

12/15/23 Friday

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.

'Inherent Problem': Pentagon Can't Weed Out Leakers Like Teixeira Due to Recruitment Targets

Chronic recruitment problems in the US military contributed to the ability of a low-level service member to leak classified information - problems so deep that the Pentagon and FBI have obscured them, telling the public they have new processes in place that cannot possibly identify leakers accurately.

Earlier this week, the US Air Force said it had disciplined 15 people in connection with the leaking of classified information onto a Discord server. In April, the FBI arrested [Airman First Class Teixeira](#) and charged him with the leaks, which he allegedly shared on the server in an attempt to impress his friends and not to supply the information to a foreign power.

Those disciplined this week ranged in rank from sergeant to colonel, who were held responsible for command failures, lax oversight and a lack of robust security clearance investigations. An internal USAF probe found that people in Teixeira's unit, the 102nd Intelligence Wing at Otis Air National Guard Base in Massachusetts, "failed to take proper action after becoming aware of his intelligence-seeking activities."

Former senior FBI agent and renowned whistleblower Coleen Rowley told [Sputnik](#) that while the USAF punished those responsible for the leak, it had done nothing to address the underlying causes of such leaks, including the type of recruits the Pentagon seeks out and the communications systems that regularly put low-level service members in contact with highly secretive information.

"It does not look like they've gotten to the root of the problem, which would mean a lot of tracking of every single thing. They maybe would have to apply algorithms or something to it - and I think that to some extent, the FBI tried to do this after Robert Hanssen. Then, they did put mechanisms on the computer systems so that they could tell who was accessing things so that if it fell outside the purview of what their actual job was, then they could say, 'oh, it's suspicious'. And again, apparently two or three colleagues, or even a superior, saw him accessing, but like I said, I think they just kind of like, 'well, I can't, you know, I've done that before, and we don't want to - we're all part of the team, and if I punish him or whatever or raise it, then that might hurt the morale of other people doing good work.' So you can see the reasons for this," she said.

"And the 15 - I don't think they got severe punishment. I don't think, for instance, like the commander got his pension taken away or anything like that. They have shut down this one, Otis, I think it was called the one Air Force base where he worked as the intelligence, part of that was shut down for a while. But how many other places in the United States have the exact same problem, the same dynamic?"

Rowley said that in its coverage of the leaks, the media was "telling the truth," but noted it had also not "dug deeply" into the facts revealed in the leaks.

"These documents, there's hundreds of them. A lot of it pertains to the Ukraine war and casualties, whether it's Ukrainian casualties, or Russian casualties - actually, even operational plans being conducted in Ukraine. And the spying information that the United States has, not only on Russia, but also on Egypt and China, - of course, Egypt being an ally, so the spying operations that the US conducts on even allies," she said.

"Now, here's the thing. The media, the mainstream media, I think just recently Frontline on public television did a special and The Washington Post has run stories on this. But, you know, I hadn't seen a whole lot about it other than Teixeira's arrest. You know, they did cover that, but, you know, they did not cover - and it goes back to what you said, you know, they see themselves as an arm of the United States [government]. They haven't really dug deeply into the actual leaks themselves. Not too much. I was actually surprised to see how broad those links were, and frankly, in some of the cases, at least, they were quite damaging and at least very embarrassing to the United States."

Rowley explained that Teixeira having access to such information wasn't unusual: it's become routine for low-ranking service members, many of whom are barely adults, to handle secret communications between higher-ups, they're not 60-year-old generals.

"I think there's a broader problem here. And the broader problem is the all-volunteer force is very desperate and they are not getting their [recruitment] numbers. They've had to relax their standards across the board, even on weight and physical fitness and criminal background. In this case, Teixeira did have a criminal record from high school for some kind of violent threat that they kind of glossed over. Well, why are they doing that? It's because they can't recruit enough people," she explained.

Indeed, the recruitment chiefs for the US military's five service branches [told Congress last week](#) that many of them had failed to meet their recruitment goals, with the US Army missing 110,000 active duty and reserve soldiers.

"They've relied for decades on exactly what Teixeira was: he was a [violent video gamer](#) who got interested in the military based on violent video games. And so a lot of the recruits, this is why they've used these, they used to actually set them up and try to recruit, you know, 10-, 12-year olds to be playing violent video games because it served their recruiting purposes. So naturally, this is the type of person you're going to get in," she said.

"Teixeira's probably not the only one who was [trying to impress other people](#) on these on these boards. You know where it's all highly militarized and they're like little boys playing war games and whatever and seeing themselves - I'll bet you anything he's not the only one in the military involved in this. In fact, I think there is a there's many more. And that is an inherent problem because the military cannot weed those people out and they can't profile. You know, they would like you to believe that they can profile an insider threat, Well, no, they can't, because this is all they have working. These are the people that they have recruited."

"Teixeira was impressing the teenage people, but none of them realized any significance, apparently none of them tried to sell it. If they would have tried to, they could have maybe tried to sell it to Russia or something and make money," Rowley noted.

"To go back to the FBI, I just can't resist making a comment here because, you know, here's the FBI, who for nearly 20 years had a high level GS-15 agent working [Robert Hanssen, who actually was selling secrets](#) to the Soviet Union, and the FBI put him in charge when they realized that there was a mole, they put him in charge of finding the mole - the same guy who

was the mole! So, you know, when you can't get too much respect or be too impressed about the FBI looking for something when they have that kind of a background.”

“And, you know, the thing is to figure out: how can you do this? Well, they claim that they can profile insider threats, but that's next to impossible, because you don't know how many people match the profile. Here's the thing that's not ever said: yeah, Teixeira may have matched the profile, but he might have been 1% and there might be another 99% of people who were not doing anything wrong and who also matched the profile. When you access something, maybe out of idle curiosity, can you imagine the number of people who are just reading something that happens to come across their screen or whatever? Because this apparently is what the investigators said should have tipped them off: that he was too interested in pieces of information that his job did not really require. So they should have been tipped off. But I can imagine that's going on a lot, because people are curious and they will access things, and then superiors and colleagues will say, well, I've done that too, so I don't want to turn him in because all of us are doing it.”

rom lan:

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.

According to a poll by the Rand Corporation, 54.4% of Americans would discourage a young person they're close to from joining the US military.

The poll comes as most branches, including the Army, Navy and Air Force, failed to meet their recruiting goals in 2023, and after instituting a large number of reforms in an attempt to raise their numbers.

The study also showed that despite their hesitancy to recommend military service, most Americans still hold overwhelmingly positive views of veterans.

Additionally, a large majority, 61.2%, said they would recommend a young person close to them join an officer program, either through a military academy or the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC).

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 Engage, 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.

'Zelensky's in Trouble': Ukraine Being Used as 'Sacrificial Lamb' for US Interests

On Friday, Hungary Prime Minister Viktor Orban blocked the European Union from approving a €50 billion aid package for Ukraine, even as he allowed a vote to open accession negotiations for Ukraine in the bloc to go forward.

The rebuke came less than a week after Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky failed to convince lawmakers in Washington to approve a \$61 billion aid package that US President Joe Biden has been pressuring Congress to approve.

Kenneth Hammond, a writer and professor of Global History and East Asian History at New Mexico University [told Sputnik's Political Misfits](#) that the failure to secure aid means that "Zelensky is in trouble," and that "Ukraine is not playing out in the way that [...] Western European and American political leaders had been talking about when this all got going a couple years ago."

Rather than win, the United States and NATO are simply trying to prolong the conflict in Ukraine as long as possible in a bid to weaken Russia on the world stage, Hammond argued.

