

10/25/23 Wednesday

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Photos: 'Nightmare Scenario' as Powerful Category 5 Hurricane Otis Slams Into Mexico

Hurricane Otis made landfall in western Mexico on Wednesday as a Category 5 cyclone, coming ashore near Acapulco with sustained winds of 165 miles per hour. Just 24 hours earlier, the storm had been a Category 1 storm with winds of just 75 miles per hour.

Otis' rapid intensification in the warm Pacific waters off Mexico's western coast was described by the US National Hurricane Center as "a nightmare scenario," noting only one other storm had ever been observed to intensify so quickly: Hurricane Patricia in 2015.

Making landfall at peak strength on Wednesday, Otis became the most powerful hurricane to ever strike Mexico.

As Otis was bearing down on the Guerrero state, authorities readied hundreds of shelters to accept displaced persons and Mexico City mobilized 8,000 troops to the area to assist with rescue and recovery efforts.

Within hours of landfall, however, Otis weakened to a tropical storm with 60 mile-per-hour winds after passing over the Sierra Madre del Sur mountains, but its storm bands continued to dump buckets of rain across the region. Some areas could receive 20 inches of rain.

Footage posted on social media from Acapulco showed the resort city of 687,000 suffered heavy damage from the cyclone. The city's iconic Miguel Alemán Coastal Boulevard was strewn with uprooted trees and debris from nearby buildings, and widespread flooding was evident.

According to the Mexican government, efforts to get help to the region were frustrated by the damage to Acapulco airport. For several hours after landfall, communication was "completely lost," Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador told reporters, and electricity was almost totally knocked out across the Guerrero state.

There were no official estimates or reports of deaths when this story went to publication.

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Who is Newly-Elected US House Speaker Mike Johnson?

On Wednesday, the US House of Representatives broke weeks of deadlock and elected a new speaker, enabling the chamber to continue with its essential business, the most important of which is passing a 2024 budget.

The man selected by the narrow Republican majority was [US Rep. Mike Johnson](#), who has represented Louisiana's 4th congressional district since 2017. Having only been in Congress for six years, he has the shortest House tenure of any speaker in 140 years.

"To my colleagues, I want to thank you all for the trust that you've instilled in me to lead us in this historic and unprecedented moment that we're in," Johnson said after being sworn in. "The challenge before us is great, but the time for action is now, and I will not let you down."

Still, Johnson isn't exactly a household name in the United States, unlike several other GOP stalwarts who failed to gather the votes to become speaker. So, who is House Speaker Mike Johnson? Sputnik explains.

The Louisiana Native

Born in Shreveport, Louisiana, in 1972, Johnson is the son of a firefighter and the oldest of four siblings. He studied business administration at Louisiana State University and later obtained a Juris Doctor from the institution.

Prior to entering political life, Johnson worked as an attorney, by way of which he entered advocacy for conservative political causes, most notably becoming the spokesperson for the Alliance Defense Fund, which later became the Alliance Defending Freedom (ADF), a group that supports Christianity in schools and opposes abortion and LGBTQ rights and education. In 2015, he ran unopposed in a special election for a vacated seat in the Louisiana House of Representatives. Two years later, he left office early to assume his seat in the US House of Representatives after winning the election.

Here are some of the political positions Johnson has defended since taking office:

Support for Israel

After being sworn in as speaker on Wednesday, Johnson said his first order of business, even before passing the urgent budget bills, would be to pass a symbolic resolution condemning Hamas and expressing support for [Israel's war against the Gaza-based](#) militant group.

"We must not waver, our nation's greatest ally in the Middle East is under attack," Johnson said. "The first bill that I'm going to bring to this floor in just a little while, will be in support of our dear, dear friend Israel, and we're overdue and getting that done."

The United States, Johnson said, is going to show Israel and the entire world that the "barbarism" of Hamas is "wretched and wrong," and that the United States stands for the good in the conflict.

US President Joe Biden has also expressed similar attitudes, pressing Congress for billions in weapons for Israel and opposing calls for a ceasefire.

'Transparency' in Support for Ukraine

Like several other Republicans, Johnson opposes further US military aid for Ukraine without "transparency" for how the money is being used.

"American taxpayers have sent over \$100 billion in aid to Ukraine in the last year," Johnson said earlier this year. "They deserve to know if the Ukrainian government is being entirely forthcoming and transparent about the use of this massive sum of taxpayer resources."

Johnson has voted against several recent appropriations bills for aid for Ukraine. He was one of over 100 Republicans who rejected a stand-alone \$300 million aid package to Ukraine, a price tag that was ultimately pulled from Pentagon funding.

The newly-elected speaker [earlier explained](#): "We should not be sending another \$40 billion abroad when our own border is in chaos, American mothers are struggling to find baby formula, gas prices are at record highs, and American families are struggling to make ends meet, without sufficient oversight over where the money will go."

However, following the launch of Russia's special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, Johnson gave his vocal support to Ukraine, including supporting "debilitating sanctions on Russia's economic interests" and voting for the Ukraine Democracy Defense Lend-Lease Act of 2022.

Conservative Christian Values

An evangelical Christian, Johnson has argued that student-prayer in schools is protected under the First Amendment, as is the teaching of Christian beliefs. He believes in Young Earth Creationism, or that the universe is roughly 6,000 years old, and as such, opposes the idea of human-caused climate change.

Johnson has long been an opponent of abortion and LGBTQ rights, supporting full nationwide bans on abortion access, the teaching of LGBTQ topics in schools, and same-gender marriages.

Supporting Trump's Election Fraud Claims

In early January 2021, Johnson was one of 147 Republicans to vote to overturn the results of the November 2020 election, in line with claims by then-US President Donald Trump that the election was fraudulent. Trump lost the election to Joe Biden and launched an effort to build support for canceling the election results, culminating in the failed insurrection of January 6, 2021, by Trump's supporters at the US Capitol.

Johnson also signed an amicus brief filed by Texas in December 2020 aimed at bringing Trump's election fraud case to the US Supreme Court, which declined to hear the case, saying one state couldn't challenge another state's election results. Johnson boasted that Trump personally expressed "his great appreciation" for the effort, asking him to press every Republican lawmaker to do the same.

Following news of Johnson's gavel win, Biden issued a statement noting that he looked forward to working alongside the new speaker "in good faith on behalf of the American people," underscoring that "there should be mutual effort to find common ground wherever we can."

Asked whether he was concerned about working with Johnson in light of his 2020 election beliefs, Biden told reporters during his joint Wednesday presser with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese that he wasn't concerned about a repeat effort taking place in 2024.

"Because he can't ... Just like I was not worried that the last guy would be able to overturn the election," Biden said. "They had about 60 lawsuits that went all the way to the Supreme Court, and every time they lost. I understand the Constitution."

Johnson has not touched the election subject since he was elected to serve as speaker-designate late Tuesday, opting to brush off reporters' questions.

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Former IDF Commander: Turning Gaza Into 'Lake' With Sea Channel 'Might Be Lesson' for Hamas

Because some of the tunnels underneath Gaza City are dozens of meters deep, Israel may not have the specialized weapons to destroy them, making flooding the city a potentially cheaper option, a former Israeli commander told Sputnik. With parts of the city potentially below sea-level, a channel from the sea could turn Gaza into a lake.

According to the [latest report](#) by investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are considering flooding Gaza City to destroy the network of Hamas tunnels dug underneath the city.

"A well-informed American official told me that the Israeli leadership is known to be considering flooding Hamas's vast tunnel system before sending in its troops, many of whom have had only a few weeks of training in the maneuvers and coordination required for the invasion," Hersh wrote. He noted that doing so means "writing off" the possibility of securing the return of some 200 Israeli hostages still in Hamas custody.

Israel has been pounding the Gaza Strip for more than two weeks, ever since Hamas militants broke through the Gaza border fence and [massacred several Israeli villages](#) near the border, killing more than 1,300 people. However, the IDF response has far outpaced the death toll in Israel, with [nearly 6,000 dead](#) and another 1,000 missing in the rubble across the Gaza Strip. According to the IDF, the bombardment is in [preparation for a ground invasion](#), for which it has amassed more than 300,000 troops. A previous attempt to invade Gaza and destroy Hamas' tunnel network in 2014 resulted in grinding urban warfare that forced the IDF to withdraw after two weeks.

Retired IDF Lt. Col. Dr. Mordechai Kedar, who served for 25 years in IDF military intelligence specializing in Arab political discourse and is a lecturer at Bar-Ilan University in Tel Aviv, told Sputnik on Wednesday it would "definitely be cheaper to dig a tunnel a few hundred meters, which will stream the water from the sea," than to expend the amount of ordinance it would require to destroy Hamas' tunnel network in the city.

"It will be much cheaper and much more secure because once the city becomes a lake, nothing will remain as it was," he said.

"I don't know what Israel is preparing for these tunnels, whether it is bombs or water or whatever," Kedar said. However, he described the feasibility of using bombs or channeling seawater to destroy the tunnel networks.

"Look, I really don't know what Israel has. However, Israel is receiving every day, I think, a cargo of ammunition from the United States of America. Maybe this cargo or that cargo is a few thousand bombs which are supposed to deal with these tunnels. I have no idea what they have. And look, take into account that some of the tunnels are very deep, like 30 meters deep, which is a ten-story-tall building. This is very deep. And I don't know what the specifications of these bombs are, and I have no idea if these bombs are in the cargo," he said.

However, on the question of flooding the city, Kedar noted Gaza is likely below sea level, making it much easier to transport water into the city.

"It all depends on the quantity of water which we can bring into the city of Gaza. According to some data which I have read, the city actually is below sea level. If this is correct, it will not be so hard to make the water from the sea stream into the city. Once the city is covered with water, the water will go down into the ground because the ground is very sandy, and apparently all the

tunnels will be flooded, and whoever is in these tunnels will have to swim out or be buried there forever.”

“If this data is right and the city is actually below sea level, all you have to do is to dig a little tunnel from the sea to a lower place in the city and, physics will do the job,” he said.

When asked about the potential for ecological disaster or other consequences for the urban infrastructure as a result of the IDF flooding Gaza, Kedar replied that “whoever started this war with us should have calculated it beforehand.”

“Unfortunately, this ISIS*-like organization, they do not make any calculations neither on human lives nor infrastructure. It seems they couldn't care less about their own people, in their own cities, in their own infrastructure. I think that we don't have to put so much attention to these questions.”

“Once the city becomes a lake, I think that the whole of the city is finished and the whole story is finished because it will be a lake. And then maybe this will be the change and this might be the lesson.”

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‘Too Wrong to Ignore’: CIA ‘Outsourcing Assassinations’ to Kiev Ruffled US Journos’ Feathers

The CIA uses other nations’ intelligence agencies to handle its dirty work, which is often useful in the short term, but just as often has significant blowback, experts told Sputnik. In Ukraine, it’s resulted in an agency that assassinates its own people and maintains a “kill list” targeting those who dare to criticize the regime in Kiev.

A recent report in The Washington Post revealed how Ukrainian intelligence officers were carrying out espionage activities, including targeted assassinations, inside Russia, with the training and support of the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The article in particular noted how Ukraine’s SBU intelligence agency [was responsible for the assassination](#) of Russian journalist Daria Dugina with a car bomb in Moscow on August 20, 2022.

An unnamed CIA officer quoted in the article compared the SBU to Israel’s Mossad, which has become infamous for its assassinations around the globe, noting it “carries broader risks” beyond the threat it poses to Russia. The article notes that the ground-up reconstruction of the SBU began after the US-backed coup in Kiev in 2014, which brought a right-wing, nationalist, pro-Western government to power that began persecuting its own Russian-speaking citizens and made it a constitutional goal to join NATO, helping to set in motion the present military conflict.

An article in The New York Times a little more than a month after Dugina’s killing said the US “took no part in the attack” and that “afterward, American officials admonished Ukrainian officials over the assassination.” The Times said US officials were “frustrated” with the SBU’s “lack of transparency.”

Washington’s ‘Patron’ Intel Agencies

Columnist, former CIA officer, and torture whistleblower John Kiriakou told [Sputnik](#) that the US has long deputized the intelligence agencies of smaller nations to carry out the dirty work that Congressional oversight has made illegal for Americans to do directly, such as targeted killings. “Well, the easy answer is the answer to ‘why?’ Because these intelligence relationships that begin as nascent, almost parent-child kind of relationships are relationships that the CIA seeks all around the world because it gives them outsized authority,” Kiriakou said. “Think back over the decades to the CIA helping to create myriad intelligence services across the African continent, in Greece, in post-World War 2 Italy, in France - just all over the world, this is what the CIA does: it helps to create these foreign intelligence services so that it can exert control over them. This was a great opportunity for the CIA to build the Ukrainian intelligence service from scratch. You know, I remember hearing old timers when I was at the CIA talk about having built these foreign intelligence services and actually having their own badges and their own ranks to go into these foreign intelligence services as if they owned the place. So this is a very common thing that the CIA does and has done really since the late 1940s.”

