

12/14/23 Thursday

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.

Report: Kamala Harris Pushing Biden to Show Concern for Palestinians Amid Gaza Conflict

On Tuesday, the UN General Assembly overwhelmingly voted for a resolution calling for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Of the 153 members, only 10, including the US and Israel, voted against the resolution.

US Vice President Kamala Harris is reportedly pushing US President Joe Biden and administration officials to show more sympathy toward Palestinians in Gaza.

A US media [report](#), which cites three unnamed Biden administration officials, states Harris has urged the president and others to show more sympathy for the thousands of Palestinian civilians who have been killed by Israel as part of its response to Hamas' October 7 attack.

More than 18,700 Palestinians have been killed since Israel started bombing Gaza, including at least 7,729 children. Another 50,594 Palestinians have been injured, including 8,663 children. An additional 286 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank, including at least 65 children. Per Israel's tally, 1,147 Israelis were killed in Hamas' attack. It also claims about 240 civilians and soldiers were taken hostage during the attack.

According to at least one Biden administration official, via US media, the vice president has suggested the US take a stricter approach with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In recent weeks, the administration has used more forceful language while calling for the protection of civilians in Gaza. Earlier this week, Biden condemned what he called "indiscriminate bombing" by Israel and called on the Netanyahu government to change its tactics, but the Biden administration is nevertheless pushing for Congress to approve \$14 billion in aid to the country.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Secretary of State Antony Blinken have also given lip service to reducing civilian casualties, cautioning Israel that its tactics could help Hamas in the long run. "The center of gravity is the civilian population and if you drive them into the arms of the enemy, you replace a tactical victory with a strategic defeat," Austin said early this month. "We will continue to press Israel to protect civilians and to ensure the robust flow of humanitarian aid," Austin added.

Harris' press secretary Kristen Allen has denied there was a gap between the vice president and other officials, including Biden.

"There is no daylight between the president and the vice president, nor has there been," Allen said, adding that she "would caution the media about citing anonymous sources in the 'orbit' about sensitive national security conversations between the president and vice president."

But according to multiple media reports, Harris urged Biden to include a line decrying Islamophobia in his first speech after the October 7 attack. Biden did not mention Islamophobia in his speech.

The reported push by Harris may be an attempt to win back some of the Democratic base that the Biden administration has lost, due at least in part to its response in Gaza.

According to a poll released weeks after Israel's bombing of Gaza began, Biden's job approval among Arab Americans had dropped to just 17%, a 42-point drop from its 2020 number. Additionally, [only one-third](#) of Americans overall say they approve of his handling of the conflict, including just 19% of voters under 30.

A [different poll](#) stated Biden has seen an uptick in Democratic approval of his handling of the situation in recent days, perhaps a reflection of the administration's more forceful language. After a meeting with leaders of Egypt, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates, Harris used her most forceful language yet while talking about civilian deaths. "The United States is unequivocal: International humanitarian law must be respected. Too many innocent Palestinians have been killed. Frankly, the scale of civilian suffering, and the images and videos coming from Gaza are devastating. It is truly heartbreaking," she said.

Wa'el Alzayat, the CEO of the Muslim advocacy group Emgage, welcomed Harris' harder tone. "She's using stronger language regarding the Israelis needing to not harm civilians," adding that the comments could be aimed at "chipping away at the terrible numbers" with young voters. But others believe the administration's tone is meaningless without action. "I think [growing calls for a ceasefire in the US] caused ... Biden administration officials to start speaking in a different tone. Whether that's been translated in terms of policy – I don't think so," Omar Rahman of the Middle East Council on Global Affairs told [Arab media](#).

Warren David, president of media outlet Arab America agreed, saying the words need to be backed with action. "It doesn't really mean anything, it's empty, if there's no action being taken," he said, adding that "if she's influencing the president to stop the genocide in Gaza, I welcome that."

Last week, the US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that would have demanded an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza.

Hamas official Osama Hamdan said the blood of Palestinians is on the hands of the Biden administration, saying, "to minimize civilian casualties shows blatant disregard and disrespect for our people's blood."

"Every drop of blood spilled from a child or infant or woman or elderly person is the responsibility of the [Israeli] occupation and the US administration."

On Thursday, Netanyahu thanked the US for its UN veto of the ceasefire resolution and promised to continue the war, "Nothing will stop us. We are going on to the end, until victory, nothing less," he said.

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.

Gen Z Skeptical of US Institutions Amid Converging Economic, Geopolitical Failures

Younger Americans have seen the benefits of the post-World War II economic boom almost totally evaporate, making them increasingly skeptical about supporting a system that has failed to deliver on its promises of prosperity and security, a college organizer told Sputnik.

A recent report to Congress by the recruiting chiefs of the US military's five service branches revealed widespread staffing problems. Multiple branches [failed to meet their recruiting goals](#),

with the US Army falling more than 100,000 people short. Previously, a report revealed US Navy warships are commonly operating at two-thirds of their typical crew complement, damaging morale and contributing to deadly accidents - problems the Navy said still existed in 2023. USAF Brig. Gen. Christopher R. Amrhein, commander of the USAF's recruiting service, told lawmakers that fewer young Americans are willing to serve in the armed forces. He pointed out that just 12% of US youth have a parent who served in the military, compared to 40% in 1995, noting the "youth market" of potential recruits had "transitioned from being disconnected with the military to mostly disinterested with it."

Max Reed, American Student Union president, [told Sputnik](#) that a number of social factors have converged on Generation Z, those born between the late 1990s and early 2010s, to undermine their faith in either the American government or socioeconomic system.

"I think what we're seeing here is a culmination of a couple factors: you have Generation Z growing up without the societal wealth that other generation, such as the Greatest Generation, Baby Boomers, and even Gen-X to a certain degree, possessed as a result of the kind of the postwar economic boom that the US experienced as a result of being the only economy left standing at the end of the Second World War. We also have a kind of changing, I guess, attitude about the military as more and more people grow up, not just with war on the news but war on cell phones. I can't tell you how many people I know and Generation Z are on Discord, Telegram, or various social media apps where content about showing the reality, the brutality and the gore of war is just all over their screens. And I think this is creating an effect where American youth aren't only just questioning the meaning of these wars - US foreign policy as a whole - they're also contemplating what is the point of a military that is not defending us at home or abroad as we continue to see increasing instability throughout the Middle East as a result of US foreign policy action."

Reed said another factor was that younger people don't see themselves and their needs reflected in the policies being undertaken by their government.

"People see - and accurately so - the US military being the armed wing of the US government and the state and you know, it's kind of a social contract between yourself and if you join the armed forces, armed forces expect you to serve and to obey not only the Constitution but defend the American republic. But as American youth and students are in this economic situation that we're in, are seeing all these foreign wars overseas or having relatives addicted to opiates or coming back from wars damaged, I think we're seeing a propensity for American youth just not willing to participate and join a US military that will very quickly deploy them overseas for a year and then have them come back wounded or otherwise mentally unwell. I mean, if you look at the way veterans are treated in American society, a ridiculous amount of veterans are homeless today in American society while we're spending \$100 billion funding Nazis in Ukraine."

A recent report from Brown University's Costs of War Project concluded that US military interventions over the last 20 years have [made Americans less safe](#), pointing out that there are more terrorist groups in 2023 than before the US War on Terror was launched in 2001. Reed recalled that the CIA coined the now-common term "blowback" during the Cold War for the phenomenon of US intelligence operations having "unintended consequences" that might even affect Americans back home.

"We've clearly seen that the funding of the Mujahideen in the 80s led to the growth of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the September 11th attacks. Osama bin Laden used to be our guy in Afghanistan - 20 years later, we were fighting him. So I think we're seeing things in, so to speak, the chickens coming home to roost, in terms of US foreign policy. And I can't imagine what's going to happen in the next ten years or so with all these weapons of destruction left over from the Ukraine conflict that's been imposed ever since 2014 by a US-sponsored coup, destabilizing a lot of Central Europe with the drug trade, arms trade, neo-Nazism. It's really a scary thought to think, at some point in the future in America we could be dealing with not just the aftermath of the war on terror, but this recent conflict in Ukraine."