"This exposes perhaps the deeper game that especially the Americans have been playing, which is really to try to bleed Russia and try to weaken Russia as part of their overall campaign to eliminate anyone who doesn't really toe the line with American policy," Hammond explained.

“What they do is they just drag it on and on and on and on, allowing Ukraine to be the sacrificial lamb for American policy interests.”

Hammond notes that the military hardware the US and NATO sent was never going to be enough to defeat Russia. “[The US is] not providing the kind of assistance that they’re begging for, they’re asking for. Which is not to say that further assistance to the Zelensky regime [would] resolve anything, because I think it’s unlikely that somehow Ukraine is going to rise up and defeat Russian military capabilities,” Hammond told co-hosts Michelle Witte and Ben Zinevich. “I’d say in many ways it’s a very mixed message, but really, it’s a pretty straightforward message: we just want to drag this out as long as it’s possible. As long as Ukraine can continue to suffer, we’re going to use that to the advantage of American and Western European interests.”

Joining the EU is likely to take years for Ukraine, if it happens at all. Earlier this month, the White House told lawmakers in Congress that without another aid package, the US would have to stop providing Ukraine with weapons by the end of the year.

Congress did announce that they would delay their holiday recess in an attempt to pass the Ukraine aid bill and other issues that Washington deems critical.

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.

Most Americans Would Advise Youth Against US Military Service, Poll Finds

Despite changing their slogans, relaxing their requirements and offering big bonuses, the Army, Navy, Coast Guard and Air Force failed to meet their recruiting goals in 2023.

New polling has revealed that a majority of Americans, 54.4%, would discourage a young person close to them from joining the US military. However, a larger majority, 61.2%, said they would encourage them to join via the officer route, either through a service academy or the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC).

[The poll](#), taken by the Rand Corporation, comes as most branches of the military are failing to meet their recruiting goals. It contradicts a study released last month by the Ronald Reagan Presidential Foundation and Institute that said a slight majority would encourage young relatives to join the military.

Republicans were more likely than Democrats to recommend to a young person close to them that they should join the military, but both parties were roughly aligned when it came to recommending they join an officer program.

The study also showed that despite the hesitancy to recommend a young person close to them join the service, Americans still hold overwhelmingly positive views of US troops. Respondents agreed with positive stereotypes about veterans 30 - 80% of the time, while respondents only agreed with negative stereotypes 3 - 20% of the time.

Only the Marine Corps and Space Force met their recruiting goals in 2023, both of which have much lower recruiting goals than the Army, Navy and Air Force.

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.

Big Trouble in Little Delaware - Cartoon

The US House of Representatives voted on Thursday to formally open an impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden. The inquiry centers around Biden's son, Hunter, and his foreign business deals.

Republicans have accused the first son of selling access to his father, who was vice president at the time, to foreign companies. Much of the evidence in the case, outside of witness testimony, comes from a laptop the younger Biden allegedly left at a computer repair store in Delaware. Along with salacious photos of the first son, the laptop also contained thousands of email correspondents between Hunter, family members and business associates. With the impeachment inquiry moving forward, Joe Biden, alleged to be "the big guy" mentioned in an email that noted 10% of a payment needed to be set aside, might be hoping that those files somehow get deleted.

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.

Unfortunately for the president, that is not how the internet or digital storage works.

🗨️ "Attack helicopters, advanced fighter jets, long-range missile systems, and Abrams tanks"

These items are among Ukraine's wishlist for the United States as German media reports plans for a 2024 counteroffensive.

The report comes despite the broad failure of Ukraine's efforts in 2023 as the country continues to grow its stockpile.

"What we are experiencing is basically a controlled rearguard action," said one expert, suggesting Kiev is fighting a losing battle.

Ukraine will reportedly abandon efforts to reclaim territory and simply focus on attempting to kill as many Russians as possible.

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.

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg is investing millions of dollars to construct a vast underground bunker, according to a report in US media.

The doomsday shelter is part of a sprawling compound being built on property the multimillionaire owns in Hawaii which will include mansions, a large gym, and treehouses.

Descriptions of the bunker read like the stuff of science fiction, with soundproofed rooms and passages hidden behind bookshelves leading to secret areas.

Zuckerberg has attempted to maintain secrecy around the project, forcing contractors to sign strict nondisclosure agreements.

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.

Ukraine's Religious Persecution Continues as Russian Church Leader Placed on 'Wanted' List

Critics say the Ukrainian regime targets its detractors internationally via intimidation tactics. The Ukrainian Interior Ministry angered parishioners Friday when it [announced](#) it was placing the head of the Russian Orthodox Church on a "wanted" list for his criticism of the Kiev regime. A post on the ministry's website described Patriarch Kirill as "an individual in hiding from the bodies of pre-trial investigation" and characterized him as "missing" since November 11.

[Criminal authorities in Ukraine](#) have no jurisdiction over individuals in Russia or elsewhere outside the country's borders, making the ministry's announcement symbolic.

The move is an escalation from last month when Ukraine's security service accused Kirill of "infringing Ukrainian sovereignty" and called him "part of the closest entourage of Russia's military and political leadership."

Vladimir Legoyda, a senior official of the Russian Orthodox Church, [called](#) the development "a step that is as ridiculous as it is predictable" and accused the Ukrainian government of "lawlessness and attempting to intimidate parishioners."

"All that can be imputed to the patriarch of the Russian Church is a faithful and consistent position in defense of the canonical Church in Ukraine," wrote Legoyda in a post on his Telegram channel. "Condemning and denouncing the schism provoked by the Phanar is something that the patriarch is obliged to do by virtue of his duty before God and people," he stressed.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has promoted an alternate Eastern Orthodox organization known as the "[Orthodox Church of Ukraine](#)" as the religious body for Orthodox Christians in the country.

Ukrainian authorities have targeted prominent figures of the [Russian Orthodox Church](#) with dozens of criminal charges since Russia launched its special military operation in eastern Ukraine in 2022, which the church has defended. Some have been charged with treason. Kiev's parliament has even considered banning the Ukrainian branch of the church entirely.

Patriarch Kirill has previously denounced [Ukrainian authorities' moves](#) against religious leaders and has encouraged clerical figures around the world to stand against the religious persecution.

The addition of Kirill to the list represents a tactic that critics say is frequently employed to intimidate critics of Zelensky's regime worldwide. A separate online "[kill list](#)" is [maintained](#) by

figures with links to Ukrainian parliamentarians and includes journalists, Pink Floyd member Roger Waters, and 13-year-old social [activist](#) Faina Savenkova. Figures on the list who have died are [marked](#) with the label “eliminated.”

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.

Internal Opposition to Netanyahu Explodes After IDF Killing of Israeli Captives

More than 18,700 Palestinians, mostly civilians, have been killed in Israel’s military campaign in Gaza as the United States has twice vetoed ceasefire resolutions at the United Nations. Large demonstrations rocked the Israeli capital of Tel Aviv over the weekend as the country’s military admitted responsibility for the killing of three Israeli captives who were reportedly attempting to surrender.

“Today we learned what happens when there is no deal,” [shouted](#) protesters outside the urban headquarters of the Israel Defense Force.

The demonstrations began Friday after news first emerged of the captives’ death. The Israeli civilians, all of them in their 20s, appeared outside of a building in the Shejaiya neighborhood in northern Gaza City, [according to an IDF statement](#) released Saturday. The young men held a white flag signifying their surrender and emerged shirtless to demonstrate they weren’t hiding weapons. One reportedly yelled “help” in Hebrew.

