Representatives funds the government and provides aid to Ukraine.

Earlier this month, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer changed the chamber's dress code to allow Fetterman to wear casual clothing, such as shorts.

"If those jagoffs in the House stop trying to shut our government down, and fully support Ukraine, then I will save democracy by wearing a suit on the Senate floor next week," Fetterman said in a statement via Twitter.

Congress is currently attempting to fund the US government before the month to avoid a

shutdown. House Republicans have proposed a short-term funding measure that does not include aid for Ukraine, while the Senate is expected to include funding for Ukraine in any measure to fund the US government.

Lawmakers are scheduled to meet on Thursday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who will attempt to secure support for further aid from Congress.

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US Has Very Strong Commercial Relations With China, Hopes to Continue Them - State. Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) The United States' commercial relations with China are very strong and Washington hopes to continue them in the future, US Under Secretary of State for Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment Jose Fernandez said on Wednesday.

"We have very strong commercial relations with the PRC [People's Republic of China]. It is one of our major trading partners," Fernandez said.

The United States is looking to continue its commercial partnership with China but it is also targeting some areas where it would like to diversify supply chains, he said.

"We are aligning our goals with our partners and allies around the world," Fernandez said.

Fernandez urged countries, including China, to diversify supply chains and said those dependent on one or two suppliers put their security at significant risk.

China's General Administration of Customs said earlier in September that trade between the two countries decreased by 14.5% year-on-year to \$438.1 billion in the period between January and August.

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White House Tells Japan Envoy Emanuel to Stop Insulting Xi on Social Media - Reports

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The White House has warned US Ambassador to Tokyo Rahm Emanuel to stop taunting Chinese President Xi Jinping with his insults on social media, US media reports said on Wednesday.

National Security Council officials informed members of Emanuel's staff recently that the ambassador's public insults about Xi threatened administration efforts to improve relations with Beijing and possibly destroy efforts to set up a meeting between Biden and Xi in the next couple of months, NBC News reported, citing three unnamed US officials.

Over the past two weeks Emanuel, a former congressman who served as White House chief of staff to President Barack Obama and then as mayor of Chicago, has sarcastically criticized Xi directly on Twitter.

However, Emanuel's tweets were not in keeping with the message coming out of the White House, one Biden official told NBC News.

Speaking to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on Tuesday, Biden said he was ready to work with China on a number of unspecified issues.

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Biden to Affirm Lasting Nature of US Support for Ukraine in Meeting With Zelenskyy - Kirby

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden will affirm the lasting nature of the United States' support for Ukraine in the upcoming meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, National Security Council Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Wednesday.

"[Ukrainians] are going to continue to need all the support that they can get to keep that advance going, and that's what the president is looking forward to in this meeting, is getting a battlefield perspective directly from Ukraine's commander in chief, but also making it clear to President Zelenskyy that we're going to continue to be with them for as long as it takes," Kirby said during a press briefing.

Biden is set to meet with Zelenskyy on Thursday afternoon, after the Ukrainian president meets with US lawmakers and Defense Department officials, Kirby added.

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ATACMS for Ukraine Not Off Table, No Decision Has Been Made - White House

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Wednesday that long-range Army Tactical Missile Systems (ATACMS) are not off the table for Ukraine, but at the moment no decision has been made to supply Kiev with the weapons.

"ATACMS are not off the table," Kirby said during a press briefing. "We continue to have discussions here in the inner agency about that particular weapon system, but no decision has been made."

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US Works With Congress To Authorize \$50 Bln Funding For IMF, World Bank – State. Dept.

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) –The Biden administration is working with Congress on authorizing almost \$50 billion to support the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank lending programs for poor countries, Assistant Secretary of State Ramin Toloui said on

Wednesday.

"Together, our IMF and World Bank proposals generate nearly \$50 billion in lending for middle-income and poor countries," Toloui told reporters.

He explained that the government is working with Congress to unlock \$25 billion in new World Bank lending capacity. Those funds should help borrowers to help address the challenges they face.

Speaking about the IMF, Toloui noted that the US is working to lend up to \$21 billion for its funds to support the most vulnerable countries.

The US anticipates that with the support of partners and allies, it could mobilize over \$200 billion for middle and low-income states, Toloui added.

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Honduran President Demands Cuba Be Removed From State Sponsor of Terrorism List

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Honduran President Xiomara Castro demanded on Wednesday at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) that Cuba be removed from the US State Sponsor of Terrorism (SST) list.

"We condemn the long blockade against Cuba and against Venezuela. Therefore, we demand the removal of Cuba from the list of countries considered to be a terrorist as it is a fake, manipulated, and capricious measure," Castro said at the UNGA.