Kiriakou said that over the short term, the CIA’s efforts had proven to be a good investment “because the CIA is able to collect intelligence on the Russian military, perhaps on the Russian intelligence community. So in this short term, just over the last year-and-a-half to two years, it’s probably been a decent investment. Over the long term, I would say no, because just as happened in, let’s say, Vietnam or in Afghanistan, it has the potential to drag the CIA down into the muck of a conflict that it really doesn’t know how to get out of. And that’s something that the CIA always takes a risk of doing when it gets involved with these patron organizations.”

However, Kiriakou noted that the real danger of such an arrangement is that the client state’s intelligence agency could one day come under the control of a government hostile to the United States, which might then share the CIA’s secrets with other US adversaries.

“That happens more often than people probably realize. I remember in the beginning of my career, being instructed to act as a liaison with something that at the time was called the Iraqi National Congress. It was a puppet organization set up by a liar and a thief and a criminal named Ahmed Chalabi. And so I would fly to London and I would meet with Chalabi and the people around Chalabi, only to then be told a year or two later that several of the Iraqi National Congress employees were actually plants placed there by the Iraqi intelligence service. And so my identity was blown to the Iraqi intelligence service, meaning that any time I traveled to the Middle East, I was in danger of being targeted by the Iraqis and the Iraqi government. And this kind of thing happens all the time, either because these organizations are infiltrated or because after a period of time, people sometimes do switch sides and then you’ve essentially wasted millions, maybe tens of millions of dollars, you’ve wasted years of work and you put your people in danger. And for what?”

‘It’s Too Wrong to Ignore’

Turning to Dugina’s assassination, Kiriakou said the DC-based newspaper had decided to print the story revealing the CIA’s connection because it was considered to be far beyond the pale of acceptable practice for the agency.

“[Executive Order 12333](#), in addition to doing other things, specifically prohibits the CIA from carrying out assassinations unless the target of the assassination presents what’s called ‘a clear and present danger to the United States, to American citizens or to American installations’. Now, most people do not pose a clear and present danger. Al-Qaeda* did ISIS** did, some of these

very specific, very targeted terrorist groups do. But Daria Dugina? No. Some random Syrian guy walking down the street in Damascus? No."

"So what the CIA has done over the years several times - and it's gone bad several times - is they outsource assassination to other organizations. In this case, apparently, at least according to The Washington Post, to Ukrainian intelligence officers," he said.

"Now, why in the world would the CIA do something like this? It has nothing to gain from doing something like this. And I think that's why it was reported. Remember, the Washington Post is, for all intents and purposes, the official newspaper of the Central Intelligence Agency. The Post and the CIA have been very, very close for decades. And indeed, Jeff Bezos, who's the owner of the Washington Post, also has a \$400 million contract through Amazon Cloud Services with the CIA. So there are very close ties between Bezos and the CIA. Why, then, would the CIA report this as an exclusive? I think that they would report it as an exclusive because it's wrong, wrong, wrong, and even by The Washington Post's biased view, it's too wrong to ignore."

"It's patently illegal. That's why we have executive orders that address this kind of thing. You're just not allowed to do it," Kirakou said. He recalled "in the early 1980s when the CIA was told that it could not assassinate these Lebanese leaders of Hezbollah, so what they did is they just paid money to Lebanese Christians and the Lebanese Christians assassinated them - not with close-in, hands-on operation, but by blowing up an entire city block with car bombs and then killing dozens of people in the process. You can't do stuff like that. It's illegal. It's a crime against humanity, just as it is to murder a woman who's just going about her normal business in the course of a day. You can't do it. And I think that's why the Post reported it."

WaPo or WikiLeaks?

He noted there was "really no difference" between what the Washington Post had reported and what Julian Assange reported as the head of WikiLeaks.

"Julian Assange exposed more crimes committed by the US military in Iraq, including what's now known as the 'Collateral Murder' video, where an American helicopter gunship is murdering Reuters journalists and then shooting at the ambulance crews coming to their rescue. And he's charged with more than a dozen counts of espionage. But we're supposed to look the other way when the Ukrainians do it."

"The CIA's plan to murder Julian Assange in broad daylight in the center of Knightsbridge, London, made its way all the way to the White House and the national security adviser before he finally said this plan is so insane and so illegal, we just can't take the risk of doing it," he said.

"I think what it means is that we lack any meaningful congressional oversight of our intelligence community. It's not the 1970s or the early 1980s anymore where the CIA actually went to Capitol Hill and 'had the Riot Act read to them', where CIA officers were prosecuted for committing crimes, where others were forced into retirement, and where Congress actually stood up and told the CIA: 'you're going to have to operate within the confines of the law'. Those days are gone and there's no meaningful oversight of the CIA on Capitol Hill."

Kiev and the 'Kill List'

International relations and security analyst Mark Sleboda told [Sputnik](#) that "It's not really new information to those who have been paying attention to what has been happening, not only the last year, almost two years since the Russian intervention in Ukraine began, but what has been going on in the country for the last decade."

Sleboda noted how the CIA “basically took over and rebuilt from scratch” Ukraine’s military intelligence agency, giving it financing, training, technology, and hand-picking the staff. “So the CIA built up the arm of the Kiev regime’s intelligence wing that has assassinated Russian civilians in Russia. We’re talking Daria Dugina, she was doing her own journalistic and political activity, [but] she is the daughter of the prominent Russian philosopher and political scientist [Alexander Dugin] that has long been a bête noire of the West, because he does have a very anti-Western political view, has long held it. Both of them were on the Kiev regime’s official ‘kill list’, the Mirotvorets or ‘peacemaker’ list, which has long been acknowledged even in the Western mainstream media, is curated by the Kiev regime’s Ministry of the Interior (sic).” “This clearly indicates how the CIA’s, the US’, complicity in these attacks, if not their outright culpability. Likewise, with [Vladlen Tatarsky](#), the blogger from the Donbass region” who was killed by a bomb placed at a public speaking event in St. Petersburg in April 2023. “What I think is even more relevant is that this military intelligence wing built up by the CIA has assassinated - they say, dozens. It’s actually hundreds of East Ukrainians, those that the regime regards as ‘collaborators’ or ‘traitors’, many of them civilians who didn’t serve any military role. And the CIA has built up the organization that has done all of this and continues to provide them with funding and arms and even fake military uniforms so they can penetrate into the Donbass and carry out these types of assassinations. And this has been going on very regularly and it’s barely mentioned in the Western media, and when it is mentioned, it’s with the ‘oh, yeah, okay, so maybe these are summary executions of your own people, but they deserve it’. That is the mentality because they don’t support the regime that seized power in Ukraine in 2014.” “I think in a way that is almost more damning than the assassinations of Russian civilians in Russia. This is a regime that is killing its own people, and the intelligence wing that is carrying it out was built up from the ground by the CIA,” Sleboda said.

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The Rise of Mike - Cartoon

Prior to Wednesday, the US House of representatives went without a speaker for three weeks and remained in a deadlock as the lower congressional chamber proved unable to carry out any legislative work without a leader.

The US House of Representatives managed to regain a sense of normalcy on Wednesday after House Republicans successfully elected a new speaker to fill the vacancy prompted by the historic removal of US Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) at the start of the month.

Now taking up the gavel is the little-known lawmaker US Rep. Mike Johnson (R-LA), whose success earlier in the day left many with a single question on their lips: [who exactly is the new speaker?](#)

As it turns out, Johnson hails from Louisiana and has mostly grabbed attention for his support of former US President Donald Trump, specifically his efforts to overturn the results of the 2020 election. Johnson was among a group of lawmakers who signed an amicus brief that sought to bring Trump’s election fraud case to the US Supreme Court.

With the 2024 presidential election just around the corner, and a rematch expected between Trump and US President Joe Biden, many are wondering just how events may unfold if results are questioned once again. Biden earlier indicated that he wasn't "worried" as the 2020 efforts proved unsuccessful.

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Multiple Feared Dead & Injured After Mass Shooting in Maine, Manhunt Underway

Shelter-in-place orders have been ordered in Lewiston, Maine, as well as surrounding cities. Images shared of the suspected gunman appear to show him carrying a rifle while entering a local bowling alley.

Authorities in Maine are on the hunt for a suspect after several shootings were reported late Wednesday in the state's Lewiston city, with police instructing the wider public to immediately seek shelter until further notice.

Law enforcement officials have not released any details regarding casualties or sustained injuries; however, unconfirmed figures released by insiders have suggested that at least 22 people were killed while between 50 and 60 others were injured during the shooting.

The local Central Maine Medical Center has been cited as responding to a "mass casualty, mass shooter event." It did not specify how many individuals it had received as a result of the shooting.

Mike Sauschuck, the commissioner of Maine's Department of Public Safety, told reporters that a specific casualty figure would not be provided as the situation remains "very fluid."

The mass shooting has been labeled as the deadliest in the United States in 2023, according to statistics compiled by the Gun Violence Archive. Per figures provided by the Maine State Police, the Pine Tree State [reported](#) a total of just 29 homicides in 2022, 15 of which were related to domestic matters.

At present, there are two active scenes being examined by authorities in Lewiston, the bowling alley SpareTime Recreation and the Schemengees Bar. Additional shots were also heard at a Walmart Distribution Center in Lewiston. The neighboring city of Auburn has also been put under a shelter-in-place order.

Local media reports have indicated that calls alerting police to the first shooting at the bowling alley came in just before 7 p.m. local time before additional calls came in from a second location.

The cause of the shootings has yet to be provided.

A statement earlier issued by the Maine State Police called on individuals in Lewiston to "shelter in place" and "stay inside your home with the doors locked."

"Law enforcement is currently investigating at multiple locations," the police said, adding that "any suspicious activity or individuals" should be reported to authorities.

Local media reported that a text sent out by Lewiston Public Schools said a lockdown was in place and asked anyone near the school to get in a safe place as area schools were hosting parent-teacher conferences.

Police have released a photo of the active shooter suspect and released a photograph of the individual holding an assault rifle.

Sauschuck told reporters at a briefing that a person of interest has been identified as 40-year-old Robert Card, who is not being considered a "suspect" at present.

Media earlier reported that the suspect has a history of military service and mental health issues. Card is said to have spent two weeks at a facility after threatening to carry out a shooting at a National Guard facility. Sauschuck did not elaborate on media reports on the topic. Additionally, police released a photo of what appears to be the gunman's vehicle, which Sauschuck said was located in the nearby town of Lisbon, Maine. The town has since been put under a shelter-in-place order.

Agents with the local Boston branch of the FBI and the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives are said to be assisting in the ongoing investigation.

The White House has noted that US President Joe Biden has been notified of the shooting during an initial briefing.

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Large Majority of Americans Want to Help Palestinians Flee Violence - Poll

Support is high among all political stripes of Americans, but the poll did not ask where they'd like the refugees to be settled.

A [new poll](#) says that a large majority of Americans want the US government to help citizens in Gaza flee the violence in the territory.

The poll closed as Israel continued to prepare a large ground invasion in Gaza targeted at Hamas. The country has been bombing Gaza since an October 7 surprise attack by Hamas killed 1,400 people and captured 199 more, according to Israeli authorities. The response by Israel has killed over 2,808 people in Palestine, the majority being citizens, according to Palestinian authorities.

The poll indicated 78% of respondents agreed with the statement, "American diplomats should actively be working on a plan to allow civilians fleeing fighting in Gaza to move to a safe country," while 22% disagreed.

The support was seen across all political spectrums but was most pronounced among Democrats, with 94% of Democratic respondents saying they supported the statement compared to 71% and 73% for Republicans and Independents, respectively.

Support for Israel in general remains high among Americans, with 41% saying the US government should support Israel in the conflict. However, more Americans believe the US should act as a neutral mediator or not be involved at all. Combined, those two neutral options were supported by 48% of respondents (27% for neutral mediator, 21% for no involvement). Only 2% said they believe the US government should support Palestine and the support for Israel is higher than in 2014, when the country conducted a ground operation against Hamas in a smaller scale operation.

While support for helping refugees fleeing the violence is predictably high, there are questions about its viability. No neighboring country or other third-party country has committed to taking in large numbers of refugees. The Rafah crossing into Egypt from Gaza remains closed despite ongoing negotiations and Israel has closed all other routes out of the territory.

Israel has told citizens to move towards the southern area of the country ahead of the ground invasion.

Furthermore, Hamas has told civilians to stay in their homes and some fear a repeat of the 1948 Nakba or "catastrophe" in Arabic. That event, which coincided with the formation of Israel, saw at least 750,000 Palestinians being displaced from their homes and expelled from the borders of Palestine. They were never allowed to return and construction was later undertaken to establish new homes for Israelis.