"Well, I think you have a problem particularly amongst Gen Z. There is this sense of hatred for both the Democratic and Republican parties. Social media has, and the Democratic Party, to their credit, have very effectively used this kind of social blackmail, especially amongst middle class, upper-middle class students, to make them feel as though, 'oh, we have to vote for the Democrats because the Republicans are so evil and they're going to do X, Y, Z.' But there is a growing bloc of people of my generation who are just simply out of the system, aren't going to vote, or if they do vote, will probably vote for the Greens or Libertarian parties, just so they're not going to vote for the establishment."

"Another thing that we're seeing in universities, especially related to the recent conflicts in Palestine, is the blacklisting of teachers, students, faculty to the point where these people are being put on websites, the Canary Mission, for example. We're seeing a real attack on the civil liberties and kind of the political expression of Generation Z. And I think we've yet to see the full metastasization of what this is going to mean and the future coming years."

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.

'Shared Future': Vietnam, China Pledge to Resist 'Color Revolutions' During Xi's Hanoi Visit

Two of the world's declared socialist republics pledged to deepen their commitments to cooperation and a "shared future" on Wednesday as the leaders of China and Vietnam penned dozens of agreements on trade, security, and other kinds of cooperation.

At a joint conference with Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong in Hanoi on Wednesday, Chinese President Xi Jinping said the agreements would "open a new stage in the development of relations" between the two socialist states, which have had a tumultuous relationship since the mid-20th century. Xi said it was a step toward building a community with a "shared future." In their joint statement, the two leaders said Sino-Vietnamese relations had been raised to a state of "greater political mutual trust, more substantive security cooperation, deeper practical cooperation, firmer social foundation, closer multilateral coordination, and better management of differences."

Officials also pledged to increase security and intelligence cooperation with the intent of preventing a "color revolution" in either country by "hostile forces."

The specific phrasing could only refer to the United States, which fought a bloody war in Vietnam to prevent the spread of socialism in the 1960s and 1970s and which has declared its intent to halt the rise of China today through “great power competition.”

A particular point of contention the pair marked as a danger was “maritime differences” in the South China Sea, where Hanoi and Beijing have overlapping sea and island claims, leading to showdowns between fishing fleets, gas exploration vessels, and other incidents.

The United States, [inserting itself into the affairs](#) of nations thousands of miles from its shores, has accused both states of violating the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), but clearly marked China as the major threat to smaller regional states, including Vietnam. The US has pushed trade and military deals with Hanoi in recent years, including a visit by a US aircraft carrier, in an effort to woo the smaller nation away from Chinese orbit.

Officials signed 36 agreements in total, including on trade, railway and road connections, investment in green technologies, and on setting up a hotline for answering “unexpected incidents arising from fisheries activities at sea.”

During his visit, Xi met with Nguyen Phu Trong, general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Prime Minister Pham Minh Chinh and Vuong Dinh Hue, chairman of the National Assembly of Vietnam.

“China would like to step up multilateral cooperation with Vietnam ... increase the voice and influence of developing countries in international affairs,” Xi told Trong, who replied that Hanoi saw improving China-Vietnam relations as a top priority while reaffirming Hanoi would not harness its chariot to another nation’s steed.

Xi’s visit comes after the US and Vietnam elevated their relations to being “comprehensive strategic partners” [in September](#), although Beijing and Hanoi have referred to each other as such for more than 15 years.

At the time, Vietnam made clear it “has no interest” in joining a “US-orchestrated” anti-China coalition. Other regional powers, such as the Philippines, have been more obliging, but Manila has also [refused to allow Washington](#) to use newly opened bases on its soil for offensive operations.

In the 1970s, China and Vietnam became rivals after finding themselves on opposite sides of the fissure that opened in the worldwide communist movement, with Beijing and its allies on one side and the Soviet Union and its allies on the other.

They even fought a brief war in 1979 after Vietnam invaded Cambodia and overthrew the murderous Khmer Rouge government, a Chinese ally. However, within a decade, the two nations had ended their border skirmishes and normalized relations, with a steady stream of agreements following in later years to write out the possibility of armed conflict between them.

The end of the Cold War in 1990 came amid a collapse of part of the communist sphere, with all of the Warsaw Pact allies, including the USSR, being replaced with restored capitalist states.

By the mid-1990s, only five states led by Marxist-Leninist parties remained: China and Vietnam, their neighbors Laos and North Korea, and Cuba. The crisis caused old animosities to be quickly buried as their friends dwindled in number.

Today, China has become Vietnam’s top trade partner, accounting for 15.5% of total export values from Vietnam as of 2022 and 23.9% of Vietnamese imports. The two countries are both members of numerous [international trade blocs](#) and programs, from the Belt and Road Initiative to the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

'Honored in the Breach': US Nods to Human Rights as Israeli Arms Shipments Persist

Unless the White House threatens to withhold substantial amounts of weapons from Israel, Jerusalem is unlikely to take the administration's verbal beratings seriously, a human rights lawyer told Sputnik. However, both street protests and legal action are capable of influencing events.

As the war in Gaza grinds on, outrage is also continuing to grow over Israel's treatment of the civilian population in the small territory. While US President Joe Biden has remained steadfastly behind the Israeli war cause, Biden verbally castigated Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for the "indiscriminate" bombing of Gaza and the deaths of more than 18,000 civilians.

On Thursday, US media [reported](#) that Vice President Kamala Harris has also pressured Biden to be "tougher" on Netanyahu and told administration staffers to show more concern for humanitarian issues in Gaza.

The news comes amid reports confirmed in Israeli media that Israeli soldiers detained, bound, stripped down, and tortured hundreds of Palestinian civilians in Gaza after photos of the incident circulated widely on social media. The Committee to Protect Journalists [has reported](#) that at least 63 journalists have been killed in Gaza since the war began on October 7, as well as targeted assassinations of cultural figures like [professor and writer Refaat Alareer](#), whose Shujaiya apartment was singled out in a December 7 airstrike.

Human rights activist, labor attorney, and author Dan Kovalik told [Radio Sputnik's Political Misfits](#) on Thursday that a strong case exists for bringing legal action against the Biden administration on human rights grounds to halt the weapons shipments to Israel.

Violence 'Every Day' in West Bank

Kovalik, who just returned to the United States from spending a week in the West Bank and Jerusalem, said that "people feel pretty grim, most of the people I know are not even going out to restaurants or doing anything to celebrate."

"The people who put me up, their daughter is getting married in December, they were going to have a big wedding - that's been canceled," he said. "People feel they can't do such things when their brothers and sisters are being murdered in Gaza, is the long and short of it."

"There was violence every day I was there. In various places that I was at, including Ramallah, in Bethlehem, in Hebron. In one day, five Palestinians were killed in skirmishes, I'd say probably 10 were killed the whole week I was there. The death toll is nearing around 300 since October 7, which again would exceed the entire number from all of last year, and around 3,000 Palestinians have been arrested in the West Bank since October 7, which is an astounding number," Kovalik said.

Kovalik said many times, Palestinians arrested in such mass sweeps are not charged with crimes, but are "held in what is called 'administrative detention,' in which case they don't even have to be charged. I met a young man, he was in jail for eight months, he was 17, he never knew why he was arrested, he said it was in a secret file and he never knew. He was released as part of the prisoner exchange a couple weeks ago. He was beaten in prison, he shared a cell with 12 or 13 other people, he said that they would get one plate of food to share. So it's terrible, what's happening is awful."

Kovalik said those kinds of facts weren't getting as much attention in the media due to the violence in Gaza, "which is much worse of course, but what's happening in the West Bank is terrible as well."