The president further added that the UNGA has also for many years asked for ending the outdated blockade on Cuba, one that condemns Cubans to hardships. Castro also demanded the removal of sanctions on Nicaragua and Venezuela

Castro added that the world cannot be called "civilized" for as long as countries live under the threat of being embargoed and of seeing their financial assets frozen and confiscated in foreign banks.

In January 2021, the Administration of former US President Donald Trump designated Cuba as a State Sponsor of Terrorism for having allegedly provided on several occasions support for acts of "international terrorism", and for being a safe heaven for terrorists.

The US had decided to add once more Cuba to the list over its supposed failure to live up to its commitments to stop financing terrorism made in 2015, which allowed for its removal.

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Korean President Calls for International Organization on Digital Ethics at UNGA

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, during the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on Wednesday, proposed the establishment of an international organization under the UN to address digital ethics, warning that failure to combat

the spread of fake news driven by AI and digital technologies poses a threat to freedom.

"I have also proposed the establishment of an international organisation under the UN to discuss and set forth rules regarding digital ethics. If we fail to curb the spread of fake news, resulting from the misuse of AI and digital technologies our freedom will be at risk," Yoon Suk Yeol said.

During his address at the UNGA, he focused on the pressing need to tackle the challenges posed by the misuse of AI and digital technologies.

"Korea plans to introduce a digital Bill of Rights," Yoon Suk Yeol said, underlining the country's commitment to advancing digital ethics.

He also expressed Korea's readiness to collaborate with the high-level advisory body on AI that is currently being established by the UN.

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Latvian President Warns War in Ukraine to Shape Global Security

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Latvian President Edgars Rinkevics at the UN General Assembly said the end result of the conflict in Ukraine will define world security in coming years and called for international unity.

"The outcome of this war will determine global security for the years to come," Rinkevics said.

He stressed the importance of international unity, underlining the necessity for a unified stance against Russia's violation of international principles and norms.

Furthermore, Rinkevics said restoration of international peace can only be discussed once Russian forces withdraw from Ukraine.

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US Economy Could Have Soft Landing Though There Are Factors Outside Fed's Control - Powell

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Wednesday that the US economy could have a soft landing, but there are factors outside of its control.

"Ultimately this may be decided by factors that are outside of our control at the end of the day, but I do think it's possible," Powell said during a press conference.

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Fed Prepared to Raise Rates Further if Appropriate - Powell

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The US Federal Reserve is prepared to raise interest rates further if appropriate, Chairman Jerome Powell said on Wednesday.

"We are prepared to raise rates further if appropriate, and we intend to hold policy at a restrictive level until we are confident that inflation is moving down sustainably toward our objective," Powell said during a press conference.

The Federal Reserve, according to Powell, decided to maintain the policy rate at this meeting, but it doesn't mean it has determined a stance of monetary policy that they are seeking.

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Powell Says Process of Getting US Inflation Down to 2% Has Long Way to Go

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said on Wednesday that the process of getting US inflation down to 2% has a long way to go.

"The process of getting inflation sustainably down to 2% has a long way to go," Powell said during a press conference.

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US Attorney General Says Meeting With Ukrainian Prosecutor General Kostin This Week

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - US Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Wednesday that he will meet with Ukrainian Prosecutor General Andriy Kostin this week to discuss cooperation on alleged war crimes committed by Russia.

"I have traveled to Ukraine twice to meet with the Prosecutor General there and I'm going to meet with him again this week, here," Garland said during a US House Judiciary Committee hearing.

Garland explained that the goal is to help investigate war crimes over which the United States has jurisdiction, which will help the Prosecutor General in Ukraine investigate those prosecutions.

In July, US media reported that the United States is providing evidence of alleged Russian war crimes in Ukraine to the International Criminal Court (ICC) despite concerns from the Defense Department. The Defense Department has expressed concerns that helping the ICC to prosecute Russians could set a standard for the entity to have jurisdiction over US troops.

Neither the United States nor Russia are parties to the Rome Statute, which established the ICC.

The move to share US information with the ICC was reportedly backed by the Justice Department and State Department.

In March, the ICC issued an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin for allegedly removing children from conflict zones in Ukraine. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has characterized the ICC as a puppet institution of the Western countries and denied the legitimacy of the charges.

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Parties to Ukraine Conflict Must Use Restraint - Chinese Foreign Affairs Vice Minister

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - The parties involved in the Ukrainian conflict should exercise restraint and not escalate tensions, Chinese Foreign Affairs Vice Minister Ma Zhaoxu said on Wednesday.