All three were shot by Israeli service members in violation of international law dictating the rules of military conduct. An IDF spokesperson said the soldiers reacted in response to a feared threat from the group Hamas.

“The shooting at the hostages was against the rules of engagement,” conceded IDF chief of staff Herzl Halevi. “It is forbidden to shoot at someone who raises a white flag and seeks to surrender. However, this shooting was carried out during combat and under pressure.” Halevi said that he accepted responsibility for the killings and claimed “we will do everything” to prevent similar incidents in the future.

A brief ceasefire earlier in December resulted in the exchange of captives held on both sides of the conflict. Hamas brought about 240 Israelis back to Gaza during their surprise October 7 operation in Israel, while Israel holds thousands of Palestinians in prison, including some 2,500 who are [detained](#) without charges. Among the captives held by Israel are [at least 146 Palestinian minors](#).

Protesters have urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to negotiate a new ceasefire and exchange of captives. US media has reported that the head of Israel’s Mossad intelligence agency was scheduled to meet with the Qatari Prime Minister this weekend to discuss the matter.

“Israel needs to actively pursue another deal, even if it means halting military operations in Gaza or releasing Palestinian prisoners with blood on their hands,” said retired Israeli Major General Noam Tibon to US media. “Otherwise, the cabinet is neglecting the hostages, and we risk not bringing them back alive.”

Meanwhile, family members of citizens held in Gaza have slammed the Israeli Prime Minister's prosecution of its proclaimed war on Hamas.

"Yesterday, I heard a minister in the cabinet say that the conditions haven't matured for the return of the captives," said Rubi Chen, the father of 19-year-old Israeli soldier and US citizen Itay Chen who is being held by Hamas. "What is the cabinet waiting for? We urge immediate negotiation for the return of all hostages."

Israeli society has been torn apart by massive protests for more than a year as controversial Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu enters his 17th year as the Middle Eastern country's head of state.

Previously Israeli opposition took to the streets to protest a legal reform package proposed by Netanyahu that critics said would have gutted the independence of the country's judiciary. Elements of the sweeping proposal were placed on hold amidst the show of defiance, which saw Israeli military reservists threaten mass resignations from their posts.

When a member of Israel's opposition finally took power for just over a year in 2021, former Prime Minister Neftali Bennet's governance showed just how far politics in the country had shifted away from the liberal Labour Zionism that characterized previous administrations. Bennett was criticized for a debate performance where he [declared](#), "I've killed lots of Arabs in my life and there's no problem with that."

Recently, controversy erupted after video emerged of a 1986 interview with Netanyahu where he [appeared](#) to justify the bombing of hospitals. Israel has been sharply criticized for its handling of their military incursion into Gaza, with United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres saying, "Gaza is becoming a graveyard for children."

About 70% of the more than 18,700 Palestinians killed in the besieged enclave are [thought](#) to be women and children, according to Gaza health authorities that the UN has claimed have offered accurate numbers in the past. Israel disputes the death toll.

Some observers have [questioned](#) the competence of the IDF, with critics claiming the military force is more focused on filming TikTok videos than engaging professionally on the battlefield. Historically the army's so-called [Hannibal Directive](#) has excused the killing of civilians – even Israeli civilians – in the name of pursuing greater combat objectives.

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.

Failing Upwards: Ukraine Likely Planning New Counteroffensive for 2024 - Expert
[21 hours ago](#)

The news comes after the broad defeat of Kiev's much-hyped 2023 counteroffensive which began in June of this year.

Hope springs eternal for beleaguered military planners in Kiev, who are [likely plotting a new Ukrainian counteroffensive](#) according to a report in German media Saturday.

Nico Lange, a senior fellow at the Munich Security Conference and a former German official, speculated the new campaign would take place next year. Although Western support of Ukraine

is in decline, the expert claimed Kiev still possesses large [stockpiles of military equipment](#) and will likely receive more in the months to come.

“Ukraine is probably gathering resources for a new counteroffensive next year,” said Lange, suggesting the regime may attempt to cross the Dnepr River from the southern Kherson area. The report noted the long list of military equipment Ukraine has requested from the United States, including attack helicopters, [advanced fighter jets](#), long-range missile systems, and Abrams tanks. The report claimed the substantial wishlist suggested the country “still has big plans.”

On Friday another German media outlet cited sources claiming Kiev is devising a “new war plan.” Having given up on reversing Russian territorial claims, the country will instead attempt to reduce public support for the military operation in Russia by inflicting large numbers of casualties.

“Our goal is to have the kill ratio as positive as possible,” said one unnamed Ukrainian officer. Another source agreed that “the main thing is that most [Ukrainians stay alive](#).”

Public support for Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has eroded in recent months as the country’s military losses have mounted. Recently the country has been [forced to move](#) towards registering women, teenagers, and elderly men to be drafted to fight. Speculation has emerged that declining Western support for Kiev will result in Zelensky being replaced as president, perhaps by military leader Valery Zaluzhny.

An unnamed former Western military official told German media “what we are experiencing is basically a controlled rearguard action” in Ukraine, suggesting the country’s military is on an essentially defensive footing.

Political developments have suggested support for Ukraine is waning in the United States as well. A funding package has stalled in Congress as Republicans have insisted on incorporating funding for border security. The populist flank of the party has long questioned President Joe Biden’s support for Kiev while [polling shows](#) a plurality of Americans believe the US is sending too much money to Ukraine.

Zelensky’s wife recently [appeared](#) on British state media to admonish American taxpayers against growing “tired” of sending money to Ukraine.

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.

Mark Zuckerberg to Ride Out Apocalypse in Expansive Underground Bunker - Report

“The cost rivals that of the largest private, personal construction projects in human history,” said one media outlet of the tech mogul’s ambitious project.

Amidst fears of global conflict and nuclear war, Facebook’s* founder has made plans to ensure survival – for himself at least.

US media [reported](#) this week on Mark Zuckerberg’s plans for an expansive 5,000-square-foot underground bunker forming just part of a sprawling compound under construction on land the billionaire owns in Hawaii.

The tech mogul has made efforts to keep the plans secret, forcing carpenters, electricians and other contractors to sign airtight nondisclosure agreements. "It's fight club, we don't talk about fight club," a former employee told a US outlet. "Anything posted from here, they get wind of it right away."

The Zuckerberg family has reportedly spent \$170 million acquiring the property since August 2014. The compound is self-sustaining, generating its own energy and water supplies, and includes onsite ranching and farming.

Above ground the compound will [include](#) more than a dozen buildings with at least 30 bedrooms and 30 bathrooms. Two mansions will provide 57,000 square feet of living space while a large building will include a gym, pools, sauna, hot tub and tennis court. Some eleven tree houses throughout the property will be connected by rope bridges.

Below ground a bunker will include a living space and soundproofed doors. Descriptions of some of the rooms read like the stuff of science fiction, with passages hidden behind bookshelves leading to secret areas.

Mark Zuckerberg rode success from his Facebook social media platform to financial superstardom; reports [indicate](#) the mogul is the seventh-richest man in the world in 2023 with a net worth of about \$115.3 billion. Facebook is used widely across the world but recent attempts by the billionaire to popularize virtual reality technology have been met with a mixed reception. Seed funding for Facebook emerged from a variety of sources, including [In-Q-Tel](#), an investment arm of the US Central Intelligence Agency that helps finance technology that assists the agency in data gathering.