"Meanwhile, the construction of Israel settlements is fast and furious," he said. "You hear the sound of construction, you see the cranes at the top of the ridges, that's where the Israelis build their settlements. They are building furiously and they are destroying Palestinian homes in a furious manner. In fact, I got a tour of East Jerusalem from a human rights advocate, and he showed me all the homes that had been destroyed and all of the homes and apartment buildings that are slated for demolition, which is pretty astounding."

Pushing for Ceasefire

Kovalik said he "hopes" and "thinks it's possible" mass pressure on the White House for a ceasefire would yield results, noting "that's what people like me who have been protesting would like."

"Biden's words seem to be just words. He tells Netanyahu 'please stop killing so many civilians and using these heavy bombs on the population' - meanwhile, he sends them 2,000-pound bombs to drop on Gaza. Military experts in Afghanistan said they wouldn't even use 500-pound bombs because those were too big to use on an urban area, which Gaza is. Meanwhile, he's pushing for \$14 billion in aid to Israel at this time to help them with the war effort, and he's been trying to get rid of all limitations on Israel's ability to tap into US weapons and ammunition reserves so they can keep up their fight."

"If he coupled his statements to and about Netanyahu with action, that would mean something and he could force Netanyahu's hand if he withheld military assistance, but he's not doing that," Kovalik said. "So I don't know how to take Biden seriously on this."

"Now, if his poll numbers start to drop, then maybe he can be moved toward a ceasefire, though I was surprised to see the most recent polls that he pulled ahead of Trump again."

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan was the latest to meet with Netanyahu on Thursday, telling him the "high intensity" phase of the Gaza war needs to end "in a matter of weeks, not months."

Kovalik said that "unless they're going to threaten to withhold military support, and I don't see that happening, I don't see what everybody says to him is going to make any kind of a difference."

Legal Action to Halt Arms Shipments

Indeed, Kovalik noted that a federal lawmaker could likely sue Biden under [the Leahy Amendment](#), a part of the Foreign Assistance Act that prohibits the US government from giving financial assistance to foreign military or police forces "where there is credible information implicating that unit in the commission of gross violations of human rights (GVHR)."

The human rights lawyer said Biden's weapons sales to Israel "clearly does violate the Leahy Amendment," as well as numerous other international human rights laws and conventions to which the US is a signatory, and as a result are part of US law.

"And there are people, the Center for Constitutional Rights, has brought a lawsuit against Biden under the Genocide Convention trying to do just that, to prevent these arms sales," he noted.

"But as we see time and time again, in all the wars the US is involved in, they seem to rarely be invoked or invoked in any effective way. They seem to be 'honored in the breach,' which is quite sad."

“POWs have to be treated with respect, you're not even supposed to interview a prisoner of war for like a newspaper, certainly not publish photos of them naked or nearly naked,” he said, comparing to the US-operated prison at Abu Ghraib in Iraq, where torture and the circulation of photos of torture were widespread and revealed to much scandal in 2004.

“What makes it worse is these weren't even combatants,” he said, adding it “is an outrage,” all the more so because “Israel continues to lie about it” and many other things, which are repeated in the media until they are debunked.

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.

Unless the White House threatens to withhold substantial amounts of weapons from Israel, Jerusalem is unlikely to take the administration's verbal beratings seriously, human rights activist, labor attorney, and author Dan Kovalik told Sputnik.

“Biden's words seem to be just words. He tells Netanyahu ‘please stop killing so many civilians and using these heavy bombs on the population’ - meanwhile, he sends them 2,000-pound bombs to drop on Gaza ... he's pushing for \$14 billion in aid to Israel at this time to help them with the war effort, and he's been trying to get rid of all limitations on Israel's ability to tap into US weapons and ammunition reserves so they can keep up their fight,” Kovalik said.

“If he coupled his statements to and about Netanyahu with action, that would mean something and he could force Netanyahu's hand if he withheld military assistance, but he's not doing that.”

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.

Chinese and Vietnamese leaders penned three dozen agreements during a recent summit, pledging to increase security and intelligence cooperation with the intent of preventing a “color revolution” in either country by “hostile forces.”

The US has inserted itself into the maritime dispute between the two socialist states, trying to pry apart three decades of healing relations of the once-Cold War rivals.

“China would like to step up multilateral cooperation with Vietnam ... increase the voice and influence of developing countries in international affairs,” Xi told Nguyen Phu Trong, head of the Communist Party of Vietnam, who replied that Hanoi saw improving China-Vietnam relations as a top priority while reaffirming Hanoi would not harness its chariot to another nation's steed.

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.

US Vice President Kamala Harris is pushing Biden administration officials to show more sympathy for Palestinians killed by Israel in Gaza.

The vice president has already used more forceful rhetoric when speaking about civilian casualties than US President Joe Biden, but according to reports, she has been pushing for more.

It has been speculated that the push may be aimed at winning back voters that Biden has lost due to his response to the conflict in Gaza. Meanwhile, Harris' press secretary and other Biden administration officials, there is "no space" between the vice president and president.

The administration as a whole has been more forceful in its words, imploring Israel to change its tactics to minimize civilian casualties, but some Palestinian advocates insist the words must be backed with action. "Whether that's been translated in terms of policy – I don't think so," Omar Rahman of the Middle East Council on Global Affairs told Arab media.

Last week, the US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that would have called for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza.

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.

Hong Kong Issues Bounties for Five Overseas Activists – National Security Police

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Hong Kong national security police have announced a HK \$1 million (\$128,205) bounty on five activists living overseas, including two in the United States, according to a release.

"A total of five persons, namely male CHENG Man-kit, female HUI Wing-ting, female SIU Joey, male FOK Ka-chi and male CHOI Ming-da, who have fled overseas, are alleged to have continued to commit offences under the National Security Law, including 'incitement to secession,' 'incitement to subversion,' and 'collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security,'" the police said in a released on Thursday,

Hui and Siu are based in Washington, D.C. Hui is a policy and advocacy coordinator at The Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation, while Siu, reportedly a US citizen, is on the executive council of the World Liberty Congress.

Commenting on the issue during a press briefing on Thursday, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said that the United States deplores "any attempt to apply the Beijing-imposed national security law extraterritorially" and reiterates that "Hong Kong authorities have no jurisdiction within United States borders, where the advocates for democracy and freedom will continue to enjoy their constitutionally guaranteed freedoms and rights."

In July, Hong Kong's national security police placed the first round of bounties on eight other

national security suspects living overseas in the US, UK, and Australia.

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.

Canada to Base Tactical Aviation Assets in Latvia, 1st Such Deployment to Europe Since 90s

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Canada plans to deploy four Griffon helicopters to a Latvia-based NATO battlegroup, marking the first time in over 20 years that the country has based its tactical aviation capabilities in Europe, the Ministry of National Defense said on Friday. "Starting in summer 2024, Canada will deploy four Griffon helicopters to the eFP Battle Group and periodically deploy Chinooks as well, starting fall 2025. This is the first time that Canada has persistently deployed tactical aviation capabilities to Europe since operations in Bosnia and Kosovo in the late 1990s and early 2000s," the ministry said in a statement.

The announcement comes as National Defense Minister Bill Blair and Chief of the Defense Staff Gen. Wayne Eyre visit Latvia, which hosts Canada's largest foreign military deployment.

Per the roadmap it committed to in July, Canada is more than doubling its military presence in Operation Reassurance from about 1,000 troops to up to 2,200 persistently-deployed troops by 2026.

Blair announced several other measures, including finalizing the procurement of Portable Anti-Armor Missile Systems for Canadian forces in Latvia, including missiles, simulators, and associated supports; and deploying medium range radar capabilities for the first time to provide aerial surveillance for the brigade.

Blair also announced a total investment of more than C\$15 million (\$11.2 million) in infrastructure to scale up the current battlegroup to a brigade, part of the C\$2.6 billion in funding that Canada committed to Operation Reassurance in July.

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.