"All parties should exercise restraint and not increase or escalate tension, refrain from taking any initiatives that lead to a steady escalation of the situation, and work to create the necessary conditions for a political settlement," Ma said at the UN Security Council meeting on peace and security in Ukraine.

Ma added that the Ukrainian crisis has dealt a blow to the economic recovery and development around the world, noting that the food, energy and financial security of developing states has been strained.

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Federal Reserve Keeps US Rates Unchanged in September But Sees Hike Before Year-End

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The Federal Reserve said on Wednesday it was leaving interest rates unchanged for September although it still planned a hike before the end of the year in a bid to bring inflation back to its long-desired target of 2% per annum from current levels of above 3%.

"The Committee seeks to achieve maximum employment and inflation at the rate of 2 percent over the longer run," the US central bank said after a meeting of its Federal Open Market Committee, or FOMC. "In support of these goals, the Committee decided to maintain the target range for the federal funds rate at 5-1/4 to 5-1/2 percent."

The Fed had raised interest rates 11 times between February 2022 and July 2023, adding a total of 5.25 percentage points to a prior base rate of just 0.25%.

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US Lawmaker Questions Effectiveness of Law Barring Funds for Ukraine's Azov Battalion

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Paul Gosar, in a letter obtained exclusively by Sputnik on Wednesday, is questioning the effectiveness of a US law prohibiting funds for Ukraine's Azov Battalion (recognized as a terrorist organization and banned in Russia).

"Congress was correct to incorporate Section 8138 into the FY 2023 Consolidated Appropriations Act, prohibiting funds made available from the legislation from going to the reprehensible neo-Nazi militant organization. Despite this, I question the effectiveness of Section 8138," Gosar said in the letter to Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

Gosar stressed that he is concerned the Azov unit has been incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine. US arms, weapons, intelligence, and training, are going to Azov militia, which is patently illegal, he added.

The Republican congressman said it is immoral and illegal for the United States to send money to a Nazi regime.

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Lawmaker Asks Blinken, Austin for Info on Aid That May Have Reached Azov Militias - Letter

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Paul Gosar, in a letter obtained exclusively by Sputnik on Wednesday, is asking Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to provide any information concerning US assistance that may have gone to Azov militias in Ukraine.

"How much US aid has been delivered to Azov militias, through the Ukraine National Guard or the Armed Forces of Ukraine?" Gosar said in the letter.

Gosar emphasized that the Azov Battalion is an Ukrainian neo-Nazi militant organization and said he is concerned the unit has been incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine. US weapons, intelligence and training are going to the Azov militia, which is patently illegal, he added.

The Republican congressman from Arizona said it is immoral and illegal for the United States to send money to a Nazi regime.

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Finnish President Urges Preventing Ukraine War From Turning Into Protracted Conflict

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Finnish President Sauli Niinisto said on Wednesday that it is very important to act and prevent the conflict in Ukraine from turning into a

protracted one.

"The war in Ukraine must not become one of the many protracted conflicts we see around the world today," Niinisto said during his speech at the UN General Assembly.

The Finnish president emphasized that the efforts toward establishing a lasting peace cannot be Ukraine's efforts alone and called for comprehensive international participation to effectively address the crisis.

Bringing the war to a just end is essential for the Ukrainians, but such an achievement may also help to lower tensions on a wider scale, Niisto said.

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Biden Invites Netanyahu to Washington Before Year End for Talks - White House

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - During a meeting in New York, US President Joe Biden invited Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to Washington before the end of this year to continue their trend of direct collaboration, the White House said on Wednesday.

"President Biden invited Prime Minister Netanyahu to Washington, DC before the end of the year to continue direct collaboration on this broad range of issues," said the White House in a release.

In conjunction with their respective teams, both Biden and Netanyahu also agreed to consult with regional partners, with an eye toward meeting soon in an Aqaba/Sharm format, the release added.

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Transfer of Weapons Between Russia, DPRK Would Violate UNSC Resolutions – Blinken

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) – The transfer of weapons between Russia and North Korea would be in violation of several resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council (UNSC), US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

Blinken delivered the remarks as he intervened in the UNSC Ministerial Meeting on Peace and Security in Ukraine.

"Of course, the transfer of arms between Moscow and Pyongyang would violate multiple resolutions of this Council. It's hard to imagine a country demonstrating more contempt for the United Nations and all that it stands for. This from a country with a permanent seat on this council," Blinken said.

Blinken's comments were made in relation to the recent visit of the North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to Russia at the invitation of President Vladimir Putin, where both countries said they would seek ways to enhance military cooperation, and Pyongyang pledged unconditional support to Moscow.

The alleged supply of Iranian military-grade drones to Russia for its use in the special military operations and who are said to be responsible for the death of several civilians, is also in violation of UNSC Resolutions, Blinken added.