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Who Are the Eight Republicans Running to Become US House Speaker?

Following US Rep. Jim Jordan's (R-OH) failed bid to win the House speakership, the Republican party is back to square one on picking a new leader for the lower congressional chamber.

However, unlike previous attempts, the field has been greatly expanded.

Having spent weeks at a stalemate, House Republicans are now sifting through quite the crowded field as eight party members have announced they are running to clinch the chamber's speakership, greatly expanding a list of potential contenders previously limited to one or two candidates.

Jack Bergman, Michigan, 76

A former US Marine who flew a helicopter in the Vietnam War and spent 40 years in the service, US Rep. Jack Bergman (R-MI) has indicated he is only looking to take on the position temporarily so to establish a sense of normalcy in the US House.

"I'm military. And when you are in the middle of a fight, if the commander goes down on the battlefield, someone steps up to still prosecute the fight," Bergman told reporters on Friday.

"I don't want this job... but I will volunteer to step up to properly relieve until we get 217 votes out of this room."

Bergman has largely supported funding to Ukraine but said in March that funding to Kiev should be separate from any further budget debates.

The Michigan lawmaker presently sits on the House Armed Services Committee, Veterans Affairs and Budget panels, and chairs the Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence and Special Operations.

Byron Donalds, Florida, 44

The youngest and least experienced on congressional matters among the eight candidates, US Rep. Byron Donalds (R-FL) is seen as a rising star in the GOP, being named a member of the "Freedom Force," a Republican counterpoint to the Democrats' ostensibly progressive "Squad." Donalds began entering the national conversation when he received 20 votes during US Rep. Kevin McCarthy's (R-CA) appointment as House speaker in January. Those votes, which were

intended to prevent McCarthy from securing the nomination and not to elect Donalds, forced McCarthy to go through more than a dozen rounds of voting before eventually securing his short-lived term.

A vehement critic of further aid to Ukraine, Donalds said there was “no money in the House right now for Ukraine,” ahead of a visit by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in September. Originally from Brooklyn, Donalds describes himself as “everything the fake news media says doesn’t exist: a Trump supporting, liberty loving, pro-life, pro-2nd Amendment Black man.”

Tom Emmer, Minnesota, 62

Originally from Indiana, US Rep. Tom Emmer (R-MN) is a staunch ally of McCarthy and has received his endorsement. As the majority whip in the US House, Emmer was tasked with keeping the caucus together since his election to the position earlier this year.

Emmer has backed all aid packages to Ukraine and has been vocal in his support.

The Minnesota officials earlier angered former US President and current presumptive Republican nominee for President, Donald Trump by voting to certify Joe Biden’s election win in 2020, one of only two speaker candidates to do so.

A Trump fundraiser has described Emmer as “[former US House Speaker] Nancy Pelosi in a suit” on Steve Bannon’s podcast last week.

Kevin Hern, Oklahoma, 61

US Rep. Kevin Hern (R-OK) was initially floated by media outlets as a potential candidate shortly after McCarthy was booted from the House speakership, although he initially refused to run. Like Donalds, Hern also received some protest votes during McCarthy’s appointment. Hern has expressed opposition to Ukraine funding being tied to budgetary bills but has not closed the door on additional funding completely. If elected speaker, Hern has indicated he would demand the White House give a classified briefing to representatives before any aid package is considered.

The lawmaker presently serves as the chair of the Republican Study Committee.

Mike Johnson, Louisiana, 51

A former radio talk show host, US Rep. Mike Johnson (R-LA) serves as the vice chairman of the House Republican Conference, making him a force behind the scenes.

While he initially called for “swift action against Russia” at the start of the special military operation, Johnson has since stated his opposition to further aid being sent to the Kiev regime. Elected to serve in Congress in December 2016, Johnson previously served in the Louisiana House of Representatives between 2015 and 2017. It was during this period that he proposed a 2015 bill that was largely seen as discriminatory to the LGBTQ community.

Gary Palmer, Alabama, 69

An adamant supporter of Ukraine, US Rep. Gary Palmer (R-AL) has voted to send weapons to the conflict at every opportunity while also being one of the more hawkish Republicans regarding China.

As the chair of the Republican Policy Committee, Palmer already holds a major role in shaping the policies of the GOP.

“The Republican majority must be willing to make the reforms necessary to ensure fiscal responsibility and restore people’s faith in their government - and in us as their elected representatives,” Palmer said in a statement that spoke to the importance of Republican leadership.

The lawmaker, who spent 24 years at the Alabama Policy Institute think tank, has served in Congress since 2014 and was among Republican members who voted not to certify the 2020 election results.

Austin Scott, Georgia, 53

US Rep. Austin Scott (R-GA), along with Emmer was one of only two speaker candidates that voted to certify Biden's election win, drawing ire from Trump and his supporters.

A vocal ally of McCarthy, Scott has also been one of the strongest proponents of giving more aid and weapons to Ukraine.

Scott previously challenged Jordan for the Republican nomination for speaker but supported the Ohio Republican during floor votes. With Jordan out and the field open again, Scott has thrown his hat into the ring again.

Pete Sessions, Texas, 68

Originally elected in 1996, US Rep. Pete Sessions (R-TX) has more experience in Congress than any other speaker candidate. While he lost his seat in 2018 to a Democrat in an upset election, Sessions returned to Congress two years later after running in a different district.

Sessions was listed in a [criminal indictment](#) as one of the congressmen who allegedly accepted money from two Ukrainian businessmen who were attempting to get Ukraine's ambassador to the United States removed from the position. Sessions was not charged in the case and was not accused of any wrongdoing.

He has, however, been one of the most vocal supporters of Kiev in the GOP, and has voted for every aid package.

Of note: His father, William S. Sessions was the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigations during the [Branch Davidian Siege](#), also known as the Waco Massacre, where 86 members of the cult were killed, including 28 children.

What's Next?

Republicans plan to hold a closed-door vote to pick a nominee on Tuesday but because of the large number of candidates, it is likely to take multiple votes to whittle down the field.

Once a candidate is selected, 217 members of Congress, likely all Republicans, will have to vote for the candidate on the House Floor for the ordeal to end. There are currently 221 Republicans in the House of Representatives.

US Rep. Mike Flood (R-NE) has introduced a unity pledge, of which the signees will promise to vote for the eventual Republican nominee once elected. At least six of the eight candidates have signed it, but it will ultimately be up to the rank-and-file members of Republicans in the House.

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Most Americans, Including Republicans, Want New House Speaker But There's a Catch

Congress narrowly avoided a government shutdown earlier this month. With the new deadline for a funding bill set for November 17 and the House paralyzed without a leader, pressure is building for a new speaker to be elected soon.

A large majority of Americans, 67%, want the US House of Representatives to elect a new speaker for the lower congressional chamber as soon as possible, including most Republicans, according to a [new poll](#).

The poll, which questioned 1,000 registered voters by landline telephone, found that only 25% of Americans do not care if a new speaker is elected. While support was much larger among Democrats than Republicans, 86% to 57%, the poll shows even voters for the party that once employed the "[starve the beast](#)" strategy, do not want to see the House without a leader.

Their preference for a speaker being picked quickly does not reflect any warm feelings for Congress or our leaders by voters. Only 36% of voters said they have "a lot" (4%) or "some" (32%) confidence in US leadership, compared to 62% who said they have "very little" (35%) or "none at all" (27%).

The House of Representatives has been in a frozen state since Rep. Kevin McCarthy (R-CA) was ousted three and a half weeks ago. Republicans, who control the House with a small margin, have been trying to appoint a new speaker but have been unable to unify behind a candidate.

With that news fresh in voters' minds, it remains unsurprising the House is the least popular of the two chambers of Congress. Only 25% of voters view the lower chamber favorably, while 54% hold an unfavorable view. The US Senate fared slightly better, with 36% of voters seeing it favorably, while 42% saw it unfavorably.

So What's the Catch?

Once the US House does what the majority of voters want and elects a new speaker, Congress will have to get to work avoiding a government shutdown on November 18, an outcome that was narrowly avoided on October 1.

While a majority of voters, 61%, agree a deal should be negotiated, a majority of Republican voters, 55%, said they do want their representatives to stand firm on spending cuts, even if it means a government shutdown.

With Republicans controlling the House and presumably, the speaker's gavel, Congress may soon find itself in the same position it was in at the end of September: desperately scrambling to keep the government funded.

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Video: At Least 7 People Killed After 'Superfog' Envelops Louisiana, Prompts Massive Pileup

This is not the first time this year that wildfires have created apocalyptic-like conditions. Over the summer, multiple areas of the United States dealt with dense smog created by massive wildfires in Canada, which resulted in an orange-colored sky in New York City and unhealthy conditions across several states.

At least seven people were killed and dozens more were left with injuries after a dense mix of fog and smoke, called “superfog,” descended on parts of Louisiana and caused massive multi-car pileups.

The superfog was formed when normal fog mixed with smoke from a wetland fire that has been burning since July in the Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge inside the city limits of New Orleans.

The fire is said to be in an area that is tough for firefighters to access, limiting their ability to control the blaze.

The largest pileup occurred on Interstate 10 and involved more than 100 cars; authorities have shut down the interstate for “the foreseeable future.” Dozens of other accidents have occurred in the area, shutting down Interstates 10 and 310 temporarily.

Authorities say the death toll may increase as the pileup is cleared. At least 25 people have been transported to local hospitals with their injuries ranging from minor to critical.

The 23.8-mile-long Causeway Bridge was closed temporarily due to low visibility but has since reopened. The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development said that the superfog made it “nearly impossible” to see in the area, noting that visibility was near zero.

The fog in Louisiana is expected to continue for the next few days. Depending on the progress of the wildfires and wind direction, that could mean more superfog in the coming days.

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Americans' Health Care Inadequate Regardless of Insurance – Poll

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) – Americans suffer from inadequate health care, regardless of whether they have insurance and their source of insurance, according to the Commonwealth Fund 2023 Health Care Affordability Survey released on Thursday.

The survey of more than 7,800 American adults, conducted from April 18 to July 31, found that many of them, even those with public or private coverage, had to deal with “delayed or forgone care, significant medical debt, and worsening health problems.”

Forty-three percent of working-age adults with employer coverage, 57% of those with marketplace or individual market plans, 45% with Medicaid, and 51% with Medicare reported that it was “very or somewhat difficult” to afford health care.

Twenty-nine percent of respondents with employer coverage, 37% of those with marketplace or individual market plans, 39% with Medicaid, and 42% with Medicare said that they or a family member had delayed or skipped health care or a drug prescription in the past year because of affordability.

As a result of such delays or neglect in seeking care, 54% of respondents with employer coverage, 61% of those with marketplace or individual market plans, 60% with Medicaid, and 63% with Medicare said that they or a family member become sicker.

Medical debt was also exacerbated across all groups, regardless of insurance coverage.

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Shelter-in-Place Order Expands as Manhunt Continues After Mass Shootings in Lewiston

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) – The police of the US state of Maine on Thursday expanded their shelter-in-place advisory as the manhunt for a person of interest in the two mass shootings in Lewiston continues.

"We are expanding the shelter in place advisory and school closings to include the town of Bowdoin," the police said on X, formerly known as Twitter.

The authorities urged residents to stay in their homes.

More than 100 investigators are working to locate Robert Card, 40, who is a person of interest in the Lewiston shootings, the police said.

The death toll from the mass shootings at a restaurant and a bowling alley in Lewiston could be as high as 22, City Councilor Robert McCarthy previously told CNN.

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US Q3 GDP Growth Estimated at 4.9% in First Reading - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - US Gross Domestic Product growth for the third quarter of 2023 has been estimated at an annual rate 4.9%, the Commerce Department said in its first reading of the period issued Thursday.

"Real gross domestic product (GDP) increased at an annual rate of 4.9 percent in the third quarter of 2023," the Bureau of Economic Analysis, a unit of the Commerce Department, said in a news release.

In the second quarter, real GDP increased 2.1%.

The Commerce Department releases three GDP readings for each quarter.

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Kamala Harris Will Travel to UK Next Week for AI Summit - White House

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - US Vice President Kamala Harris will visit the United Kingdom next week for an Artificial Intelligence (AI) summit, the White House said on Thursday.

"Vice President Kamala Harris and Second Gentleman Douglas Emhoff will travel to London and Bletchley Park, the United Kingdom from October 31 to November 2," the White House said in a statement.

The trip will advance the Biden-Harris administration's "global leadership" on AI, the statement said.

Harris will continue to push for protecting human rights, civil and labor rights, consumer rights, and privacy, the inclusion of civil society in AI policymaking, and accountability for the private sector, the statement added.

On November 2, Harris will represent the US at the Global Summit on AI Safety at Bletchley Park.