US Treasury Chief Says Will Visit China Next Year For Talks on Difficult Areas of Concern

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, during remarks at a US-China Business Council dinner, said she will visit China next year for talks with her Chinese counterpart on challenging issues.

"I plan to take my second trip to China as Treasury Secretary, where a significant portion of the agenda will focus on discussing difficult areas of concern with my counterpart," Yellen said Thursday.

Yellen, in her remarks, laid out the Treasury Department's priorities for next year, which will focus on continuing to responsibly manage the US-China economic relationship. However, Yellen highlighted that the US will not attempt to resolve all of the disagreements between the two countries because it would be an unrealistic goal.

Moreover, Yellen said both sides will work on strengthening bilateral communication with the hope that it will help prevent misunderstandings that could lead to a dangerous escalation. The US will maintain its commitment to clear communication on its actions, from its restrictions on US investment in China to sanctions, Yellen said.

The US and China will also facilitate exchanges between their financial regulators, such as what the United States does regularly with other major financial centers such as the European Union and the United Kingdom, Yellen said.

Yellen said the US will continue to push for the two countries to jointly address global challenges, including issues related to climate change.

The US, Yellen said, also wants to seek faster progress on China's sovereign debt restructurings in outstanding cases and advocate for needed changes to the debt architecture. The US will also continue to look for ways to continue partnering with China to strengthen the international financial architecture, including through evolving the multilateral development banks, Yellen said.

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.

Satanic Temple Says Baphomet Display in Iowa Capitol Building Destroyed Beyond Repair

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The Satanic Temple of Iowa said that their public display of the deity Baphomet in the US state's capitol building was destroyed beyond repair, following controversy over the religious exhibition.

"This morning, we were informed by authorities that the Baphomet statue in our holiday display was destroyed beyond repair," the Satanic Temple of Iowa said on Thursday in a statement via social media. "Happy Holidays! Hail Satan!"

Earlier in the week, Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds called the display "objectionable," but also defended the Satanic Temple's right to freedom of speech and religion. Reynolds encouraged people to pray over the Iowa Capitol in response.

Former US Navy pilot Michael Cassidy took responsibility for vandalizing the display by beheading the Baphomet statue.

"The world may tell Christians to submissively accept the legitimization of Satan, but none of the founders would have considered government sanction of Satanic altars inside Capitol buildings as protected by the First Amendment," Cassidy said in a statement.

The founder of conservative organization Turning Point USA, Charlie Kirk, said that the group will contribute \$10,000 to Cassidy's legal defense fund. Cassidy is facing criminal mischief charges for his actions, Kirk said.

The First Amendment of the US Constitution prohibits the government from making laws respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.

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.

US Senate Confirms Career Diplomat Lisa Johnson to Be Next Ambassador to Lebanon

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Senate confirmed career diplomat Lisa Johnson to be the next US Ambassador to Lebanon.

The Senate confirmed Johnson's nomination by unanimous consent on Thursday. Johnson's nomination had been waiting for a full Senate vote since the Senate Foreign Relations Committee approved her nomination in June.

According to the State Department, Johnson has served in posts in Lebanon, Pakistan, Namibia and other locations. She currently serves as deputy assistant secretary of state for Europe and Asia in the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs.

Johnson also previously served as White House National Security Council director for Middle East affairs.

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.

Houthi Fire Missile at Maersk Commercial Vessel in Bab el-Mandeb Strait - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Houthi rebels fired a ballistic missile from Yemen towards a commercial container ship transiting the Bab el-Mandeb strait but there were no injuries, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) said in a statement.

"Midday December 14 (Sanaa time), a ballistic missile was fired from a Houthi-controlled area of Yemen toward the international shipping lane north of the Bab-el-Mandeb," CENTCOM said on Thursday. "There were no injuries or damage. Following the missile launch, the M/V Maersk Gibraltar was hailed by the Houthis, who threatened further missile attacks."

The Houthis claimed to hit the Hong Kong-flagged ship, but a Maersk spokesperson said the ship was not hit, according to media reports.

CENTCOM said the incident did not involve US Forces, but they continue to closely monitor the situation.

US Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks recently confirmed that Washington is engaging with its allies on a plan to protect ships passing through the Red Sea from mounting attacks by Yemen's Ansar Allah movement, also known as the Houthis.

Last week, a Houthi spokesman said that the movement was ready to allow vessels of all countries to pass through the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea except those ships that are related to Israel.

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.

Post-War Gaza Could Be Overseen By Ex-Palestinian Authority Security Forces - US Official

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Gaza residents who previously served in the Palestinian Authority security forces could potentially form the initial governing body of the enclave after the Israeli military campaign ends, a senior US administration official told reporters.

"There are a number of Gazans who have been part of the Palestinian Authority security forces in the past and that might be able to serve as a nucleus for a future force, but I want to stress that is one idea of many," the official said on Thursday.

The United States is discussing this proposal with the Palestinians, the Israelis and other regional partners, but plans for a post-conflict Gaza is "very much remains a work in progress," the official added.

The official emphasized that there is a broad agreement that the future of Gaza should be Palestinian-led, but the future of Gaza should be one in which the Palestinians are not a threat to Israel, and that Israel is not a threat to them.

US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in a meeting with the Saudi Crown Prince earlier this week also consulted on this matter, the official noted.

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.

Biden Discusses NATO, Gaza Conflict With Erdogan - White House

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden spoke by telephone with Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan and discussed issues pertaining to NATO and the conflict in the Gaza Strip, the White House said.

"[Biden and Erdogan] discussed the importance of strengthening the NATO Alliance, including the importance of welcoming Sweden as an Ally as soon as possible and further enhancing Turkiye's NATO interoperability, and agreed to remain in close contact in the lead up to the July 2024 NATO Summit in Washington," the White House said in a statement on Thursday.

The two leaders also discussed the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian movement Hamas, including efforts to increase the flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza, the statement said.

In addition, Biden and Erdogan discussed the need for a "political horizon" for the Palestinian people, the statement added.

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.

Yellen Says US Financial Council Identifies AI as Financial System Vulnerability

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The US Financial Stability Oversight Council identified the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) technology as a vulnerability of the financial system, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen said in a statement.

"This year, the Council specifically identified the use of artificial intelligence in financial services as a vulnerability in the financial system," Yellen said during remarks at an open session of the panel on Thursday.

Uptake of AI by the financial system could accelerate as institutions continue to evaluate and adopt innovative technologies, Yellen said.

The panel will monitor evolving technologies to respond to emerging risks, Yellen added.

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.

Sullivan in Ramallah to Discuss Revamped Palestinian Authority, Future of Gaza - Official

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan during a visit to Ramallah on Friday will discuss the urgent need to revamp the Palestinian Authority's capacity and the future of the Gaza Strip, a senior administration official said during a press briefing.

"We'll talk about ... the capacity of the Palestinian Authority, which we recognize needs to be revamped, revitalized, and I think they would tell you that themselves," the official said on Thursday. "I think we'll have a pretty good discussion with President [Mahmoud] Abbas and his senior team about primarily stability in the West Bank, but also over time about what comes next in Gaza."

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.

Reports US Expects Israel to Soon Scale Back Gaza Op 'Not Entirely Accurate' - Official

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Reports claiming the United States expects Israel to soon scale back its military operation in Gaza are not entirely accurate, a senior US administration official told reporters.

Axios reported earlier in the day that US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in a meeting with Israeli officials notified them that Israel's military operation in Gaza must lessen its intensity in the coming weeks.

"I know there's been some reporting on timeframes and I just have to say that it's just not entirely accurate," the official said on Thursday.

There was also a discussion in these meetings about Israel shifting from a high intensity clearance operations, which are ongoing now, to ultimately lower intensity focus on high value targets, intelligence-driven raids, and other more narrow surgical military objectives, according to the official.

The official added that both sides also had very detailed discussions about how the Israelis are working to protect civilians amid its military operation in Gaza.