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US Expected to Announce 'Significant' Aid Package During Zelenskyy Visit Thursday - Source

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is expected to announce a significant aid package for Ukraine during President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's visit to Washington on Thursday, a congressional source told Sputnik.

"I'm hearing Biden will announce a significant aid package tomorrow when he meets with Zelenskyy," the source said on Wednesday.

According to media reports, the Biden administration will announce a \$325 million military aid package for Ukraine that will include additional cluster munitions, 155mm artillery shells, Avenger air defense systems, stinger defense systems, Javelin anti-tank missiles and GMLRS rockets for the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) systems, among other items.

A White House National Security Council spokesperson declined Sputnik's request for comment on whether the long-range Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS) missiles will be included in the package.

However, a Defense Department official told Sputnik that no changes have been made with respect to the United States' position to refrain from supplying ATACMS to Kiev.

Media reported, citing officials, that the United States is not expected to approve ATACMS for Ukraine "anytime soon."

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White House Says Closely Coordinating with Canada on Indian State Murder Allegation

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The White House said Wednesday it is coordinating and consulting with Canada closely on the latter's accusation that Indian officials were involved in the killing of a Sikh separatist leader in British Columbia.

"Reports that we rebuffed Canada in any way on this are flatly false. We are coordinating and consulting with Canada closely on this issue. This is a serious matter and we support Canada's ongoing law enforcement efforts," White House National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson posted on Twitter. "We are also engaging the Indian government."

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced Monday that Canada was examining "credible allegations potentially linking" Indian officials to the June 18 shooting of Hardeep Singh Nijjar by two masked gunmen in the city of Surrey. The prominent separatist leader had campaigned for the creation of an independent Sikh homeland in India called Khalistan.

Media reported on Tuesday, citing Western officials, that Canada had called on allies to condemn India over the assassination but the requests were turned down.

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US Oil Stocks Drop as Exports Balloon Amid Saudi-Russian Cutbacks - Energy Agency EIA

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - US stockpiles of crude oil tumbled last week as exports surged, according to a government report on Wednesday that suggested the United States was filling some pockets of energy demand underserved by Russian and Saudi production cuts.

The U.S. crude inventory balance fell by 2.136 million barrels during the week ended September 15, according to the Weekly Petroleum Status Report of the U.S. Energy Information Administration, or EIA. Analysts polled by US media had expected a crude build of 250,000 barrels instead for last week to add to the 3.955M gain in the prior week to September 8.

“We had runaway exports of crude versus lower imports last week, that’s basically what it came down to,” said John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital and a regular commentator on the trends and statistics in oil. “Also, refiners seem to have started dialing back a little on runs with the end of the peak summer driving season.”

Exports of US crude hit a whopping 5.067 million barrels per day last week versus the prior week’s average of 3.09 million.

Imports averaged 6.5 million barrels daily last week, down 1.1 million barrels per day from the previous week.

Refineries ran at 91.9% of their operable capacity last week, against a previous rate of more than 93%.

Global flows of crude oil have dropped substantially as Saudi Arabia and Russia collaborate to jointly reduce some 1.3 million barrels of their daily production, citing weaker seasonal demand. This has allowed US oil companies to be more aggressive in marketing their crude in some markets, analysts said.

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Lockheed Martin CEO Says Patriot System Downed Hypersonic Missile Fired by Russia

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) – Lockheed Martin President and CEO James Taiclet said on Wednesday that the US company's Patriot air defense systems deployed in Ukraine were actually able to strike down a hypersonic missile fired by Russia.

“The Patriot missiles that have been deployed in Ukraine have actually shot down hypersonic weapons fired from Russia,” Taiclet said during a House Armed Services Committee hearing.

Lockheed Martin will face a “cat and mouse” game with Russian hypersonic weapons since the

more sophisticated the maneuvering and the final terminal stage of the missile gets, the tougher it is going to be to hit it, Taiclet added.

Moscow has repeatedly refuted Kiev's claims that Patriot systems in Ukraine were able to down the Kinzhal, a Russian hypersonic air-launched ballistic missile, and also stated that Kinzhal actually damaged one of the Patriot systems installed in Kiev in May.

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Ghana President Calls for Reparations on African Slavery in UNGA Speech

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Ghanaian President Nana Akufo-Addo said during a speech at the UN General Assembly (UNGA) on Wednesday that reparations should be paid by those who engaged in the transatlantic slave trade in Africa.

"Reparations must be paid for the slave trade," Akufo-Addo said.

The Ghanaian president's remarks were part of his discussion of the impact of the transatlantic slave trade and colonial exploitation on the development of Europe and the United States.