The second gentleman will have a series of engagements with civil society and young leaders. The meetings will focus on countering hate; promoting women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; and gender equity.

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Maine Shooting Suspect Has History of Military Service, Mental Health Issues - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The suspect who carried out a mass shooting in the US state of Maine has a history of military service and mental health issues, ABC News reported citing law enforcement sources.

The report said Wednesday night that the suspect had a two-week stay this summer at a mental health facility after he allegedly threatened to carry out a shooting at a National Guard facility.

The suspect Robert Card, 39, shot and killed up to 22 people and injured dozens of others in Lewiston, Maine, media reported.

The suspect remains at large, according to authorities.

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US Police Say Trying to Find 'Armed and Dangerous' Person of Interest in Maine Shooting

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) – US law enforcement forces are trying to find a "person of interest" in the mass shooting in Maine that reportedly left at least 22 people dead, state police said, warning that the individual remains "armed and dangerous."

"Law Enforcement is attempting to locate Robert Card 4/4/1983, as a person of interest regarding the mass shooting at Schemengees Bar and Sparetime Recreation this evening. CARD should be considered armed and dangerous. Please contact law enforcement if you are aware of his whereabouts," the police said on Facebook.

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White House Says Biden Spoke With Maine Governor, Lawmakers About Lewiston Shooting

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden spoke by telephone to Maine Governor Janet Mills and US lawmakers representing the state of Maine about the mass shooting in the city of Lewiston that reportedly killed at least 22 people, the White House said in a statement.

"The President spoke by phone individually to Maine Governor Janet Mills, Senators Angus King and Susan Collins, and Congressman Jared Golden about the shooting in Lewiston, Maine and offered full federal support in the wake of this horrific attack," the White House said late Wednesday night.

A city official told CNN that at least 22 people were killed in the mass shooting.

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City Councilor Confirms at Least 22 Dead in Mass Shootings in Lewiston, Maine - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - At least 22 people have been killed in the mass shooting in the US state of Maine, City Councilor Robert McCarthy confirmed to CNN.

McCarthy said he received this data from a city administrator in a text message, according to CNN.

The shooting took place late Wednesday in Lewiston, Maine, and a suspect has reportedly been taken into custody .

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FBI Ready to Assist Local Police in Maine Shooting that Left 22 Dead - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is prepared to help local law enforcement investigate a mass shooting in the US state of Maine that reportedly left at least 22 people dead, the agency said in a statement obtained by Sputnik.

"The FBI Boston Division continues to coordinate with our local, state and federal law enforcement partners in Maine and we stand ready to assist with any available resources they need, including evidence response, investigative and tactical support, as well as victim assistance," the FBI said late Wednesday night.

The FBI said it continues to urge the public to remain vigilant and report any and all suspicious activity or individuals to law enforcement immediately.

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

Mass Shooting in Lewiston, Maine Ranks as Most Deadly in US This Year – Statistics

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) – A mass shooting in Lewiston, Maine has become the deadliest in the United States in 2023, according to statistics compiled by the Gun Violence Archive (GVA).

At least 22 people died and another 60 were injured in the mass shooting across three locations in the city, media reports said late Wednesday.

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State of Maine Issues 'Shelter in Place' Warning - Notice

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The state of Maine has issued a "Shelter in Place" warning for citizens in and near Androscoggin county while an active shooter situation is under investigation, Spectrum said on behalf of state authorities.

Spectrum's emergency alert system late Wednesday warned citizens to stay indoors and lock their doors as local and federal authorities search for a suspect involved in the killing of at least 22 people on Wednesday evening across three different locations in Lewiston, Maine.

Local public schools also announced via district superintendents offices that local area schools will be closed tomorrow, October 26, due to ongoing safety concerns.

Maine State Police are taking the lead investigating the shooting, and the FBI is supporting local law enforcement forces.

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Russian Embassy in US Says Closely Monitoring Deadly Shooting in Maine

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The Russian Embassy in the United States is closely monitoring the mass shooting that reportedly left at least 22 people dead in Lewiston, Maine, and has no information that any Russian nationals were among the victims, the head of the embassy's press service Igor Girenko told Sputnik.

"The Embassy of the Russian Federation in the United States is monitoring the situation in Maine," Girenko said on Wednesday. "At the moment, there has been no information about whether Russian citizens were among the victims."

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

Biden Briefed on Mass Shooting in Lewistown, Maine, Will Remain Updated - White House

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has been briefed on what is known so far about the mass shooting that reportedly left at least 22 people dead in Lewiston, Maine, the White House said in a statement.

"The President has been briefed on what's known so far about the mass shooting in Lewiston, Maine and will continue to receive updates," said the White House in a Statement.

At least 22 people were shot dead at three locations across the city, Fox news reported.

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Biden Applauds Tentative Agreement Between Ford, United Auto Workers - White House

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden welcomed a tentative agreement between the United Auto Workers (UAW) and Ford Motor Company that could end a nearly six-week long strike, according to a statement released by the White House.

"I applaud the UAW and Ford for coming together after a hard fought, good faith negotiation and reaching a historic tentative agreement tonight. This tentative agreement provides a record raise to auto workers who have sacrificed so much to ensure our iconic Big Three companies can still lead the world in quality and innovation. Ultimately, the final word on this contract will be from the UAW members themselves in the days and weeks to come," Biden said in a statement on Wednesday.

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Death Toll From Shooting in Lewiston, Maine Rises to 22 - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The death toll in multiple shootings that took place in Lewiston, Maine, increased to 22, Fox News reported citing a source.

The report said late Wednesday that the suspect might be in custody.

Maine State Police are taking the lead investigating the shooting, and the FBI is supporting local law enforcement forces.

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Australia Wants to Connect Vast Mineral Resources With US Markets, Tech - Prime Minister

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - Australia is working with the US to bolster critical mineral supply chains and is looking to connect its vast resources of elements like lithium, copper and rare earths with American investors and end markets, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said in remarks at the White House alongside President Joe Biden.

The comments come as the US is looking to secure critical minerals as China ratchets up export controls on key metals used in a wide range of high-tech applications in retaliation to Biden administration restrictions.

"We're working closely with the United States to build end-to-end sustainable, reliable, and transparent supply chains for critical minerals," Albanese said on Wednesday. "Australia has abundant supplies of these critical minerals that will drive our economies throughout this century: lithium, cobalt, copper, vanadium, and rare earths. We want to connect that with American markets, investors, and technology."

The US and Australia earlier this year put together a critical minerals task force with a mission of exploring ways to better secure global supply lines of key raw materials, the lack of which posed threats to national and economic security.

Earlier this week, Albanese announced Australia was upping its Critical Minerals Facility from \$2 billion to \$4 billion.

The US geological survey (USGS) designated lithium, cobalt, and rare earth elements as critical minerals - those critical to the economy and national security that have vulnerable supply chains.

Australia's 6.2 million tons of lithium mineral reserves is second to only Chile's 9.3 million tons, according to the USGS. Australia has the second largest reserves of cobalt, with 1.5 million tons, behind the Congo which has 4 million tons.

China was the source for 70% of rare earth elements produced in 2022 with 210,000 tons of output. China introduced export controls on graphite, a key battery metal, last week. Chinese export controls on gallium and germanium, metals the US needs to make semiconductors and renewable energy technologies, went into effect on August 1.

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Maine Police Looking for Active Shooter at Multiple Locations in Lewiston - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - An active shooter is being investigated in multiple locations in the town of Lewiston, Maine, state police said in a statement.

"There is an active shooter in Lewiston. We ask people to shelter in place. Please stay inside your home with the doors locked. Law enforcement is currently investigating at multiple locations. If you see any suspicious activity or individuals please call 911. Updates to follow," the police said in a post on X on Wednesday.

The city of Lewiston has issued a shelter-in-place order, according to WMTW. A text sent out by Lewiston Public Schools said a lockdown was in place and asked anyone near the school to get

in a safe place, the report added.

BNO News said police identified an active shooter suspect and released a photograph of what looked like a white bearded male holding an assault rifle.

10/25/2023 8:30:37 PM -04:00

US State of Maine Police Say Searching for Active Shooter at Multiple Locations in Town of Lewiston

Sputnik

10/25/2023 8:18:44 PM -04:00

Sullivan, China's Wang to Discuss Communication Channel in Talks This Week - White House

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi during a meeting this week will address keeping a channel of communication open to ensure the two countries manage the bilateral relationship responsibly, National Security Council (NSC) spokesperson Adrienne Watson said in a press release.

"National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will meet with Chinese Communist Party Politburo Member, Director of the Office of the Foreign Affairs Commission, and Foreign Minister Wang Yi on October 27," the release said on Wednesday. "This meeting is consistent with commitments by both sides to maintain this strategic channel of communication as part of ongoing efforts to responsibly manage the relationship."

Friday's meeting is a follow up to recent high-level talks between Sullivan and Wang in Malta in September and in Vienna in May, the release noted.

According to the State Department, Wang will be on an official visit in Washington from Thursday to Saturday.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Wang will also hold a meeting to discuss a range of bilateral, regional, and global issues, the State Department said.

Earlier this month, President Joe Biden told reporters it is a possibility he will meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping on the margins of the APEC summit next month in San Francisco.

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FBI Received 'Criminal Info' From Over 40 Confidential Sources on Biden, Hunter - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The Federal Bureau of Investigation has maintained over 40 confidential sources over criminal matters related to the Biden family, Fox News reported, citing information obtained by Republican Senator Chuck Grassley.

According to the report, Grassley learned that an FBI task force within the Washington Field

office occasionally shut down reporting and information on Biden, James Biden, and Hunter Biden by multiple FBI offices by falsely discrediting the information as "foreign disinformation," causing any investigations related to the the family to cease.

However, according to the report, which cites Grassley, confidential sources were vetted and deemed unrelated to foreign, and especially Russian, sources.

These facts have come to light, the report said, after Grassley wrote to US Attorney General Merrick Garland and FBI Director Christopher Wray on Tuesday night discussing the information, which outlined facts pointing towards credible whistleblowers outing an attempt by the Justice Department and FBI to shut down investigative activity relating to the Biden family.

According to the report, Grassley demands answers from both the FBI and the DOJ by November 17.

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US Peace Activists Visit Offices of Congressmen Who Signed Mideast Ceasefire Resolution

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - Some two dozen US peace activists gathered outside the US Capitol and then visited lawmakers' offices to urge them to sign the Ceasefire Now Resolution and thank those who have backed it, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

The activists stopped by the offices of Ayanna Pressley, Summer Lee, Jamaal Bowman, Bonnie Watson Coleman and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, to thank them for supporting the resolution, the correspondent said.

"We are here to say thank you to your boss for the leadership ... Violence is not the answer to violence," an activist was reported to have said during a meeting with the staff of Congresswoman Ayanna Pressley.

The peace action was organized by the US Jewish group IfNotNow.

On October 16, a group of US House Democratic lawmakers said they introduced a resolution calling for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas as well as for the provision of humanitarian aid to civilians in Gaza. The resolution was backed by House Democrats, including Cori Bush, Rashida Tlaib, Jamaal Bowman, Ilhan Omar and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

Various groups, including the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation, Council on American Islamic Relations and Jewish Voice for Peace Action, have expressed support for the resolution.

Several hundred peace activists rallied on Capitol Hill calling for a ceasefire and an end of Israel's military activities against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

At least 49 peace activists were arrested in Congress, IfNotNow said via X (formerly known as Twitter).

Last Wednesday, peace activists calling for a ceasefire entered the Cannon House Office Building to express their views to lawmakers and the public. The authorities arrested more than 400 activists.

On October 7, the Palestinian group Hamas launched surprise attacks against Israel from the Gaza Strip. Israel declared war on Hamas and launched strikes as well as imposed a complete

blockade of the Gaza Strip, cutting off supplies of water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel to some 2.3 million Palestinians. The escalation of the conflict has resulted in the killing of 1,200 Israeli soldiers and civilians and some 6,000 Palestinians with multiple thousands of injured.

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US House Passes Resolution Supporting Israel in First Vote Under New Speaker

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives approved a resolution calling for supporting Israel in its conflict with Hamas by a 412-10 majority, a vote that came shortly after the lower chamber elected a new speaker.

With the scheduled vote for Wednesday, House Republicans showed unwavering support for Israel against Hamas, recognized as a terrorist group, through House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul's resolution, H.Res. 771.

Earlier in the day, the House elected Republican congressman Johnson to the speakership, filling the void left after the ouster of Kevin McCarthy three weeks ago.

However, despite over 420 House Representatives backing this legislation, a group of Democrats, notably Representatives Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Pressley, Ilhan Omar, Jamaal Bowman, and Cori Bush, have chosen not to endorse Israel's right to self-defense.