Two global shipping majors suspended their vessels' passage through the Red Sea on Friday: Denmark's Maersk and Germany's Hapag-Lloyd. Then on Saturday, the Italian-Swiss giant MSC and France's CMA CGM also suspended the travel of their vessels through the Red Sea strait.

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.

"We are deeply concerned about the highly escalated security situation in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The recent attacks on commercial vessels in the area are alarming and pose a significant threat to the safety and security of seafarers," Maersk said in a statement.

The decisions made by these shipping majors is a response to a warning by the Huthis who claimed they were targeting vessels as a way to put pressure on Israel. Since the Palestine-Israel conflict broke out in early October, the Houthis have conducted multiple attacks on commercial ships in the Red Sea.

On Sunday, Russian gas giant Gazprom announced that it had set a new daily record for gas deliveries to China the previous day. The company did not disclose the volume of gas it had sent to its partner, but added that it is working to increase its supply to Beijing along the Power of Siberia pipeline which had been responsible for its new daily record.

"On December 16, China's application for the supply of Russian gas through the Power of Siberia gas pipeline once again exceeded the daily contractual obligations. Gazprom delivered all the requested volumes and set a new historical record for daily gas supplies to China," the statement said.

Gazprom had also announced cooperation plans on Thursday with the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) for next year. Those plans include potential gas supplies from Russia through Mongolia. The project has been called the Power of Siberia 2, or the Altai gas pipeline with the designed capacity to carry 50 billion cubic meters per year.

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.

Four Shipping Majors Halt Vessels on Red Sea After Attacks

At least eight ships have reportedly come under attack by the Houthis in what is believed to be retaliation for the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas.

Two global shipping majors suspended their vessels' passage through the Red Sea on Friday: Denmark's Maersk and Germany's Hapag-Lloyd. Then on Saturday, the Italian-Swiss giant MSC and France's CMA CGM also suspended the travel of their vessels through the Red Sea strait. Since conflict first broke out between Israel and Hamas in early October, Yemen's rebel Ansar Allah movement, known as the Houthis, have conducted multiple missile and drone [attacks](#) on commercial ships in the Red Sea.

The Huthis recently announced that they were targeting vessels near the strategic Bab al-Mandab strait as a way to put pressure on Israel. In response, shipping majors paused the passage of their vessels. On Thursday a Maersk Gibraltar vessel was attacked followed by a second attack on a container ship on Friday. The company has ordered all vessels to pause their passage for the time being.

"We are deeply concerned about the highly escalated security situation in the southern Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. The recent attacks on commercial vessels in the area are alarming and pose a significant threat to the safety and security of seafarers," Maersk said in a [statement](#).

Meanwhile, Hapag-Lloyd said they would be suspending traffic until Monday. Their vessel, Al Jasrah, was attacked on Friday.

"It's very worrisome because ships heading to the Suez have to pass through the strait. We are stopping some ships, but there is no general rule yet, though this could change," Nils Haupt, the company spokesperson, told a New York City [journal](#).

MSC said one of its container vessels had been targeted in the Red Sea on Friday. While no injuries have been [reported](#), the ship suffered fire damage.

The Red Sea is an important trade route that extends southeastward from Suez, Egypt, to the Indian Ocean through the Bab el Mandeb sound and the Gulf of Aden. Linking Asia to Europe, it is responsible for the 10% to 12% of global trades that pass through it annually, including 30% of all global container shipments.

"The Red Sea could become a more dangerous route, but in proportion with the increasing tension between Israel and Hamas on one side at a local level and also at a regional level between Iranian allies from Lebanon and Syria, Iraq and Israel itself and the US military bases in Syria and Iraq. Everything is connected," Dr. Lorenzo Trombetta, a Beirut-based scholar and analyst specializing on the Middle East, told Sputnik in early [December](#) following an attack. "Both of the cargo ships targeted by the Houthi in November and a few days ago were not Israeli-flagged ships, but they were owned by Israeli businessmen. That was the aim of the direct target of the pro-Iranian government."

On [Saturday](#), a US destroyer shot down more than a dozen drones in the Red Sea that were launched by Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen, according to the US Central Command. The UK government also said it had taken out a suspected drone attack in the area using one of their destroyers.

Thus far, eight ships have come under attack by the Houthis. On Friday, the International Chamber of Shipping ([ICS](#)) said it "deplores the actions of the Houthis" and called for an immediate cessation of attacks.

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 Lacks Preparedness for Tick, Mosquito-Borne Diseases

"We don't pay enough attention in the United States to what is going on in other countries. We just kind of watch it spread and we don't prepare ourselves for that virus potentially coming to the U.S.," said Laura Kramer, director of the Arbovirus Laboratory at State University of New York at Albany.

This past week a public health preparedness [workshop](#) was held at the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine in Washington, D.C. According to a recent [report](#), during that workshop global public health experts warned that some countries, including the US, are not prepared for the risk of arboviral threats—viruses spread by ticks, mosquitoes and other arthropods which lead to diseases.

Some of these diseases can cause serious health issues including those which are chronic, fatal and/or can even lead to birth defects. And while it's true that some of these diseases—particularly those caused by mosquitoes—do not often occur in the US, they are beginning to. Thanks to globalization and an increasingly warmer planet, the arboviral threats will become more commonplace in the US, especially as the country is doing seemingly little to mitigate the risk.

"If we don't do anything, which is basically what we're doing right now, it's going to get worse," Tom Scott, a medical entomologist and professor emeritus at UC Davis, said during the workshop. "The damage from inaction is enormous, it's unacceptable. It's unethical."

Ticks and mosquitoes are not only a nuisance to deal with for those who enjoy their time outdoors, they also carry a variety of diseases which can be transmitted to humans and pets. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency, diseases that mosquitoes carry with them include: Zika, West Nile virus, malaria, yellow fever, dengue fever, and the chikungunya

virus. Meanwhile, tick-borne diseases include: Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, ehrlichiosis, and encephalitis.

This year alone, the US saw locally transmitted cases of [malaria](#) in the state of Florida—a first in 20 years. Cases of locally transmitted dengue fever were also reported in the states of Florida and Texas this past year; the disease has broken out across the western hemisphere in an unprecedented way as climate change expands the habitat of dengue-carrying mosquitoes. The World Health Organization (WHO) also issued a warning this fall that dengue fever is on the verge of becoming endemic in parts of the US, Europe, and Africa within the next [decade](#), as more than 4 million cases have been reported throughout the Americas and Caribbean alone so far this year.

And leishmaniasis, a skin disease spread by sand flies, was once considered a tropical disease one can "only" get while traveling, but began to spread at low levels in the southern US this year. To further compile this list would be to mention the Zika virus outbreak that occurred in Florida and Texas in 2015 and 2016.

According to [Dr. Sadie Ryan](#), the co-director of the Florida Climate Institute at the University of Florida, it's a matter of when, not if, future outbreaks spread to larger regions across the US. "We don't pay enough attention in the United States to what is going on in other countries. We just kind of watch it spread and we don't prepare ourselves for that virus potentially coming to the U.S.," said [Laura Kramer](#), director of the Arbovirus Laboratory at State University of New York at Albany, during the workshop. "That happened with Zika, chikungunya and West Nile." But the US's ability to track insects is at half the capacity it was nearly 100 years ago. There are just sixteen state entomologists in the country who are working to control insect populations and malaria. [Scientists](#) have also added that the US is still unprepared for outbreaks and are urging for preparations to avoid the same missteps made during the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2016 Zika outbreak, even as they work to produce new medicines.