Akufo-Addo underscored the growing shift in global awareness on the issue, saying that the world had previously avoided confronting the full extent of the consequences of the slave trade.

"Granted, the current generations are not the ones that engaged in the slave trade, but that grand inhuman enterprise was state sponsored and deliberate and its benefits are clearly interwoven with the present day economic architecture, " Akufo-Addo said.

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US Launches Eight Microelectronic Innovation Centers With \$238Mln Award - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, Sept. 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration is setting up eight new regional innovation hubs at high tech institutions to boost microelectronics research, development and expand production within the United States, the Department of Defense announced in a press release on Wednesday.

"Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks announced the award today of \$238 million in 'Creating Helpful Incentives to Produce Semiconductors (CHIPS) and Science Act' funding for the establishment of eight Microelectronics Commons (Commons) regional innovation hubs," the release said.

The grant was the largest award to date under the CHIPS and Science Act, the Defense Department said.

"The Microelectronics Commons is focused on bridging and accelerating the lab-to-fab transition, that infamous valley of death between R&D and production. President Biden's CHIPS Act will supercharge America's ability to prototype, manufacture, and produce microelectronics scale. CHIPS and Science made clear to America - and the world - that the U.S. government is

committed to ensuring that our industrial and scientific powerhouses can deliver what we need to secure our future in this era of strategic competition, Hicks said in the release.

The eight receivers of the funding are: The Massachusetts Technology Collaborative (MassTech), The Applied Research Institute (ARI) in Indiana, the University of Southern California (USC), North Carolina State University (NCSU), Arizona State University, Midwest Microelectronics Consortium (MMEC) Hub in Ohio, The Research Foundation for the State University of New York (SUNY) and Leland Stanford State University in California, the Defense Department said.

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US on Pace to Be 'Very Competitive' in Hypersonic Strike Capability - Lockheed Martin CEO

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The United States is on pace to become very competitive in hypersonic strike capability, Lockheed Martin President and CEO James Taiclet said in a congressional testimony on Wednesday.

"The industry is investing in hypersonics. I've been to Courtland [Alabama] twice myself. We stood up a brand-new facility for that with the support of the government, and so I think we are on pace now to be very competitive in hypersonic strike," Taiclet told the US House Armed Services Committee.

Taiclet explained that one lesson learned from the last 20 years of hypersonic development is to avoid the previous "stopped starts" as well as the practice of funding and defunding hypersonic test capacity and test activities.

The first hypersonic system deployed will be a land vehicle system and Lockheed Martin hopes to have it operational by the end of 2023, Taiclet said.

In September, the US Army had to cancel the first hypersonic missile flight test after pre-flight checks were conducted, according to the Defense Department.

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Nebenzia Asks UN Security Council President for Reasons to Invite Zelenskyy to Speak

(Updates with more details in paras 3, 4)

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - Russian envoy to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia on Wednesday asked the UN Security Council president why he proposed giving the floor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

"We wish to ask you on what basis you propose to give the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the floor before members of the Security Council could speak, many of whom also are represented at the level of head of state and government," Nebenzia said at the UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine.

Nebenzia noted that the Albanian representative to the United Nations, who presides over the

UN Security Council during the month of September, prioritized Zelenskyy's speech over those of the heads of other states.

"This has nothing to do with the procedure for the Security Council," Nebenzia added.

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Complete Embargo on China Will Not Interrupt F-35 Production Line – Lockheed Martin CEO

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) – A complete embargo on Chinese goods will not interrupt the F-35 production line in the short term, Lockheed Martin President and CEO James Taiclet said on Wednesday.

"I can assure you the F-35 production line will not be interrupted in any near-term sense if there was a complete embargo of goods coming from China," Taiclet said during a House Armed Services Committee hearing.

The US military giant is now working to ensure that it does not have any vulnerabilities in the face of possible hostile actions from Chinese suppliers, Taiclet added.

Earlier in September, China imposed sanctions against the US-based Northrop Grumman and Lockheed Martin defense technology companies over arms supplies to Taiwan. The companies' leadership received an entry ban. Work and stay permits of all the companies' employees are being annulled. Besides, the enterprises have to pay fines, which are twice as large as the total sum of each company's deals with Taipei.

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US Senator Paul Says Will Oppose Expedited Passage of Any Funding Measure With Ukraine Aid

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - US Senator Rand Paul said on Wednesday that he will oppose the expedited passage of any government funding measure that includes further aid for Ukraine, as Congress works to secure funding and avoid a shutdown before the end of the month.

"Today I'm putting congressional leadership and [US President Joe Biden] on notice that I will oppose any effort to hold the federal government hostage for Ukraine funding. I will not consent to expedited passage of any spending measure that provides any more US aid to Ukraine," Paul said in a statement via social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter.