This resolution comes after a large-scale attack by Hamas on Israel earlier this month, leading to significant casualties on both sides. In response, Israel declared a state of war with Hamas, imposing a complete blockade on the Gaza Strip, affecting water, electricity, and food supplies.

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Russian Draft Resolution on Israeli-Palestinian War Not Adopted at UN Security Council

(Updates with more details in paras 3-7)

UNITED NATIONS, October 26 (Sputnik) - The Russian draft resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian war was not adopted at the UN Security Council given that it did not gain enough votes for it to be approved, a Sputnik correspondent reported.

Four countries voted in favor of the draft resolution, two countries voted against and nine countries abstained, the correspondent said on Wednesday.

Russia expressed disappointment over the UN Security Council's failure to adopt the resolution, which had raised hopes to bring about a ceasefire and prevent the expansion of the conflict.

"We regret the fact that the Security Council did not meet the hopes pinned upon it. We sought to do everything we could to help this," Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said.

The Russian ambassador said the challenge of preventing further escalation of the conflict now

lies with the UN General Assembly and the efforts of Jordan.

"We support the draft resolution proposed by Jordan on behalf of the Arab group. Russia is one of its co-sponsors," Nebenzia added.

China affirmed its support for Russia's draft resolution prior to the vote and reiterated Beijing's steadfast commitment to peace.

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Border Agency Says No Indications Hamas-Linked Foreign Fighters Trying to Enter US

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) has not seen any indications of Hamas-linked foreign fighters attempting to enter the United States, an agency spokesperson told Sputnik.

"CBP has seen no indication of Hamas-directed foreign fighters seeking to make entry into the United States," the spokesperson said on Wednesday.

Media reported earlier this week that CBP put out an internal bulletin recently alerting its officers that Hamas, Hezbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad foreign fighters inspired by the Israel conflict might be encountered attempting to enter the United States through the US southern border.

The CBP spokesperson said that due to the agency's policy, it cannot confirm or discuss sensitive internal information.

However the spokesperson pointed out that the agency provides its personnel on the border a wide range of context for situational awareness in order to ensure they remain vigilant.

Situational awareness briefs are not threat assessments, the spokesperson added.

According to CBP data, in fiscal year 2023 Border Patrol agents encountered approximately 169 migrants on the US southern border who are on the FBI's terror watchlist.

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Sullivan Modified Comments in Editorial Claiming It Established Peace in Mideast - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan wrote in a magazine editorial just days before the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel that the Biden administration had established peace in the Middle East, but later modified his essay to reflect the attack, the Daily Caller reported.

"The region is quieter than it has been for decades. The progress is fragile, to be sure. But it is also not an accident... [Biden's] approach returns discipline to US policy. It emphasizes deterring aggression, de-escalating conflicts, and integrating the region," Sullivan said in the original essay as quoted by the report on Wednesday.

According to the report, Sullivan also claimed that although the Israeli-Palestinian situation

remains tense, the Biden administration had de-escalated the crisis in the Gaza Strip and restored diplomatic ties between the two parties.

Sullivan also said that US troops were no longer regularly attacked in Iraq and Syria.

The peace in the Middle East was a result of military action combined with diplomacy to deter Iran's influence in the region, he added.

Sullivan had already been publicly scrutinized for claiming the Middle East had become more stabilized days before Hamas carried out attacks against Israel on October 7, which led to Israel declaring war on the Palestinian movement. Some 1,200 Israeli soldiers and civilians have died and some 6,000 Palestinians with multiple thousands of wounded since October 7.

According to Central Command (CENTCOM), some 13 bases housing US and coalition forces have been attacked, resulting in at least 24 US soldiers being injured.

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Wall Street Tumbles as Tech Stocks Hit By Google's Disappointing Cloud Earnings

NEW YORK, October 26 (Sputnik) - Wall Street experienced one of its sharpest falls for the year as disappointing earnings from Google's cloud computing division combined with a sell-off in bonds and higher oil prices to pull the US stock market broadly lower.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, which serves as Wall Street's broadest equities indicator with stocks of 30 large US corporations, closed down 105 points, or 0.3%, at 33,035 on Wednesday.

The S&P 500 Index, which represents the top 500 US stocks, dropped 61 points, or 1.4%, to 4,187.

The Nasdaq Composite Index, which comprises marquee names in technology such as Google, Amazon, Apple, Facebook (banned in Russia as an extremist organization) and Netflix, settled down 319 points, or 2.4%, at 12,821. The last time Nasdaq tumbled more this year was on February 21, when it closed 2.5% lower.

With Wednesday's slide, Nasdaq officially has entered correction territory, after accounting a loss of more than 10% from its most recent high on July 19.

Despite the drop on the day, Nasdaq is still up 22% on the year against an annual gain of 9% shown by the S&P 500. Only the Dow is down for the year, with a modest decline of 0.3%.

Wednesday's market slump came after shares of Alphabet, Google's holding company, slid more than 9% due to the weak performance of its cloud business.

"It goes to show how much emphasis investors are putting on the cloud and AI that Alphabet overall reported stronger than expected revenue and earnings but has been punished with shares falling in early trade," said Craig Erlam, analyst at online trading platform OANDA.

By contrast, Microsoft shares rose 2% on results showing its AI business outperforming its cloud segment.

Weighing further on Nasdaq were stocks of Amazon and Facebook parent Meta, which fell more than 4% each.

"Earnings from Microsoft and Alphabet could have been the catalyst that kicked things off this

week but the contrasting results appear to have left investors wondering which way to turn," Erlam said. "The clear difference maker was AI which gave Microsoft the edge and a strong start to trading today. Alphabet is a little behind the curve and that's come at an early cost for its cloud business which, unlike Microsoft, saw slower growth."

Also pressuring stocks in general was a resumption in the selloff of US bonds after a 3-day break and the first rally in oil in four days.

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UPDATE- Biden Asks Congress for \$1.55Bln in Funding for Countering Fentanyl Epidemic – White House

(Updates with additional details in para 6, background in para 4)

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden is asking Congress for an additional \$1.55 billion to counter the fentanyl epidemic as part of a new domestic supplemental request for a total of \$55.92 billion, according to a document published by the White House.

"As part of the Administration's National Drug Control Strategy supported by the National Security Supplemental package released last week to crack down on the trafficking of illicit fentanyl, the Administration's Domestic Supplemental request includes funding for grants to States, Territories, and Tribes through the Department of Health and Human Services' State Opioid Response (SOR) grant program," the White House said in a press release on Wednesday.

The grant program will provide funding for opioid use disorder treatment, evidence-based harm reduction services, overdose prevention measures like naloxone, and recovery support services, the press release said.

The new funding request will add up to the administration's request from last week asking for more than \$1.2 billion, including for the Department of Homeland Security for the deployment of a non-intrusive inspection system and additional CBP officers, and \$23 million for the Department of Justice to bolster testing and tracing activities.

US Attorney General Merrick Garland said in October that fentanyl is the leading cause of death for Americans ages 18 to 49 and from February 2022 to January 2023, at least 105,263 Americans died of drug overdoses, the majority of which involved synthetic opioids such as fentanyl and fentanyl analogs.

The largest expense item in the new request is additional funding for disaster response and other needs, including \$9 billion for the Disaster Relief Fund to address ongoing disaster response and recovery efforts, and \$2.8 billion for the Department of Housing and Urban Development to address housing and infrastructure needs caused by major disasters, according to the document.

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

Private Yards to Double Their Construction Capacity Over Next Couple of Years – US Navy

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) – The tonnage of submarine construction at US private shipyards has reached 100,000 tonnes and will double over the next couple of years, Under Secretary of the US Navy Erik K. Raven told a House Armed Services Committee hearing.

“In terms of the tonnage of construction at private yards for submarines, we are out at 100,000 tonnes today. That is double what we were just a few years ago, and in just the next couple of years we will be doubling again,” Raven said on Wednesday.

While the US submarine industrial base spans 16,000 suppliers in all 50 states, Navy investments in 194 suppliers in 31 states have already increased production, increasing capacity by 10% and adding 1000 jobs, Raven added.

Earlier in October, US President Joe Biden asked Congress to approve a \$3.3 billion supplemental to speed improvements in the submarine industrial base. According to Raven, this is on top of \$2.3 billion invested over the last six years and the \$1.6 billion already budgeted in the next four years.

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China Warns Passing US Draft Resolution in UNSC Threatens 2-State Solution

UNITED NATIONS, October 26 (Sputnik) - Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun said that the adoption of the US draft resolution by the UN Security Council on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would severely jeopardize the prospect of realizing a two-state solution.

"If the draft is adopted, it will completely dash the prospect for the realization of the two state solution and plunge the Palestinian and Israeli peoples into a vicious cycle of hatred and confrontation," Zhang said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on Wednesday.

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Biden Asks Congress for \$1.55Bln in Funding for Countering Fentanyl Epidemic – White House

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, October 26 (Sputnik) -

US-AUSTRALIA TALKS

* The United States and Australia in a joint statement on Wednesday said they agreed that a cyberattack could constitute an armed attack under the Australia-New Zealand-United States (ANZUS) security treaty.

* The United States and Australia said in a joint statement that they will seek a possible partnership with Japan on military drone technology.

* President Joe Biden said he is confident that he will be able to secure funding for the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) military partnership.

* Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said that he will ask his country's parliament to approve AUKUS this year.

ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN WAR

* Israeli captives held by Hamas can be exchanged for Palestinian prisoners, while foreign hostages in the Gaza Strip are treated as guests, Saleh al-Aroui, the deputy head of the political office of Hamas, said on Wednesday.

* The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) will be forced to cease its humanitarian operations in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday night if Israel continues not to allow fuel deliveries to the area, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

* The United Nations Security Council rejected a US-drafted resolution on the Israel-Gaza conflict, with two permanent members exercising their veto power.

* US President Joe Biden said that he did not make a demand to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to delay the ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, but suggested that they should take any opportunity to secure the release of hostages first.

* Biden said on Wednesday that he thinks the Palestinian Hamas movement carried out its October 7 attacks against Israel as a means to disrupt the normalization of ties between Israel

and Arab nations.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin offered condolences to the families of those killed in the Hamas attack in Israel on October 7.

* Israeli fighter jets targeted Hezbollah military targets in Lebanon, the Israel Defense Forces said.

US-CHINA RELATIONS

* US officials "frankly raised" the areas of disagreement with Chinese counterparts during the first virtual meeting of the Financial Working Group, the US Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

* President Joe Biden said that the United States will compete with China in every way but Washington does not seek a conflict with Beijing.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The United States is working with Ukraine on land routes for grain exports through Poland, Hungary and Slovakia, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Wednesday.

* The US Air National Guard has started to train Ukrainian pilots this week on F-16 fighter jet fundamentals, a US Air Force spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik.

* The European Union countries plan to providing \$52 billion to Ukraine for 2024-2027 by the end of this year, a senior EU official said.

* Ukraine has lost more than 500 soldiers - killed and wounded - in the Donetsk direction over the past 24 hours, the Russian Defense Ministry said.

* The Russian Defense Ministry said that its air defense systems downed two Ukrainian ATACMS missiles for the first time.

US HOUSE VOTES IN NEW SPEAKER

* The US House of Representatives on Wednesday elected Republican Congressman Mike Johnson as its speaker.

* Johnson said that the first bill he will bring to the floor will be a symbolic resolution that condemns Hamas and declares US support for Israel's security.

* President Joe Biden told reporters that he is not concerned about Johnson attempting to overturn results of the 2024 presidential election.

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Biden Requests \$6Bln in Funding to Bolster US Energy Independence - White House

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is asking Congress for \$6 billion to bolster US energy independence and security, including \$2.2 billion to improve domestic enrichment capabilities and \$300 million to improve the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, as part of a new \$55.92 billion supplemental request, according to a document published by the White

House on Wednesday.

Biden is also requesting \$3.1 billion for the Federal Communications Commission to reimburse communications providers for the ongoing removal of insecure equipment and software from the US communications infrastructure as well as \$278 million for the Department of Energy to mitigate domestic vulnerabilities and enhance US competitiveness in the global market for isotopes, the document said.

In addition, the president is requesting \$200 million for the Department of Homeland Security grants to nonprofit organizations, including synagogues, mosques and other places of worship, that are at high risk of attack in order to strengthen their security, the document said.

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Russia Regrets UNSC Not Adopting Its Resolution on Israeli-Palestinian Conflict - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - Russia is disappointed about its resolution on Israel-Gaza not being adopted and supports further actions of Jordan in this regard in the UN General Assembly, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Wednesday.

"We regret the fact that the Security Council did not meet the hopes pinned upon it. We sought to do everything we could to help this," Nebenzia said during a meeting of the UN Security Council.

The Russian ambassador said the challenge of preventing further escalation of the conflict now rests at the UN General Assembly and the efforts of Jordan.