"The fact is, we're not really ready," said Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine and co-director of the Texas Children's Hospital Center for Vaccine Development. "Our local health departments are very spotty with their ability to do mosquito control and to even try to diagnose these viruses and mosquitoes."

In the meantime, [experts](#) recommended emulating Singapore: a country that has cut its number of mosquitoes by cleaning up city environments and teaching mosquito-controlling practices to citizens beginning at a young age. Restrictions are also placed on Singapore residents who will find themselves being fined or jailed for harboring mosquito breeding sites at home.

And [yesterday](#), a report was made that the private companies of Orbit Services Partners Inc., and Verily have partnered for a project to release mosquitos across the Caribbean bred with a bacterium that blocks the dengue virus.

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.

Dependency, Forced Displacement, and Child Slavery: The Dark Side of Green Tech

US President Joe Biden is touting his administration's climate agenda, but in the absence of a multipolar world, the Western drive towards green tech merely reproduces historical patterns of exploitation and dependency.

"Biden's renewable energy crusade exploits and enslaves thousands in poor nations," says Jason Isaac, the founder and CEO of the American Energy Institute. "The human suffering caused by mining for electric vehicle batteries and wind turbine construction is unimaginable — as is the environmental destruction caused by these mines and their toxic byproducts."

Sputnik examines some of the criticisms of transnational mining companies in Africa and considers alternate approaches that respect international sovereignty.

■ "The hostile forces' attempt to use armed forces against the DPRK will face a preemptive and deadly counteraction"

North Korea fired a ballistic missile into the sea on the 12th anniversary of the death of ex-leader Kim Jong Il.

The show of force demonstrated the country's opposition to the growing presence of the United States in the region, including the sending of military assets to the South.

North Korea has slammed military exercises between South Korea, Japan, and the United States as rehearsals for another invasion.

The US-led Korean War led to the killing of 20% of the DPRK's population, widespread destruction north of the 38th parallel, and the balkanization of the Korean Peninsula.

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 Senator Chis Van Hollen said during an interview with an American news channel that Prime Minister Netanyahu has "shut the door" on efforts to establish a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine following the war.

"[Netanyahu] has continued to weaken the Palestinian authority," he said. "Instead of trying to find peace or at least preventing the conditions on the ground from changing with additional settlements to allow a two-state solution, he has shut the door on that effort."

US President Joe Biden has repeatedly expressed support for Israel in their war against Hamas, but has also called for a two-state solution in the event that the conflict ends. However, the tensions between the US and Israel reached new highs when Netanyahu pushed back against

the White House after they urged Israel to end its large-scale ground campaign in Gaza, and focus its attack on Hamas.

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 Senator Says Netanyahu Has 'Shut the Door' on Two-State Efforts

Tensions between the US and Israel recently reached new highs when a senior Israeli diplomat said Israel would not accept a two-state solution following the war. Netanyahu also pushed back after the Biden administration urged the Israeli government to end its large-scale ground campaign in Gaza and focus its target on Hamas.

On Sunday, Senator Chis Van Hollen (D-MD) said during an interview with an American news channel that [Prime Minister Netanyahu](#) has "shut the door" on efforts to establish a two-state solution between Israel and Palestine following the war.

Van Hollen was responding to a question surrounding a statement recently released by Netanyahu in which the prime minister said he was "proud" to have prevented the possibility for a two-state solution.

"I am proud to have prevented the establishment of a Palestinian state, because today everyone knows what that Palestinian state could have been after we saw the little Palestinian state in Gaza," the prime minister said this weekend.

"This is a direct response to President Biden calling for a [two-state solution](#). Ultimately it's the only political settlement that's viable," said Van Hollen, in reference to the statement.

"[Netanyahu] has continued to weaken the Palestinian authority. This is the organization that recognized Israel's right to exist decades and decades ago—instead of trying to find peace or at least preventing the conditions on the ground from changing with additional settlements to allow a two-state solution, he has shut the door on that effort," the senator continued.

"This is where it's really important that President Biden asserts leadership in this moment," the senator added.

Israel is one of the largest recipients of US foreign military financing, according to a [report](#). Since the Obama administration, the country has received \$3.8 billion annually for its military and missile system. A GOP plan to provide the country with \$14.5 billion in military assistance was also passed in early [November](#).

US President Joe Biden has repeatedly expressed support for Israel in their war against Hamas, but has also pushed for a two-state solution, which would allow for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state, in the event that the war ends.

According to the Health Ministry in Gaza, Israel's military response to the October 7 attack from Hamas has killed over 18,700 people. The Biden administration has ["tried to appear as peacekeepers,"](#) yet [blocking ceasefire resolutions](#) at the United Nations Security Council twice. Israel understands the true US intentions, although covered with calls for peace, thus, continues its operation, regardless of civilian casualties. Van Hollen stressed that the US entreaties for Israel to reduce its civilian death toll are ignored by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

"I don't think it's getting through clearly enough because we continue to see unacceptably high levels of civilian casualties," Van Hollen said on Sunday. "And when it comes to the humanitarian crisis [in Gaza], we still have a near-total siege."

"The United States is not a bystander to this. We are a big supplier, of course, a supplier of military assistance to Israel," Van Hollen continued. "So we are with them [Israel] entirely in the objective of ending the military threat. But again, we need to make sure that our values are reflected in this so long as we are providing all of this equipment."

On Wednesday, in response to criticism on the war in Gaza, Netanyahu said that "nothing" would stop Israel: "Nothing will stop us. We are going on to the end, until victory, nothing less."

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.

Australia Experiences Extreme Rain and Flooding Following Cyclone Jasper

On Sunday, the Australian state of Queensland experienced intense flooding following bouts of heavy rain produced by ex-Tropical Cyclone Jasper. The near-record rainfall has left tens of thousands without power and has forced multiple evacuations and rescues as life-threatening flooding surges.

Queensland State Premier Steven Miles declared a "serious weather emergency" as a result of the cyclone's impact. The country's international airport in Cairns—a tourist hub where around 170,000 people live—was also closed due to the record levels of flooding. The state premier announced that Cairns was expected to exceed its previous record of flooding which was set in 1977.

"We've seen rainfall in some places of almost 600 mm with more to come," he said, adding that the situation was "very serious" and could get worse. "There are currently 10,500 people without power."

"I have been speaking with people on the ground, who say they have never seen rainfall like this - (these are) people who have lived in the state's far north for all their lives," he added.

The state premier also said that the government had deployed a significant number of rescue vessels to respond to urgent calls for help. The Queensland Fire and Emergency Services said that number was [532](#). The agency said that some of those who they rescued were trapped in vehicles after knowingly driving into water.

The local government for the aboriginal area of Wujal Wujal also urged caution during the storm on social media. They warned people to stay from floodwaters, and warned of a crocodile that was seen at a bridge crossing near where children were swimming.

One meteorologist confirmed that some areas received more than 600 millimeters of rain within a 24-hour window, and that 500 mm more was expected to follow that. The Cairns Local Disaster Management Group said that homes, buildings, roads, and bridges had been submerged with water, according to one British news [source](#). Some roads were completely destroyed as a result.

Casualties included one 30-year-old man who died after being found unconscious next to downed power lines. A 10-year-old girl was also struck by lightning amid the extreme weather and is now in critical condition, Queensland [police](#) confirmed.

About a week ago, Australia's Bureau of Meteorology first [issued a tropical cyclone warning](#) in preparation for Cyclone Jasper. The cyclone brought with it intense as well as the risk of bushfires. At the time, meteorologists could tell it was going to hit Queensland's coast, but were not sure when. The ex-tropical cyclone is expected to continue its barrage of extreme weather until Monday night.