Last month, Biden sent a request to Congress for \$24 billion in further assistance to Ukraine. The request comes as Congress attempts to secure funding for the US government before the end of the month.

US House Speaker Kevin McCarthy has said that he wants lawmakers to consider any Ukraine aid separately from a government funding measure. However, the Senate is poised to attempt to

include it in their funding plan.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is set to meet with lawmakers, including McCarthy, on Thursday to make the case for further support of the country amid its conflict with Russia.

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UN Remains Engaged in Securing Grain, Fertilizer Exports From Russia, Ukraine - Guterres

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The United Nations remains engaged with all interested parties in the efforts to secure grain and fertilizer exports from Russia and Ukraine, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Wednesday.

"We remain engaged with all parties aiming to ensure safe and secure exports of grain and fertilizer from Russia and Ukraine," Guterres said during the UN General Assembly debate.

The UN chief emphasized the importance of putting the ongoing efforts on a stable footing without the repeated threat of interruption.

Guterres thanked Turkey for its contribution to resolve the issue and urged other member states to support the efforts to secure grain and fertilizer exports.

Volatility and uncertainty have already returned to international grain markets and a further escalation of the conflict in Ukraine could destabilize the region and further shock the markets, Guterres said.

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Nebenzia Asks UN Security Council President for Reasons to Invite Zelenskyy to Speak

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - Russian envoy to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia on Wednesday asked UN Security Council president why he proposed giving the floor to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

"We wish to ask you on what basis you propose to give the president of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, the floor before members of the Security Council speak, many of whom also are represented at the level of heads of state and government," Nebenzia said at the UN Security Council meeting on Ukraine.

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Guterres Urges All Countries to Prevent Further Escalation In Ukraine

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) – UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged the international community on Wednesday to prevent further escalation in Ukraine.

“I urge all countries to do their part to prevent further escalation, and to lay the foundations for sustainable peace,” Guterres said at the UN Security Council debate.

The United Nations continues to work towards a just and lasting peace in Ukraine in line with the Charter, international law, and the resolutions of the General Assembly, he added.

“There is no alternative to dialogue, diplomacy, and a just peace,” Guterres said.

He also reiterated the UN commitment to the sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity of Ukraine within its internationally recognized borders.

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US Calls for Ending Hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh, Renewing Respectful Dialogue - USAID

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The United States calls for an immediate end to hostilities in Nagorno-Karabakh and for the resumption of respectful dialogue, US Agency for International Development (USAID) Administrator Samantha Power said on Wednesday.

"We call for an immediate end to hostilities and for respectful dialogue between Baku and representatives of the population of Nagorno-Karabakh," Power said at the Democracy Delivers event in New York City.

The USAID administrator expressed concern about Azerbaijan's military actions in Nagorno-Karabakh given that they are worsening the humanitarian situation there and are undermining the prospects for peace.

"The use of force to resolve disputes is unacceptable," Power said.

Armenian Foreign Minister Ararat Mirzoyan said that 128,000 people in Nagorno-Karabakh are facing an existential threat and accused Azerbaijan of conducting ethnic cleansing in the region.

"In light of the gravity of the situation, the international community needs to undertake urgent and effective measures to prevent the imminent atrocity crime and to ensure the rights and security of the people of Nagorno-Karabakh," Mirzoyan said.

Earlier on Wednesday, the Azerbaijan Defense Ministry announced that an agreement had been reached on the suspension of anti-terrorist activities in Nagorno-Karabakh and the disarmament of Armenian illegal formations.

The Russian Defense Ministry said Azerbaijan and representatives of the Armenian population in Nagorno-Karabakh had agreed on a complete cessation of hostilities through the mediation of Russian peacekeepers.

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Ukraine Unlikely to Get ATACMS During Zelenskyy's Visit to Washington - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - There has been no change in the United States' position to refrain from sending long-range ATACMS missiles to Ukraine, a Pentagon official told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"Nothing new from the last time," the Pentagon official said, when asked if there has been any change to the United States' decision to not send ATACMS to Ukraine.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy will be in Washington on Thursday to meet with President Joe Biden. The United States is expected to announce a new military assistance package for Ukraine during Zelenskyy's visit, but it will not include the ATACMS.

Last week, a Pentagon official told Sputnik no decision has been made to send ATACMS to Ukraine. According to media reports, citing US officials, ATACMS are not expected to be approved for Ukraine anytime soon.

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Netanyahu Says Israel, Saudi Arabia Can Forge 'Historic Peace' Under Biden

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) – Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Wednesday that he believes Israel and Saudi Arabia can forge a “historic peace” under US President Biden’s leadership.