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.

Sullivan In Israel Had Detailed Discussion On Hostages – Official

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, who is currently traveling to the Middle East, had very detailed discussions with his Israeli counterparts on releasing hostages from Gaza, a senior US administration official said on Thursday.

“There was a very detailed discussion of the effort to get hostages out of Gaza,” the official told reporters.

He did not clarify the specific number of hostages but pointed out that there are about 100 of them or maybe less.

“We are calling on Hamas to release those hostages,” he said.

The official also stressed that the US is trying to locate these people and to bring them to a safe place.

On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing over 1,200 people and abducting some 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 18,500 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of the conflict, according to local authorities.

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.

Sullivan to Speak With Palestinian Authority During West Bank Visit on Friday- Official

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan will be in Ramallah to speak with the Palestinian Authority, a Senior Administration Official said on Thursday.

"Jake [Sullivan] will be in the West Bank tomorrow in Ramallah to talk to the Palestinian Authority," said the official.

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.

Senior US Defense Official on China Policy Met With Chinese Counterpart - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China Michael Chase recently met China's Defense Attache in Washington Maj. Gen. Liu Zhan, a US defense official told Sputnik.

"Yes I can confirm," the official said on Thursday, noting that no additional information about the meeting is available.

According to media reports, the meeting took place before the summit between US President Joe Biden and Chinese President Xi Jinping in San Francisco last month, when the two leaders announced that both sides will soon resume high-level military-to-military communications. China suspended communications after then-US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visited Taiwan. The United States and China are reportedly putting together a series of senior-level communications between their military leaders for 2024.

Chinese Embassy spokesperson Liu Pengyu told Sputnik that he had no additional details to provide about the recent meeting, but reiterated that both China and the United States will resume senior-level military-to-military communication on the basis of equality and respect.

"The defense authorities of the two countries are in communication and coordination with each other in this regard," Liu said. "We will release relevant information in due course."

Liu added that China values the bilateral defense relationship with the United States and stands ready to cooperate.

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.

Ex-FBI Agent Receives 50-Month Sentence for Work With Russian Businessman - Court Official

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Former FBI Special Agent Charles McGonigal has been sentenced to more than four years in prison for aiding a Russian billionaire businessman in his efforts to be taken off a US sanctions list, a court official told Sputnik.

"The sentence was 50 months imprisonment, a \$3,000 fine and three years of supervised release," the court official said on Thursday.

McGonigal, 55, was sentenced for aiding Russian billionaire Oleg Deripaska, who wanted his name to be removed from the US sanctions list. McGonigal was also accused of hiding \$225,000 in payments from an Albanian agent.

In August, McGonigal pleaded to one count of conspiring to launder money.

McGonigal was indicted in January on charges of money laundering and violating US sanctions for working for Deripaska to remove him from the sanctions list and to investigate a rival.

McGonigal was the special agent in charge of the FBI's counterintelligence division in New York before retiring in 2018.

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.

US Collecting Intelligence on Israeli Military Operations, Impact in Gaza - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States is collecting intelligence on Israel's military operations in Gaza and their potential impact on civilians, Politico reported on Thursday.

The US is gathering information and developing intelligence assessments on both Israel and Hamas' activities in Gaza, the report said, citing two people familiar with the matter.

The US State Department is specifically collecting reports of potential Israeli legal violations through the Civilian Harm Incident Response Guidance system, the report said.

Earlier this week, US President Joe Biden said that Israel was indiscriminately bombing Gaza, although White House and Pentagon officials have declined to confirm his assessment.

However, Biden was likely referring to real information provided by the intelligence community, the report said.

The Biden administration has shared some of the intelligence with members of the US Congress, the report added.

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.

Canadian Lawmakers Issue Joint Letter to Universities Asking How They Tackle Antisemitism

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Lawmaker for the ruling Liberal Party of Canada Anthony Housefather said on Thursday that jointly with four other colleagues they had sent a letter directed at 25 universities across Canada asking them to clarify what the efforts taken to combat antisemitism on campuses.

Beside Housefather, the letter was signed by four other liberal lawmakers, including former Minister of Justice David Lametti, and former Minister of Public Safety Marco Mendicino.

The letters redaction happens days after Canada voted alongside 153 other countries at the UN General Assembly in favor of adopting a non-binding resolution demanding an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

However, among the governing Liberals the decision was poorly received by Housefather and Mendicino who openly criticized their own party for jeopardizing the security of both Israelis and Palestinians in Gaza.

“Today 4 of my MP colleagues joined me in writing to the Presidents of Canada’s 25 biggest universities. We asked them how they are tackling the rise of #antisemitism on campus & whether a call for genocide against Jews violates their Code of Conduct,” Housefather said via X (formerly Twitter).

In the letter shared by Housefather, the lawmakers are asking universities to clarify whether calling for genocide against Jews or the destruction of Israel violates their Code of Conduct, and to specify what steps are being taken to protect Jewish students, among others.

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.

SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) -

ISRAEL INVASION OF GAZA

- * Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas has instructed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to establish contacts with Hamas, PLO Executive Committee member Azzam al-Ahmed said on Thursday.
- * Only the United States stands in the way of a ceasefire in Gaza and Washington should not interfere with the implementation of United Nations decisions, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan said.
- * Russia will increase the delivery of medical equipment and medicines in Gaza at the request of Israel, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- * US National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday that Ukraine needs military assistance now rather than "after the eggnog" as he commented the possibility of Congress going on a holiday recess.
- * The conflict in Ukraine will be long, because no one in the world has made a peace proposal that will be acceptable for all sides, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic told Sputnik.
- * Germany has supplied Ukraine with a second Patriot air defense system and missiles, the government's updated list of equipment supplied to Kiev revealed.
- * Russian President Vladimir Putin said passenger safety was paramount when considering whether to reopen airports in southwestern and central Russia that were closed at the start of the special military operation in Ukraine in February 2022.
- * Putin put the number of Russian troops in the zone of the special military operation in Ukraine at 617,000, with the contact line between Ukrainian and Russian forces stretching for over 2,000 kilometers (1,242 miles).

RUSSIA-CHINA COOPERATION

- * Russian and Chinese pilots conducted their seventh joint air patrol over the Sea of Japan and East China Sea, the Chinese Defense Ministry said on Thursday.
- * Strategic missile carriers of the Russian Aerospace Forces and of the People's Liberation Army Air Force conducted joint air patrols in the Asia-Pacific region over the waters of the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
- * Russia-China relations are at an unprecedentedly high level, with bilateral trade exceeding \$200 billion by the end of 2023, Russian President Vladimir Putin said.

UKRAINE ACCESSION TO EUROPEAN UNION

- * The European Council has decided to open EU accession negotiations with Ukraine and Moldova, and also grant the EU candidate status to Georgia, European Council President Charles Michel said on Thursday.
- * Hungary was not involved in the decision to start EU accession talks with Ukraine and still considers it to be a bad option, Prime Minister Viktor Orban said.

* Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said Orban did not use a veto against starting accession talks with Ukraine during the EU summit.

US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

* The Nord Stream 2 pipelines were likely blown up by the United States, Russian President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday.

* Russia is not abandoning the idea of returning US reporter Evan Gershkovich and former US Marine Paul Whelan, but agreements with the United States on the matter should be mutually acceptable, Putin said.

* Russia is ready to build relations with the United States and considers it important and necessary, Putin said.

* US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said that Putin could start to repair relations with the United States by releasing the allegedly wrongfully detained Americans in Russia.

FINLAND-RUSSIA BORDER ISSUES

* The Finnish government has decided to close all checkpoints on the border with Russia, Interior Minister Mari Rantanen said on Thursday.

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.

Biden Says Wants Israel to Focus on Saving Civilians in Gaza, Not Stop Going After Hamas

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Thursday that he wants Israel to focus on saving civilian lives in Gaza, but not to stop its military operation to oust Hamas.