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.

Gazprom Sets New Daily Record for Gas Deliveries to China

The new record emphasizes the importance of Russia's partnership with its Asian neighbor, as Europe struggles with the irony of their economic failures following their unprecedented sanctions imposed on Russia, as well as the cost of liquefied natural gas exports from the US. On Sunday, Russian gas giant [Gazprom announced](#) that it had set a new daily record for gas deliveries to China the previous day. The company did not disclose the volume of gas it had sent to its partner, but emphasized that it is working to increase its supply to Beijing along the Power of Siberia pipeline which is to thank for its new daily record.

"On December 16, China's application for the supply of Russian gas through the [Power of Siberia gas pipeline](#) once again exceeded the daily contractual obligations. Gazprom delivered all the requested volumes and set a new historical record for daily gas supplies to China," the statement said.

The Power of Siberia is the main gas pipeline stretching from Russia to China, and covers about 3,000 kilometers. Last year alone, the Russian gas giant exported 15.4 billion cubic meters through the pipeline, and for the year 2023 estimations have predicted that it will reach 22 billion. In September, Russia's Energy Ministry also estimated that exports will reach 30 billion in the year 2024.

And on Thursday, Gazprom had announced [cooperation plans](#) with the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) for next year which may include potential gas supplies from Russia through Mongolia. The project has been called the Power of Siberia 2, or the Altai gas pipeline with the designed capacity to carry 50 billion cubic meters per year.

The Power of Siberia has proven to be a successful commitment between Russia and Asia, developing against all odds, [despite the unprecedented Western pressure](#) on Russia's economy. Ironically, the sanctions imposed on Russia have left Europe grappling with spiraling inflation and [surging energy bills](#).

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.

Yemen's Houthis Claim Attacks on Two Ships Linked to Israel - Spokesman

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) – Yemen's Houthi movement has claimed two new attacks on ships linked to Israel in the Red Sea in response to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, according to a statement posted on social media on Monday.

Yemen's Houthis "carried out a qualitative military operation against two ships linked to the Zionist entity. The first was the 'Swan Atlantic' ship, loaded with oil, and the other was the 'MSC Clara' ship, carrying containers. They were targeted by two naval drones," the group's spokesman, Yahya Sarea, said in a social media post.

The claim could not immediately be independently verified.

CNN, citing a US military official said the USS Carney responded to a distress call earlier on Monday from the Swan Atlantic in the Red Sea after it was attacked by "multiple projectiles."

The commercial vessel was hit around 9:00 a.m. local time, the official said.

The incidents marked the latest in a series of attacks on commercial vessels by Yemen's Houthi group in response to Israel's war on Gaza. As recently as Saturday, the USS Carney shot down 14 drones launched from Houthi-controlled areas of Yemen, the US Central Command said.

The Houthis have been firing missiles and attempting to hijack ships linked to Israel passing through the Bab al-Mandab strait. The attacks have forced several major container lines to reroute their ships around southern Africa, pushing up fuel, insurance, and other costs.

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 Returned to Pre-Pandemic Passport Processing Norm

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) – The US State Department said on Monday that its passport processing times have returned to a pre-pandemic norm.

"Passport processing times have returned to our pre-pandemic norm. As of December 18, 2023, passport applications will be processed within 6-8 weeks for routine service and 2-3 weeks for expedited service, which costs an additional \$60," the statement said.

During the pandemic, the processing times were much higher than usual, which created problems for many Americans, particularly those who tried to set up their foreign travels quickly and requested passports urgently.

US authorities said they experienced unprecedented demand for passports over the past year.

"Between October 2022 and September 2023 (the federal fiscal year), the Department of State issued over 24 million passport books and cards - the highest amount ever in our nation's history," the statement said.

The State Department has promised to modernize and improve its services to address the increased demand.

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 Efforts to Stop Houthi Red Sea Attacks Face Uneven Support From Arab Allies - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) – The US' diplomatic efforts to stop Houthi attacks on ships passing through the Red Sea have been challenged by diverging views of allies Saudi Arabia and the UAE on handling the situation, Bloomberg reported on Monday, citing various officials.

While the US has been considering military action, it prefers diplomacy and has been urging the Houthis to stop the attacks through intermediaries like Oman, a US official said.

However, a Houthi spokesperson said that the group's attacks will not stop until Israel ceases its attacks on Gaza. The UAE also wants the US to redesignate the Houthis as terrorists and launch military action, a Yemeni official said.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is concerned that any military action will lead to a more aggressive approach by the Houthis, as well as jeopardize the truce in the Yemen war and efforts to reach a permanent ceasefire, according to a Saudi official involved with negotiating with the Houthis. Saudi Arabia believes diplomacy with Iran can help restrain Houthi attacks and additional regional escalation of Israel's war on Gaza.

The Houthis have been firing missiles and attempting to hijack ships linked to Israel passing through the Bab al-Mandab strait. The attacks have forced several major container lines to reroute their ships around southern Africa, pushing up fuel, insurance, and other costs.

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 Secret Service Says 'No Protective Interest' Linked to Car That Hit Biden's Motorcade

WASHINGTON, December 18 (Sputnik) - There was no so-called protective interest linked to an incident involving a car that hit President Joe Biden's motorcade while he was leaving his campaign headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware on Sunday night, US Secret Service spokesperson Special Agent Steve Kopek told Sputnik.

"Today, at approximately 8:09 p.m., a Secret Service vehicle securing the President's motorcade route was struck by another vehicle in Wilmington, DE [Delaware]," Kopek said on Sunday. "There was no protective interest associated with this event and the President's motorcade departed without incident."

Earlier in the day, the White House press pool reported that a car hit a truck shielding Biden's motorcade at the entrance of his campaign headquarters. The White House press pool said there was a loud bang as Biden was standing outside by a vehicle with a "surprised expression" on his face.

US Secret Service agents reportedly cornered the car and pulled their weapons on the driver who held his hands up.

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 F-35 Still Underperforms Rival Jets as Taxpayer Bill Hits \$1.7 Trillion - Experts

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - The F-35 fighter jet continues to lag Chinese and Russian counterparts in terms of effectiveness despite costs soaring to exorbitant levels, forcing the US to seek more war to justify the investment, experts told Sputnik.

Earlier this week, the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) in an audit sponsored by Congress said the \$1.7 trillion F-35 program's costs continued to soar out of control, rising another \$44 billion 17 years after it first flew and eight years after it entered service. The aircraft continues to be plagued by issues with technology upgrades including cockpit electronics software, the Pentagon has said.

"The cost of this aircraft, continually rising and hard to justify financially, is a stunning example of what the corporate defense industry has wrought in its domination of Congress and of the Executive Branch," former Pentagon analyst and retired US Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Karen Kwiatkowski told Sputnik. "A new war anywhere in the world means new and long-term contracts, and provides high paying jobs for a small sector of the country."

As a result, the former Pentagon analyst said the US political establishment is seeking to foment conflicts regardless of the best interests of the United States.

Kwiatkowski said the F-35 was designed to deliver "a continuous and growing paycheck" to the defense contractors who conduct a lifetime of extensive repairs on the aircraft.

"One plane, all missions, and guaranteed profits. As older and more battle hardened US air combat capabilities are retired and shifted to the F-35, the rest of the world may in fact be chuckling instead of shaking in their boots," she said.