“I think that under your leadership, Mr. President, we can forge a historic peace between Israel and Saudi Arabia,” Netanyahu said to Biden during their meeting on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly. “I think such a peace would go a long way for us to advance the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict, achieve reconciliation between the Islamic world and the Jewish state.”

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Pentagon Launches Review of Veterans Dishonorably Discharged Under 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell'

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) – The Pentagon is launching a review of veterans dishonorably discharged under the “Don't ask, don't tell” policy on the basis of their sexual orientation, defense officials said Wednesday.

“The review will begin by identifying veterans discharged during the operative period of Don't Ask Don't Tell, which is 1994 to 2011, whose certification of release or discharge from active duty ... indicates the basis for their separation was their sexual orientation and who received a characterization of discharge that was less than honorable,” US defense officials said during a press briefing.

The Pentagon will assess whether these veterans qualify for a “discharge upgrade.” Defense officials said they were still working out the details of how the review would be conducted.

The announcement of the review came on the 12th anniversary of the repeal of the “Don't ask, don't tell” policy banning LGBTQ+ people from serving in the military.

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Defunding FBI Would Leave US Vulnerable to China, Russia, Iran - Attorney General Garland

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - Defunding the FBI would leave the United States vulnerable to the actions of adversaries such as China, Russia and Iran, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Wednesday.

“Defunding the FBI would leave the United States naked to the malign influence of the Chinese Communist Party, the attacks by Iranians on American citizens... to the Russian aggression, to North Korean cyber attacks [and] to violent crime in the United States,” Garland said during a US House Judiciary Committee hearing, when asked about the potential impact of defunding the FBI.

Defunding the Justice Department would also leave the US vulnerable to espionage and domestic violent extremists, Garland said. Garland said that although he cannot imagine the consequences of defunding the FBI, they would be “catastrophic.”

Some US lawmakers including Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene have called to defund the FBI and other elements of the Justice Department in response to alleged weaponization of the US justice system.

On Tuesday, Greene introduced legislation to defund Justice Department special counsels and give Congress the power to fund them instead.

Former US President Donald Trump, who has been indicted in several criminal cases, has also urged lawmakers to defund the FBI and Justice Department due to alleged abuses of their power.

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US Attorney General Says White House Does Not Direct Justice Dept. Hunter Biden Probe

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The White House has not provided direction to the Justice Department regarding its investigation into President Joe Biden’s son, Hunter, US Attorney General Merrick Garland said on Wednesday.

“No,” Garland said during a US House Judiciary Committee hearing, when asked if the White House has provided direction to the Justice Department regarding the Hunter Biden probe.

Garland provided testimony to the panel as part of its efforts to oversee the Justice Department amid its probes into Biden and former President Donald Trump.

Garland appointed US Attorney David Weiss as special counsel in the Hunter Biden probe and denies interfering in his investigation. Garland said that he would authorize Weiss to bring charges outside of the state of Delaware if requested.

Weiss makes decisions regarding the probe independently of the US Attorney General’s office, Garland added.

The Justice Department has been investigating Biden for alleged tax and firearms crimes. Biden pleaded not guilty to the tax charges and intends to plead not guilty to the firearms charge after a plea deal and pre-trial diversion agreement fell apart.

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US, Allies Re-Doubling Work to Diversify Energy Sources for Moldova - Blinken

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The United States and its allies are redoubling work to help Moldova diversify its energy sources and reduce dependence on Russia, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday.

"The United States and our donors redoubled our work with the Moldovan government to lower prices for citizens, to help diversify the energy sources," Blinken said.

The secretary of state emphasized the importance of helping Moldova to avoid being dependent on Russian energy.

In addition, Blinken accused Russia of reducing energy supplies to Moldova as a retaliation for the country standing up against Moscow's special military operation in Ukraine.

On September 6, Moldovan Energy Minister Victor Parlicov announced the results of its latest audit, saying the debt of Moldova's national gas company Moldovagaz to Russian energy giant Gazprom amounted to \$709 million as of the end of March 2022. Parlicov proposed paying Gazprom only \$8.6 million and challenge the rest of the payment in court. Gazprom said that it categorically disagrees with Moldova's position and intends to continue to defend its rights.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova called on Moldova to fulfill its financial obligations and refrain from politicizing practical issues of bilateral cooperation, including in the energy sector.

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Hungary Advocates for Direct Talks Between Parties to Ukraine Conflict - Szijjarto

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Hungary advocates for direct peace talks between those involved in the Ukraine conflict, and they should be launched as soon as possible, Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto told Sputnik.