"I want them to focus on saving civilian lives, not stop going after Hamas, but be more careful," Biden said when asked if he wants Israel to lessen the intensity of its operation in Gaza.

Earlier in the day, Axios reported that US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan told Israeli officials that they need to scale back their operation within weeks, not months.

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.

WFP on Risk of Gaza Starvation Deaths: Food Security Report Under Review, to Be Out Soon

UNITED NATIONS, December 14 (Sputnik) - WFP Deputy Executive Director Carl Skau on Thursday suggested waiting for the upcoming release of the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) report, when asked about the risk of Gaza seeing deaths from starvation amid Israel's blockade and ongoing hostilities.

A reporter asked Skau whether, with half the people in Gaza starving, the WFP is observing

deaths from starvation and if such occurrences are anticipated.

"I would wait for the report [IPC Report] that is thoroughly under review, and is based on information that is not only from the WFP, but from a wide range of partners. And so, I'm hoping to be able to answer that question, you know, in the next few days as this report has been released," Skau said during a press briefing.

The report includes a forward-looking assessment in the event the current situation persists, he added.

The UN has repeatedly warned of a high risk of famine in Gaza due to the collapse of its food system.

According to a WFP food security assessment, nine out of 10 people in Gaza reported spending at least 24 hours without food, and almost a fifth experienced it for more than 10 days in the past month. The Gaza Strip is suffering from widespread food shortages and inflated prices, with all bakeries closed in northern Gaza for more than a month.

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.

Top US General Brown to Visit Israel in First Middle East Trip in Role - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Charles Brown will visit Israel next week in his first trip to the Middle East region in his new leadership role, Pentagon Press Secretary Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is set to visit Bahrain, Qatar and Israel next week to meet with officials amid heightened tensions in the region.

"[Brown] will join Secretary Austin in Israel for meetings with senior Israeli officials. This will be General Brown's first trip to the Middle East as chairman," Ryder said during a press briefing.

Austin and Brown will meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, Ryder said. Austin will underscore the United States' support for Israel's right to self-defense, reinforce the importance of civilian safety during military operations and highlight the need for humanitarian assistance, Ryder said.

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.

US Senate to Return on Monday to Try to Advance Work on Supplemental Bill - Schumer

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US Senate will reconvene on Monday to try to make progress on the framework of the White House supplemental funding bill that includes additional funding for Ukraine and Israel, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said on Thursday.

"After we finish today, the Senate will return on Monday" Schumer said, adding that this would allow time to work through a framework for supplemental. "We will vote on a supplemental

proposal next week."

The Senate was expected to go on recess on Friday for the holidays.

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.

US Congressman Says Introduced Bill to Allow 18-Year-Olds to Buy Handguns

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US Congressman Thomas Massie said on Thursday that he reintroduced legislation to allow people in the United States to buy a handgun starting at the age of 18, whereas current law prevents anyone under the age of 21 from purchasing such a firearm.

"If democrats have their way, we will live in a world where 18, 19 and 20 year-olds can be drafted to defend the country but cannot legally acquire the means to defend themselves or their families. This is immoral and unconstitutional. I've introduced HR 6782 to repeal this law," Massie said in a statement.

The legislation, dubbed the Second Amendment For Every Registrable (SAFER) Voter Act, would repeal the federal law banning adults ages 18 to 20 from purchasing a handgun from a Federal Firearms License holder.

The bill has received support from more than a dozen House Republicans and is backed by gun rights groups including the Gun Owners of America and National Association for Gun Rights.

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.

US Does Not Share Assessment That Ukraine Counteroffensive Failed - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States does not share the assessment that Ukraine's counteroffensive earlier this year failed, US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday.

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said last month that NATO foreign ministers admitted during a meeting in Brussels that Ukraine's counteroffensive against Russia had failed.

"No, we do not," Miller said when asked if the United States shares the NATO foreign ministers' assessment.

Miller also said that Ukraine has continued to achieve successes on the battlefield.

According to US media, the countries of the collective West believe Ukraine will most likely not be able to launch another significant counteroffensive until 2025 as their forces need time to recover after this year's failed military campaign.

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.

US Talks With Russia About Returning Gershovich, Whelan 'Ongoing' - White House

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States is continuing the discussions with Russia about returning home the imprisoned US citizens Evan Gershovich and Paul Whelan, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We continue to talk to Moscow about getting Evan and Paul home. Those discussions are ongoing and they are ongoing actively," Kirby told reporters.

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.

Kirby on Congress' Holiday Recess: Ukraine Needs Help Now, Not After Eggnog

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby said on Thursday that Ukraine needs military assistance now, "not after the eggnog," as he commented on the possibility of Congress going on a holiday recess.

"They [Ukraine] need our help, and they need it right now, not after the eggnog," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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.

COVID-19 Cases on Rise, Viruses Expected to Spread During Holidays - Health Canada

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC) said on Thursday that cases of the COVID-19 virus were on the rise across the country and respiratory illnesses would further spread as Canadians meet during the holidays.

"For COVID-19 at a national level, the percent of laboratory tests coming back positive remains relatively high. Additionally, some provinces and territories are seeing increases in COVID-19 activity, including to high and very high levels in parts of the country," PHAC said in a statement.

The agency said it expects to see a further spread of viruses due to travel and socialization and recommends that individuals take precautionary measures such as getting an updated dose of flu and COVID-19 vaccines, the statement said.

PHAC also recommends that Canadians adopt other measures such as observe regular hand hygiene and improve indoor ventilation, among others, the statement added.

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.

State Dept. Says Putin Could Repair Relations With US by Releasing Detained Americans

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said on Thursday that Russian President Vladimir Putin could start to repair relations with the United States by releasing "wrongfully detained" Americans held in Russia.

"If you really wanted to repair relations with the United States or other countries in the West, and I'll say with respect to the United States, he could start by releasing the Americans that he's wrongfully detained," Miller said when asked about Putin's remarks about Russia's readiness to develop relations with the United States.

Miller said that Russia has rejected multiple offers from the United States on potential prisoner swap deals, but the Biden administration continues to welcome any negotiations conducted in good faith, especially on the release of Paul Whelan and Evan Gershkovich.

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.

WFP Director Says Ready To Deliver More Aid To Gaza If Conditions Allow It

UNITED NATIONS, December 14 (Sputnik) - Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Program (WFP) Carl Skau said that the organization is ready to deliver aid to an additional million people within a couple of weeks, if the conditions allow them to do so.

"We are ready to deliver [aid] to another million people within a couple of weeks, should the conditions allow," Deputy Executive Director of the World Food Program (WFP) Mr. Carl Skau said on Thursday during a press briefing.

Skau added that the conditions involved the opening of more crossings and the establishment of a humanitarian ceasefire to facilitate reaching people across the Gaza Strip.

On October 7, the Palestinian Hamas movement launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing and abducting people. Israel launched retaliatory strikes and ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, cutting off supplies of water, food and fuel. On October 27, Israel launched a large-scale ground incursion into the Gaza Strip.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The truce was extended several times and expired on December 1.

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.

UN Chief Very Concerned About 'Possible Genocide' in Gaza - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is very worried about a possible genocide in the Gaza Strip amid Israel's invasion of the Palestinian

enclave, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

"The Secretary-General is very concerned, he stressed his concern on what is happening in the way that civilians have paid the ultimate price in what is going on," Dujarric said during a press briefing when asked whether Guterres is concerned about a possible genocide in Gaza.

The spokesperson said that Guterres has spoken against the use of dehumanizing language when describing the situation in Gaza and beyond.

Guterres recently invoked Article 99 of the UN Charter asking the UN Security Council to take action and avert the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, but has never called Israel's actions genocide.

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.

US Notifies Israel Operation in Gaza Needs to Ease in Weeks, Not Months - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in a meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other officials notified them that Israel's military operation in Gaza must lessen its intensity in the coming weeks, Axios reported on Thursday citing US and Israeli officials.