"We support the draft resolution proposed by Jordan on behalf of the Arab group. Russia is one of his co-sponsors," Nebenzia said.

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Russia Draft Resolution on Israeli-Palestinian War Not Adopted at UN Security Council

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - The Russia draft resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian war was not adopted at the UN Security Council given that it did not gain enough votes for it to be approved, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Wednesday afternoon.

Four countries voted in favor of the draft resolution, two countries voted against and nine countries abstained, the correspondent said.

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Oil Prices Up First Time in 4 Days as Market Prioritizes War Risk Over US Stockpile Rise

NEW YORK, October 25 (Sputnik) - Oil prices rose for the first time in four days, with global benchmark Brent returning above the key bullish level of \$90 per barrel as traders braced for the possibility of contagion from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that could disrupt traffic of crude in the Middle East.

The market rebounded despite higher stockpile readings for both crude oil and gasoline in the United States at the end of last week, a situation that would have normally led to lower pricing. New York-traded West Texas Intermediate (WTI) crude for December delivery settled at \$85.39, up \$1.65, or 2% on the day. WTI had fallen just over 6% in three prior days.

UK-origin Brent crude for December delivery settled at \$90.13, up \$2.06, or 2.3%. Brent was down nearly 5% over three prior sessions.

"It's really hard to assign an appropriate war risk premium to crude now because the Middle East oil traffic hasn't really been impacted by this conflict," John Kilduff, partner at New York energy hedge fund Again Capital, said in a text message to Sputnik. "Yet, concerns of a contagion remain, thus the reversion to risk on a day like this, when the market should probably be lower because of the build in US crude stocks."

US crude oil stocks rose above the consensus of Wall Street analysts, with an unexpected rise at the federal level and at the storage hub tied to the delivery of contracts traded on the New York Mercantile Exchange, a US government report showed on Wednesday.

The build in crude inventories for the week that ended on October 20 came after a drop in exports, the Weekly Petroleum Status Report of the Energy Information Administration (EIA) showed.

The US crude inventory balance rose by 1.372 million barrels during the week that ended on October 20, according to the EIA, versus analysts' consensus for a drop of 450,000 barrels. The build contrasted with the 4.491 million draw in the prior week to October 13, which was helped by a spike in exports. Last week, crude oil exports fell to 4.833 million barrels per day from a prior 5.301 million.

In addition, there was also a rise of 213,000 barrels specifically at the Cushing, Oklahoma, storage hub that serves as the delivery point for WTI crude futures traded on the New York Mercantile Exchange. Cushing storage levels have dropped drastically this year, prompting concerns they might reach such critical lows to complicate operations at the storage hub. In the prior week, the storage hub saw a net outflow of 1.005 million barrels.

Higher stockpiles were noted in gasoline, the premier US fuel product, while distillates - a raw material for diesel and heating fuel - saw draws.

On the gasoline inventory front, there was a build of 156,000 barrels versus the prior draw of 2.371 million and analysts' consensus for a decline of 1.266 million.

With distillate stockpiles, there was a drop of 1.686 million barrels on top of the prior week's deficit of 3.185 million and analysts' consensus for a drop of 1.75 million. Distillates are refined into heating oil, diesel for trucks, buses, trains and ships and fuel for jets.

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US Draft Resolution on Israel-Palestine Does Not Reflect Calls for Ceasefire - Zhang

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - The US draft resolution on the Israeli-Palestinian war does not reflect the world's strongest calls for a ceasefire and would not help resolve the conflict, Chinese Ambassador to the United Nations Zhang Jun said on Wednesday.

"The draft does not reflect the world's strongest calls for a ceasefire an end to the fighting and it does not help to resolve the issue based on the above. The draft text is evidently not in a position to be adopted." Zhang Jun told the Security Council members during a meeting on the issue of Palestine.

The US draft resolution was not adopted due to veto by Russia and China.

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Russia, China Veto 'Political' US Draft UN Security Council Resolution on Israel-Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Security Council on Wednesday rejected a US-drafted resolution on the Israel-Gaza conflict, with two permanent members exercising their veto power.

Both Russia and China vetoed the text, which Russian Ambassador Vasily Nebenzia called "political."

"The American delegation directly refused other security council members the opportunity of consulting with capitals, establishing unrealistic urgent deadlines," Nebenzia told the Security Council members ahead of the vote.

The Russian ambassador also called the draft resolution a license for Israel's ground operation in Gaza.

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Australia Sending Aircraft With Early Warning System to Germany to Aid Ukraine - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - Australia is sending an aircraft with an early warning system to Germany to further protect the international security aid being sent to Ukraine, the United States and Australia said in a joint statement on Wednesday.

"In addition to support to Ukraine, Australia responded to a request from the United States to deploy a Royal Australian Air Force E-7A Wedgetail aircraft to Germany, which starts operations this week," the statement said.

The Australian deployment of the aircraft will bolster the protection of the international flow of security assistance to Ukraine by providing early warning of a threat, the statement added.

Earlier on Wednesday, US President Joe Biden and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese held a bilateral meeting in Washington and discussed a range of issues regarding China, the Indo-Pacific region, Ukraine and other topics of mutual interest.

Biden assured Albanese that the United States will follow through on its commitments in the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) military partnership deal to provide Australia with nuclear submarines.

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US Embassy in Kuwait Says Limiting Activity on US Military Bases Due to Threats

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - The US Embassy in Kuwait said on Wednesday that it is limiting its activity on US military bases in the country due to threats by an Iraqi militia group.

"The embassy is aware of threats made on social media by Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq, a militia group in Iraq, against US military bases in Kuwait. As a result, the US Embassy in Kuwait is limiting its activity on US military bases to essential and official events only," the US Embassy said via X (formerly Twitter).

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Biden Says to Work With New House Speaker in Good Faith, Urges Action to Avoid Shutdown

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he intends to work with newly-elected House Speaker Mike Johnson in good faith on behalf of the American people.

"As I said when this process began, whoever the Speaker is, I will seek to work with them in good faith on behalf of the American people," Biden said in a statement.

Biden added that swift action is needed to be taken now by both parties in order to address national security needs and avoid a looming government shutdown.

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Pro-Palestine Activists Getting Arrested in US Congress - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) -A number of the pro-Palestine peace activists are being arrested in the US Congress, the American Jewish group IfNotNow said on X on Wednesday.

"Capitol Police are arresting American Jews & allies outside @BernieSanders office," the statement said.

According to another post on X, 10 of the activists were arrested at the office of House Minority leader Hakeem Jeffries.

The activist group also posted a number of photos and videos of dozens of protests inside the US Congress both in the corridors and in the offices of the congressmen. The participants of the action are holding banners "Ceasefire now," "Let Gaza Leave," "Free the Hostages."

"We are American Jews. We are in mourning. But today, we are at the Capitol to act. We need leaders in Congress to fight for a #CeasefireNOW," another Twitter message said. "Chuck Schumer, Bernie Sanders, Hakeem Jeffries, and Katherine Clark: that means you. And we're not leaving your offices until you do."

Meanwhile, other posts show dozens of protesters rallying outside the Capitol Building.

Last Wednesday, protesters calling for an Israel-Gaza ceasefire entered the Cannon House Office Building, with over 400 arrested.

The protests calling for ceasefire and the end of military activities by Israel in Gaza have been ongoing in the United States since the beginning of the month.

On October 7, the Palestinian group Hamas launched surprise attacks against Israel from the Gaza Strip. Israel declared war on Hamas and launched strikes as well as imposed a complete blockade of the Gaza Strip, cutting off supplies of water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel to some 2.3 million Palestinians.

The escalation of the conflict has resulted in the killing of 1,200 Israeli soldiers and civilians and some 5,000 Palestinians with multiple thousands of injured.

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UN Rapporteur Urges Russia to Set Human Rights Example

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik)- UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Russia Mariana Katzarova on Wednesday expressed her aspiration for Russia to exemplify human rights adherence and invited government and stakeholders for meaningful discussions.

"I hope Russia will be an example of a human rights observance," Katzarova said during a United Nations press briefing.

Katzarova further expressed their ongoing commitment to uncovering human rights violations and conveyed her hope of initiating constructive dialogue with the government and other relevant parties.

According to reports, between February 2022 and June 2023, more than 20,000 individuals were detained for their involvement in what were predominantly peaceful anti-war demonstrations, she said.

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US Concerned Russia Trying to Cut Off Ukraine Access to Black Sea - State Dept.

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - The US is seeing Russia attempting to prevent Ukraine from access to the Black Sea, Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Wednesday.

"What we're seeking is a black sea that is secure, prosperous, democratic, and globally connected to markets around the world. All of that requires freedom of navigation. The threat to this... is Russia. It's trying to cut off Ukrainian access to the Black Sea," O'Brien said during the Senate of Foreign Relations Committee Europe and Regional Security Cooperation Subcommittee hearing.

O'Brien's testimony highlighted the United States' long-standing recognition of the Black Sea's strategic importance, noting its borders with three NATO Allies and many partners, its role as a key conduit for commodities like Ukrainian grain to international markets, and its significant, untapped energy resources.

Furthermore, the Black Sea Strategy submitted to Congress in June by the Department of State illustrates the US government's vision and commitment to enhancing collaboration with allies and partners, aiming for a Black Sea region that is secure, prosperous, interconnected, and shielded from threats to its territorial integrity and economic pressures.

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US, Australia Agree Cyberattack May Constitute Armed Attack Under ANZUS Treaty - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - The United States and Australia in a joint statement on Wednesday said they agreed that a cyberattack could constitute an armed attack under the Australia, New Zealand, United States Security (ANZUS) Treaty.

"Today, we reaffirm that international law applies in cyberspace and that a cyberattack on our nations could constitute an armed attack under Article IV of the ANZUS Treaty," the statement said. "A decision as to when such a cyberattack would lead to the invocation of Article IV would be made on a case-by-case basis through close consultations between the United States and Australia."

President Joe Biden and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese held a bilateral meeting in Washington on Wednesday to discuss a range of matters concerning China, the Indo-Pacific region, Ukraine, and other topics of mutual interest.

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US, Australia to Explore Partnership With Japan on Military Drone Tech - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - The United States and Australia in a joint statement on Wednesday said the two countries will seek a possible partnership with Japan on military drone technology.

"Today, we announce our intention to explore trilateral cooperation with Japan on Unmanned Aerial Systems," the statement said. "Our cooperation aims to enhance interoperability and accelerate technology transfer in the rapidly emerging field of collaborative combat aircraft and autonomy."

President Joe Biden and Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese held a bilateral meeting in Washington on Wednesday to discuss a range of matters concerning China, the Indo-Pacific region, Ukraine, and other topics of mutual interest.

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New House Speaker Johnson Says Outstanding National Debt Greatest Threat to US

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - Newly-elected House Speaker Mike Johnson in remarks to his colleagues on Wednesday said that the United States' outstanding debt issue is the greatest threat to national security.

"The greatest threat to our national security is our nation's debt," Johnson said.

The US government must provide relief to the American people by reducing federal spending and bringing down inflation.

US debt is rising at an unsustainable pace, nearly crossing \$33.6 trillion, Johnson added.

The House of Representatives was stuck in limbo for three weeks, unable to conduct business after former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy was ousted. Johnson secured a nomination and enough support for the speakership late Tuesday night after several members of Congress failed in their attempts to become speaker.

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US, Turkey Discuss Balance of Warships in Black Sea - State Dept.

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is constantly discussing with Turkey the balance of warships in the Black Sea, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Wednesday.

"We talk constantly about whether the balance is correct, whether we have the right set of forces, and the Turks look at this constantly," O'Brien said at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

He also pointed out that Turkey made a decision not to allow warships of Russia and other countries into the Black Sea.

Turkey looks at this constantly, and the US will keep working on this issue, O'Brien added.

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New House Speaker Johnson Says 'Challenge Before Us Great' Amid Historic Moment

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - Newly-elected House Speaker Mike Johnson told his colleagues they face challenging times amid a historic moment, adding that he will not let them down.

"To my colleagues, I want to thank you all for the trust that you've instilled in me to lead us in this historic and unprecedented moment that we're in. The challenge before us is great, but the time for action is now, and I will not let you down."

Johnson further said that the world is in turmoil and the world needs the United States to be strong. He pointed out that global issues in the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, Johnson urged all lawmakers to come together to fix the broken US immigration system amid record levels of migration on the US southern border the last few years.

Each member of Congress, Johnson said, has a huge responsibility to serve the US public and ensure it remains "the great beacon of light and hope and freedom."

The House of Representatives was stuck in limbo for three weeks, unable to conduct business after former House Speaker Kevin McCarthy was ousted. Johnson secured a nomination and enough support for the speakership late Tuesday night after several members of Congress failed in their attempts to become speaker.