REMAINS OUTGUNNED BY CHINA, RUSSIA

Kwiatkowski said the US Air Force recognizes the shortfalls of the program such as inability to operate far from logistics support, lessons that would be applied if the F-35 was deployed to defend Taiwan or in a war in the Pacific theater.

"In a battlespace where the F-35 is part of an offensive combined arms campaign, far from home... F-35 would not remain in the fight for long," the former Pentagon analyst said.

F-35 availability rates, she added, would be far below the current 55% due to both inherent reliability and durability issues. Plus, it is still unknown whether the aircraft has the ability to successfully operate in an active hostile environment, Kwiatkowski said.

Retired US Army Lieutenant Colonel Earl Rasmussen, former vice president of the Eurasia Foundation, said the F-35 is impressive when it is operational but it will likely face problems when facing Russia's Sukhoi Su-57 or China's J-20.

"While the F-35 may have an advantage in a perfect environment, war is not a perfect environment. Operational effectiveness may cause challenges and a degradation of sensor and network communication capabilities will likely put the F-35 at a disadvantage in a one-to-one engagement with both the SU-57 and J-20," Rasmussen said.

The Russian Su-57 and the Chinese J-20 and J-31 have advantages with respect to speed, range, agility and lethality, he added.

"The Chinese J-20 is faster, has longer range, and carries more weapon systems," Rasmussen said. "The Russian Su-57 while lacking in stealth capabilities is faster, has a longer range, and is more agile with significantly more maneuverability than the F-35. The SU-57 carries a wide variety of armaments to include cruise missiles giving it a great stand-off capability and the ability to engage targets from a range of 300 km [180 miles]."

However, despite its problems. Rasmussen added, the F-35 sensor fusion technology is a major step forward, providing unprecedented visibility while integrating with other sensor systems and targeting capabilities.

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.

Netflix Resumes Advertisement on X After Brief Pause Over Musk Backlash - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Netflix has resumed advertising on the social media platform X after a brief pause due to Elon Musk allegedly endorsing an antisemitic statement, the Wrap reported.

The report said on Friday that a spokesperson for the social media platform X confirmed Netflix resumed ads with the company.

Musk faced backlash after he replied to a post on X, which claimed that Jewish communities were pushing hatred against White people, saying it was "the actual truth."

Film companies Warner Bros., Sony Pictures, Paramount, and Lionsgate suspended advertising on Musk's social network X due to his "anti-Semitic" comments. A similar decision was made by Walt Disney, as well as technology companies IBM and Apple.

Musk said that the network would donate all its income from the content related to the conflict in the Gaza Strip to Israeli hospitals and an international humanitarian organization providing medical assistance to Palestinians.

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.

Arizona Gov. Sends National Guard to Southern Border, Says Biden Not Helping With Crisis

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Arizona Governor Katie Hobbs is deploying National Guard troops to the state's border with Mexico as it struggles to deal with a heavy flow of illegal migrants, the governor's office said in a press release.

"One week after her letter to President Biden asking him to reassign the Arizona National Guard to re-open the Lukeville Port of Entry, Governor Katie Hobbs signed an Executive Order to carry out the next step in Operation SECURE, mobilizing the National Guard to southern Arizona," the release said on Friday. "There, they will assist the Department of Public Safety and local law enforcement agencies with enforcement activities, including fentanyl interdiction, analytical support, and human trafficking enforcement efforts."

The National Guard troops will be stationed at multiple locations along Arizona's southern border with Mexico, including near both the Lukeville Port of Entry and the San Miguel crossing, the release noted.

Hobbs said in the release that Arizona needs resources and manpower to reopen the Lukeville crossing, manage the flow of migrants, and maintain a secure border.

Despite continued requests for assistance, the Biden administration has refused to deliver desperately needed resources to Arizona's border, Hobbs 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.

Star of 'Friends' Matthew Perry Died Due to 'Acute Effects of Ketamine' – Medical Examiner

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - Star of the TV series Friends Matthew Perry died by accident due to "acute effects of ketamine," the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner said in a press release.

"The County of Los Angeles Department of Medical Examiner (DME) determined the cause of death for 54-year-old actor Matthew Langford Perry as the acute effects of ketamine," the release said on Friday.

Drowning, coronary artery disease, and the effects of buprenorphine for treating opioid use disorder are listed as contributing factors in Perry's death, the release said.

Ketamine is usually used as a treatment for depression and pain management and as a recreational drug. In August, the New York Times reported that Elon Musk used this drug and his use of this drug has increased in recent years.

Matthew Perry was pronounced dead on October 28 afternoon after he was found in a jacuzzi bathtub at his house in Los Angeles, California. The police discovered no drugs at the scene and later stated that no foul play was involved.

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 Jury Orders Giuliani to Pay \$148Mln for Defaming Georgia Poll Workers - State Official

(Updates with details in paras 4,5)

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - A US jury ordered former Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani to pay a fine of \$148 million for defaming a Georgia election worker, Georgia State Chief Operating Officer Gabriel Sterling said in a statement.

Sterling said on Friday that the jury ordered Giuliani to pay a total of \$148 million to Georgia election workers Ruby Freeman and her daughter Shaye Moss.

Giuliani repeatedly and falsely accused Freeman and Moss of fraud in the 2020 US election.

Giuliani, in response to the fine, said the amount awarded to Freeman and Moss is "absurd."

The former Trump attorney said his legal team will appeal the decision and possibly seek a new

trial.

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 Jury Orders Trump Lawyer to Pay \$148Mln for Defaming Georgia Election Workers - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - A US jury ordered former Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani to pay a fine of \$148 million for defaming a Georgia election worker, Georgia State Chief Operating Officer Gabriel Sterling said in a statement.

Sterling said on Friday that the jury ordered Giuliani to pay a total of \$148 million to Georgia election workers Ruby Freeman and her daughter Shaye Moss.

Giuliani repeatedly and falsely accused Freeman and Moss of fraud in the 2020 US election.

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 State Department Approves Potential \$59Mln Sale of Missiles to Japan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) The US State Department approved a potential \$59 million sale of Sidewinder Missiles to Japan, the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a statement.

“The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Japan of AIM-9X Block II Sidewinder Missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$59.03 million,” the statement said on Friday.

Japan requested to buy 44 Sidewinder Missiles, as well as 29 training units, the statement said. The sale would support US foreign policy and national security goals, the statement said. The sale would neither alter the basic military balance of the region nor adversely impact US defense readiness, the statement 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 Approves Possible \$400Mln Sale of HIMARS, Equipment to Italy - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) – The US Department of State has approved a possible sale of 21 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and related equipment for \$400 million to Italy, the IS Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a press release.

“The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Italy of M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems (HIMARS) and related

equipment for an estimated cost of \$400 million," the release said on Friday.

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.

'No Chance' US House Will Reconvene Early to Work on Supplemental Like Senate - Source

WASHINGTON, December 16 (Sputnik) - There is no chance the House of Representatives will reconvene early during the holiday break to work on the national security supplemental package, a congressional source told Sputnik.

"No chance the House will come back early," the source said on Friday. "The Senate doesn't dictate the will of the House."

House lawmakers departed Washington on Thursday to begin their holiday recess through January 3. The Senate, which was set to go on recess on Friday, will instead reconvene next week with hopes of reaching a deal on passing the supplemental package that includes more aid for Ukraine and Israel.

US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said the Senate could vote on the supplemental bill sometime next week if a deal is reached between Senate Republicans and Democrats and the White House.