"National Security Adviser Sullivan made clear in all meetings that the high intensity kinetic campaign needed to transition to the next lower intensity phase in a matter of weeks not months. [This is not] a deadline and we understand the campaign must and will continue, but in a lower intensity manner," a senior US official said as quoted by Axios.

The United States supports Israel's operation to oust Hamas and has rejected any efforts for a prolonged ceasefire in the conflict.

However, the United States has also warned Israel that its operation in southern Gaza must not cause further displacement of civilians because it could become too overwhelming for humanitarian networks to handle.

On October 7, the Palestinian Hamas movement launched a surprise large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing and abducting people. Israel launched retaliatory strikes and ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, cutting off supplies of water, food and fuel. On October 27, Israel launched a large-scale ground incursion into the Gaza Strip.

On November 24, Qatar mediated a deal between Israel and Hamas on a temporary truce and the exchange of some of the prisoners and hostages, as well as the delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The truce was extended several times and expired on December 1.

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.

US Sen. Graham Says Biden Put Zelenskyy in 'Untenable' Position With Lawmakers

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden placed Volodymyr Zelenskyy in an untenable position with US lawmakers by inviting him for a visit amid a showdown over Ukraine aid and US border security, Sen. Lindsey Graham said in an interview with The Washington Post.

"The administration put him in an untenable position," Graham said earlier this week, following a meeting between Zelenskyy and US lawmakers.

Zelenskyy visited the United States in an effort to bolster support for further Ukraine aid. The Biden administration issued a \$106 billion supplemental funding request to the US Congress, which included aid for Ukraine and Israel.

However, congressional Republicans have insisted that Democrats pair the foreign assistance with domestic border security improvements, delaying passage of the supplemental funding request.

Zelenskyy's visit did not help him achieve his goals, Graham said. The US Congress has the votes to approve Ukraine aid, but only alongside border security measures, Graham said to have told Zelenskyy.

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.

UN Says Concerned Over Reports On Taliban's Decision To Close Women Protection Centers

UNITED NATIONS, December 14 (Sputnik) – The United Nations is “extremely” concerned over the reports that the Taliban decided to close dozens of state-sponsored women protection centers in Afghanistan and send their clients to prisons to protect them from gender-based violence, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said on Thursday.

“The reports are extremely disturbing,” Dujarric told reporters.

He expressed confidence that it is another violation of women's and girls' rights in Afghanistan. The Taliban came to power in August 2021, toppling the US-backed government as NATO troops were leaving after almost 20 years of US military presence in Afghanistan. Numerous countries and international organizations responded to the militant takeover by cutting aid and ties with Kabul.

In late 2022, the group banned girls and women from attending secondary schools and higher education institutions despite previous pledges not to do so. The move faced international backlash, with many countries urging the Afghan authorities to lift the restrictions on women rights.

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.

US European Command Chief, Zelenskyy Discuss Ukraine's Most Urgent Needs - EUCOM

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US European Command Chief Gen. Christopher Cavoli and Volodymyr Zelenskyy met to discuss Ukraine's most pressing needs amid Russia's special military operation, European Command (EUCOM) said on Thursday.

"Gen. Christopher Cavoli, commander of US European Command, met with Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, in Germany, December 14, 2023," EUCOM said in a press release. "Gen. Cavoli and President Zelenskyy discussed continued US support to meet Ukraine's most urgent requirements."

The meeting also includes discussions about the latest \$200 million security aid package announced earlier this week, the release added.

Moreover, the two also discussed ongoing US and international efforts to train the Ukrainian armed forces, the release said, adding that the Ukrainian leader also met with multinational representatives from some of the 50 nations that continue to provide assistance to Ukraine.

Zelenskyy was in Washington this week to lobby Congress to approve more aid for Ukraine as funding is slated to run out by the end of this year.

However, legislation to approve more funding for Ukraine is stuck in negotiations as Republicans refuse to support President Joe Biden's \$106 billion supplemental request, which includes \$61 billion for Ukraine, until they see "credible" border policy changes added in the bill.

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.

Biden Aides Concerned Son's Legal Troubles Could 'Consume' President - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - People close to US President Joe Biden fear that Hunter Biden's legal troubles could consume the president ahead of the 2024 election, Politico reported, citing five Biden aides and confidants.

Hunter Biden faces criminal financial and firearms charges, for which he could end up serving 17 years in prison, the report said on Wednesday.

"He's so worried about Hunter. And we're worried it could consume him," the report quotes one confidant as having said.

Biden worries that his son could backslide into drug addiction, the report said. Biden asks friends to check in on his son to ensure he has a support system, the report said.

Biden also pushes back against aides who have brought up his son as a potential electoral liability, the report said. Many aides now avoid the subject out of fear of provoking Biden, the report added.

Biden himself is also under investigation by US House lawmakers, who are conducting an impeachment inquiry into the president. The probe is rooted in allegations of criminal activity by the Biden family, including foreign influence peddling and bribery.

However, Biden denies any involvement in his son's foreign business activities.

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.

US Navy Officer Jailed in Japan for Deadly Crash Now in US Custody - Statement

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US Navy officer Ridge Alkonis, who was serving a three-year sentence in Japan for a deadly car crash in 2021, is now returning to the United States, his family said on Thursday.

"After 507 days, Lt. Ridge Alkonis is on his way home to the United States. We are encouraged by Ridge's transfer back to the United States but cannot celebrate until Ridge has been reunited with his family," his family said in a statement.

The statement added that the family hopes the Biden administration will find that Alkonis' conviction is an "absurdity" and that the US Justice Department will immediately release him.

Alkonis was convicted for killing two pedestrians in May 2021 after he lost consciousness while driving.

According to media reports, Alkonis suffered acute mountain sickness in his car after having lunch at Mount Fuji with his wife and children, which caused him to suddenly lose consciousness while driving.

US Navy doctors determined that Alkonis had experienced acute mountain sickness, reports said, but Japanese prosecutors and the judge who sentenced him rejected those findings and accused him of falling asleep while drowsy, and failing to pull over immediately.

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.

Senior US, Australian Military Officials Meet to Discuss AUKUS - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - Senior US military officials hosted Australian Defense Industry Minister Pat Conroy to discuss global security, industry cooperation and the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) partnership, Department of Defense spokesperson David Herndon said on Thursday.

"Department of Defense leaders, including Dr. William LaPlante, Under Secretary for Acquisition and Sustainment, and performing the duties of Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Dr. Mara Karlin hosted Australia's Minister for Defense Industry, the Honorable Pat Conroy, at the Pentagon, December 13," Herndon said in a statement.

During the visit, the officials discussed global security developments and opportunities for furthering cooperation, including under the AUKUS Pillar II and in the defense industrial base.

The officials also addressed the ongoing US support for the Australian company Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordinance Enterprise (GWEO).

Earlier in December, US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin hosted in California his Australian and UK counterparts, Richard Marles and Grant Shapps to discuss the AUKUS security partnership.

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.

US, UK Target IRGC-QF Support to Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad – Treasury Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United States and United Kingdom took coordinated sanctions action targeting the Qods Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps over its support for the Palestinian Hamas movement and Islamic Jihad, the US Treasury Department said on Thursday.

“Today, the US Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) and the United Kingdom are jointly taking action against Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps – Qods Force (IRGC-QF), Hamas, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (Jihad),” Treasury’s statement said.

As part of the coordinated action, the UK imposed sanctions on eight Qods Force members, including its commander Esmail Qaani and senior official Muhammad Said Izadi.

The Treasury noted that it had already designated seven of the individuals newly sanctioned by the UK, with the only exception being Qods Force official Majid Zaree, who the US targeted on Thursday for his alleged involvement in the IRGC's support for Hamas and Lebanon’s Hezbollah.

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.