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US Eyes Black Sea Air Defense Buildup Amid Russia's Alleged Laying of Mines - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien on Wednesday said the US is exploring avenues for strengthening air defense as a response to Russia's alleged use of aircraft for laying mines in the Black Sea.

"We're looking for the way to build up air defense, because that's the answer to Russia using aircraft to lay mines in the Black Sea," O'Brien said during the Senate of Foreign Relations Committee Europe and Regional Security Cooperation Subcommittee hearing.

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New House Speaker Johnson Says First Bill He Will Bring to Floor Will be Support of Israel

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - Newly-elected House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Wednesday that the first bill he will bring to the floor will be a symbolic resolution that condemns Hamas and declares US support for Israel's security.

"We must not waver, our nation's greatest ally in the Middle East is under attack," Johnson said. "The first bill that I'm going to bring to this floor in just a little while, will be in support of our dear, dear friend Israel, and we're overdue and getting that done."

The United States, Johnson said, is going to show Israel and the entire world that the "barbarism" of Hamas is "wretched and wrong," and that the United States stands for the good in the conflict.

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US Advises Turkey to Turn Away From Russia's Gas, Nuclear Energy

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - The United States recommends that Turkey turn away from Russia as its supplier of gas and nuclear energy, US Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Wednesday.

"I think we're skeptical of that and advising them [Turkey] to look to other places for their gas, and, frankly, the nuclear power as well," O'Brien said during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

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US Works With Ukraine On Land Routes For Grain Exports Through Poland, Hungary, Slovakia

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is working with Ukraine on land routes for grain exports through Poland, Hungary, and Slovakia, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs James O'Brien said on Wednesday.

"Actually, there are three things we are working on with Ukraine and its partners. One, land routes, some of which go into Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary, and onto Italy," O'Brien said at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.

He said that it is expensive but possible.

Other land routes are going through Romania and along the coast, he added.

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Biden Says US Will Compete With China in 'Every Way' But Does Not Seek Conflict

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that the United States will compete with China in every way but Washington does not seek a conflict with Beijing.

"We're gonna compete with China in every way according to the international rules: Economically, politically and in other ways, but we are not seeking conflict," Biden said during a bilateral press conference with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

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Biden Says 'Confident' He Will Be Able to Secure Funding for AUKUS

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday he is confident that he will be able to secure funding for AUKUS.

"I'm confident that we are going to be able to get money for AUKUS because it's overwhelmingly in our interest," Biden said during a press conference with Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.

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Biden Says Not Worried Speaker Johnson May Try to Overturn Results of 2024 Elections

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden told reporters on Wednesday that he is not concerned about newly-elected House Speaker Mike Johnson attempting to overturn results of the 2024 presidential election.

"No," Biden said when asked if Johnson would attempt to overturn the election.

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Biden Says Did Not Demand Israel Delay Ground Invasion of Gaza

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he did not make a demand to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to delay the ground invasion of the Gaza Strip, but suggested that they should take any opportunity to secure the release of hostages first.

"No. What I have indicated to him is that if that's possible to get these folks out safely, that's what he should do, but I did not demand it. I pointed it out to him," Biden said during a press

conference when asked whether he demanded that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delay the planned ground invasion of Gaza.

Earlier on Wednesday, media reported that the United States urged Israel to delay its ground operation in Gaza so that Washington could deploy additional air defense assets throughout the Middle East in anticipation of an escalation of attacks against US forces in the region.

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Australian Prime Minister Says Will Ask Parliament to Approve AUKUS This Year

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said on Wednesday that he will ask the country's parliament to approve the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) military partnership this year.

"We will ask parliament to approve AUKUS this year," Albanese said.

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Canadian Forces, Plane Deployed in Preparation of Possible Lebanon Evacuation - Blair

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) – Canada's Defense Minister Bill Blair said on Wednesday that 300 servicemen and a plane had been deployed to Cyprus to assist in the evacuation of Canadian nationals out of Lebanon if the situation was to deteriorate.

"The @CanadianForces are planning and ready to assist Canadians if the security situation in Lebanon deteriorates. Over 300 @CanadianForces members and a CC-150 Polaris aircraft are now deployed in this effort – and we've established a Task Force Headquarters in Cyprus," Blair said via X (formerly Twitter).

Last Friday, Major General Darcy Molstad said the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) were preparing a contingency plan in the event that a spillover of the Israel-Gaza war to neighbouring Lebanon required the evacuation of its citizens and permanent residents out of the country.

Although CAF assessed there was no indication that the conflict could affect Lebanon, Ottawa wanted to be ready for any eventuality.

Global Affairs Canada had informed that over 14,500 Canadian citizens and permanent residents were registered as being in Lebanon. The number could likely be higher as it only accounts for the registries through the government's website.

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US Envoy Travels to Middle East to Discuss Preventing Conflict From Spreading

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - US Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Barbara Leaf is traveling to the Middle East for discussions with partners on preventing the conflict in the region from spreading, the State Department said on Wednesday.

"Leaf has departed on travel to consult with regional partners and advance efforts to prevent the conflict in the Middle East from spreading," the statement said.

During the visit, Leaf will consider humanitarian solutions to protect civilians but also plans to reiterate the United States' support for the region, the statement said.

The State Department did not reveal the officials Leaf will meet but did mention that she will visit the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, Egypt, Jordan and Israel, the statement said.

"Additional stops may be added," the statement added.

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Biden Says Alarmed by Israeli Settler Attacks on Palestinians in West Bank, Must Stop

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he is alarmed by the ongoing attacks by Israeli settlers against Palestinians in the West Bank and urged an end to the provocations.

"I continue to be alarmed about extremist settlers attacking Palestinians in the West Bank, that's pouring gasoline on fire...they're attacking Palestinians in places that they're entitled to be. It has to stop they have to be held accountable, and has to stop now," Biden said during a press conference.

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Biden Says When Israel-Gaza Crisis is Over There Must be Vision of What Comes Next

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that after the Israel-Gaza crisis is over, creating a path forward towards peace will require effort from all involved parties.

"When this crisis is over, There has to be a vision of what comes next. And in our view, it has to be a two state solution. And that means a concentrated effort for all the parties: Israelis, Palestinians, regional partners, and global leaders to put us on a path toward peace," said Biden at a press conference.

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

Biden Says Hamas Carried Out Attacks to Disrupt Israel's Ties With Arab Nations

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Wednesday that he thinks the Palestinian Hamas movement carried out its October 7 attacks against Israel as a means to disrupt the normalization of ties between Israel and Arab nations.

"I'm convinced one of the reasons for Hamas attack...my instinct tells me is because of the progress we're making towards regional integration for Israel and regional integration overall. And we can't leave that work behind," Biden said during a press conference.

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US Congressman Mike Johnson Elected New Speaker of House of Representatives

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Wednesday elected Republican Congressman Mike Johnson as its speaker.

Johnson secured the speakership with 220 votes, followed by Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries who received 209 votes.

House Republicans nominated Johnson as speaker-designate late on Tuesday night after multiple lawmakers failed to secure enough votes to win the speakership.

Johnson, until now, was rather a low-key congressman who did not stand out. Johnson, a Trump supporter, voted against certifying the 2020 presidential election results and has voted against aid for Ukraine in the past.

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White House Urges Lawmakers to Sell US Aid for Ukraine as Beneficial for Economy – Reports

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) – The White House has been urging Republicans and Democrats to defend and sell the continuation of the US aid for Ukraine as beneficial for domestic economy, Politico reported on Wednesday citing unnamed aides and lawmakers familiar with the effort.

Republicans and Democrats who support the continuation of generous material support for Kiev in the conflict with Russia received from the White House a set of special talking points that would help them make the case that aiding Ukraine is good for American jobs, the report said.

A new approach to seeking support for US President Joe Biden's policy to continue funding the Ukrainian military suggests that the previous tactic of persuasion by invoking US national security interests has not worked.

“This supplemental request invests over \$50 billion in the American defense industrial base —

ensuring our military continues to be the most ready, capable, and best equipped fighting force the world has ever seen — and expanding production lines, strengthening the American economy and creating new American jobs,” the report cited a document with the talking points as saying.

Last week, the Biden administration sent a \$106 billion supplemental funding request to Congress that includes aid for Israel and Ukraine, as well as money for US border security. In particular, the White House's request includes \$61.4 billion in assistance for Ukraine, with another \$14.3 billion intended for Israeli aid as a growing number of US polls show a decline in public support of additional aid for Kiev.

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US-Led Forces in Iraq, Syria Conduct Live Fire Drills Amid Uptick in Attacks - Coalition

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - US-led forces in Iraq and Syria have been conducting live fire exercises following an uptick in attacks against bases housing American forces across the Middle East, the Combined Joint Task Force - Operation Inherent Resolve (coalition) said in a notice on Wednesday.

"On Oct. 25, 2023, coalition service members will be conducting ground operational exercises in or near the al-Hasakah region in Syria to validate weapons systems and maintain crew proficiency and readiness," the notice said.

In a separate notice, the coalition said troops in Iraq on Wednesday will be conducting base defense and ground operational exercises in or near the Khalidiyah region to validate weapons systems and maintain crew proficiency and readiness.

The coalition has been holding live fire drills every day since the Hamas attacks against Israel on October 7.

Media reported that some 30 US troops have suffered minor injuries in more than a dozen attacks against American forces in the Middle East.

The Defense Department has blamed Iran's "proxy forces" for carrying out attacks against US troops in the region.

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UN Dialogue With Israeli Authorities on Visas 'Ongoing' - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - Discussions between the United Nations and Israel regarding the issuance of visas continue after Israel denied providing a visa to UN Under-Secretary-General Martin Griffiths, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric on Wednesday.

"Our dialogue with the Israeli authorities on visas is ongoing," Dujarric said during a press briefing.

On Tuesday, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres remarked at the UN Security Council that the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7 did not happen in a vacuum. The Israeli authorities strongly criticized this and other comments by Guterres.

Following Guterres' remarks, Israeli Ambassador to the United Nations Gilad Erdan said that Israel would deny a visa to Griffiths as he planned to visit the country amid tensions with Hamas and the plight of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

On October 7, the Palestinian group Hamas launched surprise attacks against Israel from the Gaza Strip. Israel declared war on Hamas and launched massive strikes as well as imposed a complete blockade of the Gaza Strip, cutting off supplies of water, food, medicines, electricity, and fuel to some 2.3 million Palestinians.

The escalation of the conflict has resulted in the killing of 1,200 Israeli soldiers and civilians and some 5,800 Palestinians with multiple thousands injured.

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US Officials 'Frankly Raised' Areas of Debate in Meeting With Chinese Officials - Treasury

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - US officials "frankly raised" the areas of disagreement with Chinese counterparts during the first virtual meeting of the Financial Working Group, the US Treasury Department said on Wednesday.

"Following the first meeting of the Economic Working Group on Monday, the United States and the People's Republic of China today held the first meeting of the Financial Working Group, which serves as an ongoing channel for both countries to discuss financial policy matters and cooperation on common challenges," the department said in a press release. "US officials also frankly raised areas of disagreement."

The meeting lasted two hours and included a discussion on domestic and global financial stability, financial supervision and regulation; sustainable finance; anti-money laundering and countering the financing of terrorism, the release added.

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Arab Countries Prepare UNGA Draft Resolution on Israel, Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - Arab countries have prepared a UN General Assembly draft resolution on the situation in Israel and Gaza, a UN source told Sputnik on Wednesday.

There is a chance that the General Assembly will consider the document during its special session on October 26.

According to the draft resolution, seen by Sputnik, the Assembly is calling for an immediate ceasefire and urges all sides to fulfill their obligations under international humanitarian law,

particularly related to the protection of civilians and civilian infrastructure.

"[The document] demands also the immediate, continuous, sufficient and unhindered provision of essential goods and services to civilians throughout the Gaza Strip, including but limited to water, food, medical supplies, fuel and electricity," according to the text.

The document also calls for immediate access for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees and other UN bodies and their partners, as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross and other international organizations to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to civilians.

The draft resolution also calls for the "immediate release of all civilians" and stresses the necessity of an immediate creation mechanism to protect the civilian population in Palestine in accordance with the existing UN resolutions.

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UNRWA to Cease Operations in Gaza Wednesday Night if Israel Does Not Allow Fuel Delivery

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) will be forced to cease its humanitarian operations in the Gaza Strip on Wednesday night if Israel continues not to allow fuel deliveries to the area, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"The UN Relief and Works Agency, by far the largest humanitarian provider in Gaza, warned that unless fuel is allowed in Gaza immediately, UNRWA will be forced to halt operations tonight," Dujarric said during a press briefing on Wednesday.

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Guterres Must Resign Over Refusal to Retract Remarks on Israel – Envoy to UN

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) – Israel's Permanent Representative to the UN Gilad Erdan said on Wednesday that Secretary General Antonio Guterres refusal to retract his remarks on Israel are disgraceful and must lead to his resignation.