"What's important is to make this [peace] as soon as possible. There are people dying, among them are Hungarian people dying, and we would like to stop this war. Well, I think it would be very important that those who are involved in the war would start talking to each other, that what would help," Szijjarto said on the margins of the UN General Assembly.

The talks are long-overdue, and "today is even too late," he added.

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US Marshals Arrest More Than 4,400 Violent Fugitives in 20 Cities - Justice Department

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The US Marshals Service (USMS) arrested more than 4,400 violent fugitives in 20 cities over the course of three months as part of a national apprehension initiative, the Justice Department said on Wednesday.

"The US Marshals Service arrested 4,455 violent fugitives during the latest phase of its high-impact fugitive apprehension initiative, dubbed Operation North Star III (ONS III). ONS III targeted violent offenders in 20 cities and resulted in the clearance of 2,818 violent warrants, to include homicide, forcible sexual assault, robbery, aggravated assault, and firearms violations," the Justice Department said in a statement.

Investigators also seized 555 firearms, 85 kilograms of illegal narcotics and more than \$1 million in US currency, the statement said. In total, USMS has apprehended more than 6,700 fugitives as part of ONS efforts, the statement said.

ONS III targeted cities including Albuquerque, Baltimore, New York, Chicago, Detroit and Washington, the statement said.

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Szjijarto Says Sweden's Criticism 'Not Helpful' in Unblocking NATO Bid

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - Sweden's criticism toward Hungary is not "very helpful" in bringing the ratification of its NATO membership forward, Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szjijarto told Sputnik.

"Look, it only depends on our parliamentary group when the MPs would like to put it on the agenda. And in this regard, the Swedish are not very helpful. The Swedish continue criticizing, judging and lecturing Hungary on democracy, which is well beyond acceptable. And the Hungarian parliament and Hungarians feel insulted with a good reason for all this fake propaganda, which is being circulated by Swedish politicians about Hungary," Szjijarto said on the margins of the UN General Assembly, when asked about the prospects of ratification of Sweden's NATO membership.

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Senator Vance Urges Biden Admin. to Stop Arming Ukraine in Favor of Taiwan

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration should stop sending weapons to Ukraine because it is putting US national security at risk by failing to properly arm Taiwan, US Senator J.D. Vance said on Wednesday.

"My fear is that we're just sending way too many weapons systems to Ukraine and we don't make enough of them," Vance said at an Axios event.

Vance pointed out that the delays in military equipment promised to Taiwan clearly demonstrated how the US defense industrial base could not support two theaters.

"I think that we give up one for the one that's in our national security interest," Vance said.

The senator emphasized that a potential Chinese invasion of Taiwan would completely decimate the US economy.

"The amount of dependence that we have on various Taiwanese manufacturing, especially Taiwan semiconductors, means that the amount the Chinese would have leverage over us is extraordinary," he said.

Vance warned that there was a "very short window" for the United States to provide Taiwan with sufficient weapons to deter a Chinese invasion.

The senator said Russia is a "much less substantial power" that poses a "much less substantial threat" than China and reiterated his call for the United States to immediately cut off its support for Ukraine.

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Astana Talks on Syria to Be held on Sidelines of UNGA, Likely on Friday - Pedersen

UNITED NATIONS, September 20 (Sputnik) - A new round of Astana format peace talks on Syria will be held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in New York this week, UN Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"Yes, we will. Most likely on Friday," Pedersen said, when asked whether Astana peace talks would be held during the UNGA.

Pedersen also said he was not yet sure whether he would hold a bilateral meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on the sidelines of the UNGA but would at least have the opportunity to speak with him.

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Nearly Two Thirds of Canadians Say Meta Should Lift News Ban on Its Platforms – Poll

WASHINGTON, September 20 (Sputnik) – Nearly sixty percent of Canadians say Meta (banned in Russia) should restore access to news on its social media platform after it introduced a ban in response to the Online News Act, a Leger poll said on Wednesday.

On August 1, Meta announced an end to news availability on Canadian Facebook and Instagram platforms in response to the country's Bill C-18 – the Online News Act - that requires tech companies to fairly compensate news outlets for using their content.

“59% believe that Meta should lift its current ban on Canadian news on its platforms,” the poll showed, adding that 66% said news should be free and accessible to anyone.

However, only two fifths (43%) of the surveyed said they supported Bill C-18, with 31% saying that are against and 26 percent not expressing an opinion due to their little knowledge on the issue.

The survey found that 75 percent of Canadians know about the Online News Act, whereas 25% were unaware, adding that 47 percent have observed changes on their online feed following the news ban.

The poll was conducted on a sample of 1564 Canadians aged 18 and older, through an online survey from September 15-17.