UNSC Unanimously Adopted Resolution Renewing 1988 Monitoring Mechanism on Afghanistan

UNITED NATIONS, December 14 (Sputnik) - The United Nations Security Council unanimously renewed on Thursday the mandate of the Monitoring Team supporting the 1988 Afghanistan Sanctions Committee, which was last renewed in 2022, Sputnik correspondent reported.

Russia also voted in favor of the resolution and was ‘pleased’ with the text.

The Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the UN Eva Evstigneeva said that Russia welcomes “the call for the experts from the monitoring team to visit Afghanistan including to have contacts with the de-facto authorities.”

Russia is disappointed that the resolution does not include the extension of exemptions to the travel ban, she added.

The text mandates to support the 1988 Afghanistan Sanctions Committee for a period of one year and largely resembles the text from last years renewals.

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.

DNC Spokesperson Says US Congressman Comer's 'Shady Shell Company' Should Be Investigated

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - US House Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer, who was one of the initiators of the impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden, should be investigated for having a "shady shell company" and for cooperating with convicted criminals, Democratic National Committee (DNC) spokesperson Sarafina Chitika said on Thursday.

"James Comer has railed on and on about shady shell companies and inexplicable business partners when all along he's the one with a shady shell company and business partnerships with convicted criminals and major campaign donors," Chitika said in a statement.

Earlier on Thursday, US media reported that Comer co-owns six acres of land in Kentucky together with a campaign contributor. Comer transferred his share to a shell company and had contacts with people with "complicated pasts," the report said.

Chitika accused Comer of using Biden's impeachment inquiry to politically benefit former President Donald Trump's bid to reclaim the White House in the 2024 presidential election.

"If it weren't clear enough, Comer's nakedly partisan, baseless impeachment probe is all about doing the bidding of Donald Trump, evidence and facts be damned," Chitika added.

On Wednesday, the Republican-controlled US House of Representatives passed a resolution to formalize an impeachment inquiry into Biden.

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.

Biden Admin. Staffers Demand Ceasefire in Gaza Outside White House – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - A group of Biden administration staffers gathered outside the White House late Wednesday to protest Washington's support for Israel's military campaign in Gaza and demand an immediate ceasefire, an NBC reporter said in an X post (formerly known as Twitter).

The post included a photo of several dozens of staffers holding a banner saying "President Biden, Your Staff Demands a Ceasefire" in front of the White House fence on Pennsylvania Avenue. The staffers also arranged candles spelling "Ceasefire."

CNN reported that at least three dozen people took part in the protest amid media reports of growing discontent inside the Biden administration over the US approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that broke out again in October.

After Hamas' surprise attack on Israel on October 7, the United States expressed its support for the Netanyahu government and began sending ammunition and weapons to supply the Israeli army. According to media reports, Washington has already supplied Israel with tens of thousands of tons of ammunition that is being used in daily bombardments of the Gaza Strip.

Over 18,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of the ongoing conflict and this number continues to grow, according to local authorities.

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.

Israeli Defense Minister Says War on Hamas to Last 'More Than Several Months'

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant said on Thursday that the war against Hamas will take "more than several months," and Israel will win the fight.

"Hamas is a terrorist organization that built itself for a decade to fight Israel, and they built the infrastructure under the ground and on the ground, and it is not easy to destroy them. It will take and require a long time. It will last more than several months, but we will win and we will destroy that," Gallant told US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan ahead of their bilateral meeting in Israel.

Gallant also thanked the Biden administration for standing "side by side" with Israel as it conducts its military campaign in Gaza.

Sullivan is on a tour of the Middle East. On Wednesday, Sullivan met with Prime Minister and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh to discuss a range of issues, including peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

On October 7, Hamas launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip and breached the border, killing over 1,200 people and abducting some 240 others. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza, and began a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave. The death toll in Gaza has topped 18,000.

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.

US House Passes 2024 Defense Policy Bill Despite Concerns About Surveillance Authority

(Update: adds details in paras 5-10)

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), despite concerns from some lawmakers about a surveillance authority extension included in the bill.

The House of Representatives passed a reconciled version of the NDAA in a vote of 310-118, with two-thirds support required for passage. The bill now heads to US President Joe Biden's desk for finalization.

The 2024 NDAA supports \$883.7 billion in national defense funding; previous versions of the legislation put topline national defense spending at \$886 billion, but funding levels have since shifted, a Senate Armed Services Committee spokesperson told Sputnik.

The legislation cleared both the House and Senate despite concerns in both chambers of Congress about an extension of Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Section 702

surveillance powers included in the bill without reforms to the program.

“FISA Section 702 has allowed the FBI to spy on U.S. citizens more than 278,000 times without a warrant! FISA should not be combined with our national defense, and it is unacceptable that the DC Cartel is bypassing regular order to jam Members by forcing them to vote on two unrelated bills in one vote,” Congressman Matt Rosendale said on Thursday.

US Senator Rand Paul unsuccessfully attempted to remove the extension from the NDAA in the upper chamber of Congress.

The NDAA also features other defense policy provisions, including an extension of the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative (USAI) through 2026. The bill authorizes \$300 million for USAI in both fiscal year 2024 and 2025 and establishes a Special Inspector General for Operation Atlantic Resolve, who will oversee US assistance to Ukraine.

The bill also prohibits the United States from withdrawing from NATO without the consent of the Senate or pursuant to another measure by Congress.

Moreover, the bill authorizes \$14.7 billion for the Pacific Deterrence Initiative and extends the program through fiscal year 2024. The legislation also approves the sale of nuclear-powered submarines to Australia.

The legislation raises the pay of US military service members and Defense Department civilians by 5.2% and reforms housing allowance policies as well.

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.

US House Passes 2024 Defense Policy Bill Despite Concerns About Surveillance Authority

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA), despite concerns from some lawmakers about a surveillance authority extension included in the bill.

The House of Representatives passed a reconciled version of the NDAA in a vote of 310-118, with two-thirds support required for passage. The bill now heads to President Joe Biden for finalization.

The 2024 NDAA supports \$883.7 billion in national defense funding; previous versions of the legislation put topline national defense spending at \$886 billion, but funding levels have since shifted, a Senate Armed Services Committee spokesperson told Sputnik.

The legislation cleared both the House and Senate despite concerns in both chambers of Congress about an extension of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Section 702 surveillance powers included in the bill without reforms to the program.

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.

US B-21 Stealth Bomber Eventually Will Be Able to Conduct Unmanned Missions - Senator

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) - The next-generation of the US B-21 stealth bomber will eventually be able to carry out unmanned missions, US Senator Mike Rounds said on Thursday.

"The B-21 is being built in such a fashion that eventually we'll be able to do a mission without it being manned," Rounds said during a discussion at the Hudson Institute.

The senator from South Dakota explained that the B-21 bomber was being developed to "do plug and play" so its systems could be replaced with newer ones as the United States develops new capabilities and detects new offensive capabilities from Russia and China.

Rounds said the B-21 bomber would be around for 50 years and would not only be used to deliver traditional bombs, but standoff weapons as well.

With artificial intelligence, the bomber could also be used as a "quarterback" to direct the US' conventional capabilities, Rounds added.

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.

South Dakota Senator Says US Needs Over 100 B-21 Bombers to Deter Russia, China

WASHINGTON, December 14 (Sputnik) – South Dakota Sen. Mike Rounds said Thursday that the United States will eventually need more than 100 next-generation B-21 stealth bombers in order to deter both Russia and China.

"Today, we're talking about purchasing 100 of them; that's a down payment only. There is no way that we can look at challenging or at least being able to deter both Russia and China unless we substantially increase the number of B-21s that we're looking at purchasing," Rounds said at a Hudson Institute talk.

He noted that the B21 can be refueled, loiter in the area, and carry conventional and nuclear weapons while having long-range capabilities – key features for the US to fight either "near-peer" rival in the Pacific theater. Russia and China currently do not have defensive capabilities against the B-21, the senator stated.

Rounds added that the US wanted peace, but to achieve it, it needed the B-21 as a "hammer" for deterrence.