"It is a disgrace to the UN that the Secretary-General does not retract his words and is not even able to apologize for what he said yesterday. He must resign," Erdan said in a statement.

The Envoy rebuked Guterres for "distorting reality" by stating that Hamas' October 7 attack did not happen in a vacuum, remarks that Erdan characterized as a presumption of guilt of Israel for the actions of the Palestinian armed group.

Erdan added that Guterres cannot continue as Secretary General due to his inability to understand that the "murder of innocents" cannot be understood by any sort of background.

"It is sad that this is the man who heads the UN which is supposed to fight terrorism and global atrocities," he continued.

On Tuesday, the UN chief once again condemned the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel but said that it did not take place "in a vacuum" as the Palestinians have been occupied for 56 years. Erdan then stated that Guterres must resign unless he immediately apologizes for his remarks.

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US Air National Guard Begins Training Ukrainian Pilots on F-16 Fundamentals - Air Force

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - The US Air National Guard has started to train Ukrainian pilots this week on F-16 fighter jet fundamentals, an Air Force spokesperson said in a statement to Sputnik on Wednesday.

"The 162nd Wing, Arizona Air National Guard, began training a small number of Ukrainian pilots this week in F-16 fundamentals," the spokesperson said. "The training curriculum will align with the foundational knowledge and skills of each pilot and is expected to last several months. This follows President Biden and Secretary Austin's decision to train Ukrainian pilots on F-16s as part of the United States' contribution to Ukraine."

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Israel Punishing Entire Gaza Population for Hamas' Actions - UN Rapporteur

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - Israel is punishing the entire population of Gaza for the attacks carried out by Hamas, UN Special Rapporteur on the occupied Palestinian territories Francesca Albanese said on Wednesday.

"What Israel is doing is punishing the entire Palestinian population for what Hamas has done," Albanese told reporters.

She acknowledged that Israeli security and dismantling the military capacity of Hamas are legitimate goals, but Israel is not solving these issues by striking civilians in Gaza.

"This is not self-defense. Surely, not under international law," she said, adding that the entire population of Gaza is paying for Hamas' actions.

Albanese condemned the violence against civilians committed by both sides of the conflict. She called it war crimes that should be investigated,

The Palestinian group Hamas launched a surprise large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip on October 7 and breached the border, killing and abducting hundreds of civilians in neighboring Israeli communities. Israel launched retaliatory strikes and ordered a complete blockade of the Gaza Strip, home to more than 2 million people, cutting off supplies of water, food and fuel. The blockade was later eased to allow trucks with humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The escalation of the conflict has resulted in thousands of people killed and injured on both sides.

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Israel Delays Gaza Ground Invasion to Allow Time for US Regional Air Defense - Reports

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - Israel has agreed to a United States request to delay its ground invasion of Gaza in order to allow Washington time to set up air defenses to protect against potential backlash toward US troops in the Middle East, the Wall Street Journal reported Wednesday, citing US and Israeli officials.

The Defense Department is in the midst of deploying close to a dozen air defense systems to the Middle East in order to protect US troops in Iraq, Syria, Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates from potential missile and rocket attacks.

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US Senate Committee Approves Jacob Lew as Ambassador to Israel – Reports

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) – The US Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved Jacob Lew's nomination as US ambassador to Israel on Wednesday, The Messenger reported, citing Senator Todd Young.

"Jack Lew's nomination to be ambassador to Israel passed out of committee, 12-9," a reporter from The Messenger posted on social media.

While the committee agreed on the urgency of appointing an ambassador to Israel, several senators had expressed strong reservations over Lew's appointment because of lingering concerns that his implementation of the JCPOA while serving as treasury secretary gave Iran access to the US financial system.

Lew was nominated by President Biden last month after the former ambassador, Tom Nides, stepped down in July.

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Bank of Canada Maintains Policy Rate at 5% But Does Not Exclude Future Rate Hikes
(Updates with more details in paras 3-8)

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - The Bank of Canada on Wednesday issued a statement that it has decided to maintain the policy rate at 5%, but also said it does not exclude the possibility of increasing the policy rate in the future if such action is deemed necessary.

"The Bank of Canada today held its target for the overnight rate at 5%, with the Bank Rate at

5.25% and the deposit rate at 5%. The Bank is continuing its policy of quantitative tightening," the statement said.

Past interest rate increases have eased economic activity and relieved price pressures on Canadians amid slowed consumption and demand for housing, services and goods, the statement said.

"Weaker demand and higher borrowing costs are weighing on business investment," the statement added.

The Bank of Canada said economic growth is expected to remain weak and is forecast at 1.2% in 2023, 0.9% in 2024 and 2.5% in 2025, the statement said.

The near-term economic weakness is due to the broadening impacts of past rate increases and slower foreign demand, the statement said.

Higher interest rates are moderating inflation on several consumption goods bought with credit and food inflation has significantly decreased from previous high rates, the statement also said, adding that mortgage interest costs and inflation in rent and housing remain significant.

The next overnight rate announcement is expected to be delivered on December 6.

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Food Banks in Canada Registered Record 1.9Mln Visits in March

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) – Nearly two million Canadians visited food banks across the country in March, setting another record and marking a 32% increase over a year, Food Banks Canada (FBC) said on Wednesday.

"In March 2023, there were almost 2 million visits to food banks across Canada, representing a 32 per cent increase compared to March 2022, and a 78.5 per cent increase compared to March 2019, which is the highest year-over-year increase in usage ever reported," FBC said in a report.

Children made up one-third of food bank clients.

The report also showed that 43.8% of those relying on food banks are from single adult households, although those only represent around one-third, or 29.3%, of the Canadian population.

Data also showed that 42.4% of food bank clients rely on provincial social assistance as their main source of income.

Another 16.7% of food bank clients have a job income and 9.9% have a pension as their main source of income.

Some 13% of food bank attendees say they have no income, according to FBC.

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Pentagon Official Says US 'Navigating' Overlap in Ukraine, Israel Defense Demands

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - The United States is "navigating" an overlap between the defense demands of Ukraine's and Israel's respective conflicts, but that is mitigated by their different requirements and Israel's own very robust industrial base, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Industrial Base Development and International Engagement Justin McFarlin said on Wednesday.

"I think the good news is that there isn't a 100% overlap between the kind of requirements of those two conflicts," McFarlin said at the ComDef conference in Virginia. "There is some and we're navigating that."

McFarlin said the other good news is that Israel has a very robust industrial base and production capabilities.

Despite its production capacity challenges, McFarlin concluded that the United States "did not have an option" to support one conflict and not the other.

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Congressman Johnson Appears to Have Enough Support to Become US House Speaker - Source

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Mike Johnson appears to have enough support from his colleagues in the House of Representatives to become the next speaker, a congressional source told Sputnik on Wednesday.

"It does appear he has the support necessary to win," the source said. "There haven't been many public objections to him so I'd be incredibly surprised if more than five Republicans can find a good reason as to why they won't vote Mike Johnson in as Speaker."

House Republicans nominated Johnson as speaker-designate late on Tuesday night after several other lawmakers failed to secure enough votes to win the speakership.

The House of Representatives is set to vote at 12:00 p.m. Eastern Time to confirm Johnson's nomination.

This material is distributed by Ghebi LLC on behalf of Federal State Unitary Enterprise Rossiya Segodnya International Information Agency, and additional information is on file with the Department of Justice, Washington, District of Columbia.

Xi, California Governor Discuss Climate Action, Economic Development - Statement

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - California Governor Gavin Newsom met in Beijing Chinese President Xi Jinping and discussed action to address climate change and promote of economic development, issues pertaining to cultural exchanges and concerns regarding human rights, the Office of the Governor said after the meeting in Beijing on Wednesday.

"Governor Newsom met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and other high-level Chinese

officials to discuss climate action, economic development, cultural exchange, human rights concerns, and democracy," the Office of the Governor said in a statement.

Newsom reiterated the necessity to keep communication lines open and the importance of cooperating on climate change in addition to other issues and emphasized the critical need of China's efforts to reduce pollution, the statement said.

"As two of the world's largest economies, the work we do together is felt in countless communities on both sides of the Pacific," Newsom said in the statement.

In addition, Newsom raised a number of human rights issues regarding China, including Hong Kong, Tibet, Xinjiang and Taiwan as well as the fentanyl crisis in the United States and China's role in combating the transnational shipping of precursor chemicals, the statement added.

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US OKs Energy Transactions With Sanctioned Russian Banks Through May 1, 2024 - Treasury

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - The US Treasury Department on Wednesday issued a general license authorizing transactions related to energy with sanctioned Russian banks through May 1, 2024.

"Except as provided in paragraph (c) of this general license, all transactions prohibited by Executive Order (E.O.) 14024 involving one or more of the following entities that are related to energy are authorized, through 12:01 a.m. eastern daylight time, May 1, 2024," the license read.

Energy-related transactions are authorized with 11 Russian banks, including the Russian Central Bank, VTB Bank, Alfa-Bank, Sberbank, Vnesheconombank, Sovcombank, as well as with any entity in which one or more of the banks from the list own a 50% or greater interest, according to the license.

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More Than Three-Fourths of Americans Think US Going In Wrong Direction – Poll

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) – More than three-fourths of Americans are concerned that the United States is moving in the wrong direction, a new poll conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI) showed on Wednesday.

"More than three-fourths of Americans (77%) believe that the country is going in the wrong direction, compared with only 22% who believe the country is going in the right direction," PRRI said in a summary of the poll's findings.

The vast majority of both Republicans (90%) and independents (81%) are frustrated over how things are going on in the country, while only 59% of Democrats share these concerns, it added.

The survey also revealed that a majority of Americans (52%) agree that "America's best days are now behind us," while only 43% disagree with this opinion.

"Fewer Americans believe that American culture and way of life has mostly changed for the better (44%) than changed for the worse (55%) since the 1950s," the survey found.

Almost one-fourth of Americans (23%) say that the political situation justifies resorting to violence in order to save the country. Only 15% shared this view just two years ago,

The survey was conducted on August 25-30 among 2,525 adults in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, with a margin of error of +/- 2.19 percentage points.

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Bank of Canada Maintains Policy Rate at 5% But Does Not Exclude Future Rate Hikes

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) - The Bank of Canada on Wednesday issued a statement that it has decided to maintain the policy rate at 5%, but also said it does not exclude the possibility increasing the policy rate in the future if such action is deemed necessary.

"The Bank of Canada today held its target for the overnight rate at 5%, with the Bank Rate at 5.25% and the deposit rate at 5%. The Bank is continuing its policy of quantitative tightening," the statement said.

The next overnight rate announcement is expected to be delivered on December 6.

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Guterres 'Shocked' That His Remarks Were Misinterpreted as Justification of Hamas Actions

UNITED NATIONS, October 25 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres expressed shock on Wednesday that his statement at the UN Security Council on the Gaza war was misinterpreted by Israel as justifying the Hamas attacks.

"I am shocked by misinterpretations by some of my statement yesterday in the Security Council – as if it was justifying acts of terror by Hamas. This is false. It was the opposite," Guterres told reporters.

On Tuesday, the UN chief once again condemned the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, but said that it did not take place "in a vacuum" as the Palestinians have been occupied for 56 years.

Israeli Ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan stated that Guterres must resign unless he immediately apologizes for his remarks.

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US-Led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework Making Progress on Trade, Clean Economy - USTR

WASHINGTON, October 25 (Sputnik) – Countries of the US-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) made progress on trade, a clean and fair economy during talks in Kuala Lumpur, the Office of the US Trade Representative and the Commerce Department said in a statement on Wednesday.

The sixth in-person negotiating round for the IPEF took place in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from October 15-24.

"Building on the discussions that took place during the fifth negotiating round in Bangkok, Thailand in September 2023, the IPEF partners continued to make progress on negotiations towards high-standard outcomes under Pillars I (Trade), III (Clean Economy), and IV (Fair Economy)," the joint statement said.

The partners also continued discussions on the next steps for the proposed IPEF Supply Chain Agreement (Pillar II), it added.

"The United States will continue to engage with IPEF partners and will participate in additional in-person negotiating rounds in 2023. Additional details regarding the next in-person negotiating round will be announced at a later date," the statement said.

The Biden administration confirmed its commitment to provide stakeholders and the US Congress with updates on the progress of negotiations, it added.

President Joe Biden launched the IPEF in May last year. The regional economic initiative has 14 participating member states.

The US regards the IPEF as a model for meeting modern challenges ranging from setting rules of the digital economy to ensuring sustainable supply chains. At the same time, some Indo-Pacific leaders see the new US initiative as an attempt to replace the existing Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), from which Washington withdrew during the presidency of Donald Trump.