Senate Republicans blocked the supplemental bill from advancing last week because it lacked "credible" immigration policy changes that would address the ongoing crisis on the US southern border. However, media reported that the White House appears ready to agree to support stricter immigration policy changes.

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 16 (Sputnik) –
CONFLICT IN GAZA

* Israel has temporarily allowed trucks with humanitarian aid to enter the Gaza Strip through the Kerem Shalom checkpoint and their unloading on the territory of the enclave due to the limited capacity of the Rafah checkpoint, the office of the Israeli Prime Minister said on Friday.

* The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has mistakenly identified three hostages held by Hamas in the Gaza Strip as a threat and opened fire, killing all three, the IDF said.

* The United States does not believe it makes sense for Israel to occupy the Gaza Strip for the long term, White House National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The Ukraine conflict is "too complicated" to be resolved in 24 hours, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told NBC News, when asked about former US President Donald Trump's claim

that he could end the war in 24 hours if reelected.

* Ukraine will never match Russia's potential even with support from the collective West, Peskov said.

* The billions of dollars the United States has spent to support Ukraine have not helped Kiev achieve its goals on the battlefield, but have only prolonged its conflict with Russia, Peskov said.

* The European Union will hold another summit in late January or early February to agree on the financial assistance for Ukraine, European Council President Charles Michel said.

* Russia's air defense systems destroyed 26 Ukrainian drones over the Crimean Peninsula on Friday from 20:30 to 22:30 Moscow time (05:30 - 07:30 pm GMT), the Defense Ministry said.

RUSSIA-US RELATIONS

* Russia is open to talks with the United States but will only do so on its own terms, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told NBC News in an interview on Friday.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin wants a US president who would seek constructive relations with Moscow, Peskov said.

* Russian President Vladimir Putin is ready to work with any US president who understands that they have to take into account Moscow's concerns, Peskov said.

RUSSIA'S ENERGY SECTOR

* The average price of the Russian oil brand Urals amounted to \$66.12 from November 15 to December 14, while the Brent benchmark was trading at \$78.89 per barrel, bringing the Russian oil's discount to \$12.77 per barrel, the Russian Finance Ministry said on Friday.

* The duty on oil exports from Russia from January one will be nullified after \$24.7 per tonne in December 2023 due to the end of a tax maneuver, the Finance Ministry's data showed.

* The situation in the global economy remains turbulent, which leads to a decrease in demand for energy resources, including from Russia, Bank of Russia Governor Elvira Nabiullina said.

RUSSIA-CHINA COOPERATION

* Energy cooperation between Russia and China has actively developed this year and achieved new results even in a difficult and tense international situation, Vice Premier of the State Council of China Ding Xuexiang said on Friday.

* Russia plans to further increase energy supplies to China and attract Chinese investments and technological innovations to the Russian energy complex, Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said.

* A third of trade between Russia and China — that is already over \$200 billion today — amounted for energy resources, the Russian government said.

RUSSIAN ECONOMY OUTLOOK

* Russia's GDP growth in 2023 will be higher than the October forecast and will amount to more than 3%, the Russian Central Bank said on Friday.

* The annual inflation in Russia is expected to be from 7% to 7.5% by the end of the year, the Central Bank said.

* The Russian Central Bank said that the inflation risks remain significant in the medium-term outlook.

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.

Two US Treasury Officials to Visit Europe for Talks on Russian Oil Price Cap - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Two senior US Treasury Department officials will visit Europe next week for talks on the next phase of enforcing the Western price cap on Russian oil, according to a statement on Friday.

"US Department of the Treasury Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes Elizabeth Rosenberg and P.D.O Assistant Secretary for Economic Policy Eric Van Nostrand will travel to Europe to meet with government and private sector counterparts to discuss the second phase of the price cap, which seeks to further limit the profits Russia receives for its illegal invasion while promoting stable global energy markets," the statement said.

Rosenberg and Van Nostrand are scheduled to meet in Brussels with members of the European Commission and member state representatives, the statement said.

"[They will] discuss policy developments to the price cap, including recent compliance and enforcement actions and guidance that the Price Cap Coalition has taken, and will continue to take, to ensure the policy's enduring effectiveness," the statement said.

In London, Rosenberg and Van Nostrand will also engage in discussions with pertinent maritime services industry groups and think tanks on the implications and considerations surrounding the price cap, the statement said.

They will also meet with their UK government counterparts for wider-ranging talks on Russia-related sanctions, 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.

US in Coming Days to Say More on Maritime Task Force to Deter Houthi Attacks - White House

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States in the coming days will have more to reveal about enhanced maritime security measures being put together with allies to deter Houthi attacks against commercial vessels in the Middle East, White House National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Friday.

On Thursday, Axios reported that the United States is expected to announce the deployment of a "special upgraded multinational task force" in the Red Sea to deter Yemen's rebel Ansar Allah movement, also known as the Houthis, from further attacks on ships.

"We are working so hard to bolster and strengthen the existing combined maritime forces that were already established in the region and I think we'll have more to say about the specifics on that in coming days, I don't have an update for you now, but I think we'll have more to say specifically about that maritime task force here in certain days," Kirby told reporters.

The commercial traffic transit in the Red Sea is more dangerous now than before because of recent Houthi attacks on commercial shipping vessels, Kirby added.

According to reports, the task force would not escort ships in the Red Sea, but its presence would make it easier to respond to threats.

The Biden administration has recently sent several messages to Houthi rebels via a number of

channels warning them to stop attacks on ships in the Red Sea and against Israel, media reported.

The Houthis previously said that they would continue to prevent the passage of ships in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until Israel's military campaign in the Gaza Strip ends.

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 Approves \$300 Mln Military Sale to Taiwan's De Facto Embassy

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The United States approved on Friday a possible \$300 million sale of Command, Control, Communications, and Computers support to the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office (TECRO), which is de facto Taiwan's embassy in Washington.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Taipei Economic and Cultural Representative Office in the United States of Command, Control, Communications, and Computers (C4) Life Cycle Support and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$300 million," Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said in a statement.

The DSCA already notified US Congress of this possible deal, it added.

The TECRO has requested to buy follow-on life cycle support to maintain Command, Control, Communications, and Computers capabilities managed under its Syun An program, according to the statement.

The proposed sale will improve Taiwan's capabilities and serve US national, economic, and security interests, 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.

US State Dept. Approves \$224Mln Sale of Missiles to Japan - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The State Department has approved a possible \$224 million sale of AIM-120C-8 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) and related equipment to Japan, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Japan of AIM-120C-8 Advanced Medium-Range Air-to-Air Missiles (AMRAAM) and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$224 million," the DSCA said in a statement.

Japan's request includes 120 AMRAAM missiles, three AIM-120C-8 guidance sections, and AIM-120 Captive Air Training Missiles (CATM), according to the statement.

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 Agrees With Israelis That Gaza Conflict Could Last for Months – White House

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The United States agrees with the Israeli assessment that the ongoing conflict in Gaza could go on for several months, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Friday.

“We agree with the Israelis that this conflict could go on for months,” Kirby said during a press briefing.

During his meetings with Israeli officials earlier this week, US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan talked about the importance of transitioning to a new, different phase of the military operation in Gaza that would entail more targeted and precise strikes in scope and scale, Kirby 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.

US OKs Possible \$1.95Bln Sale of Black Hawk Helicopters, Equipment to Greece - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The US Department of State approved a possible sale to Greece of 35 Black Hawk helicopters and related equipment for \$1.95 billion, the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Friday.

“The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Greece of UH-60M Black Hawk Helicopters and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$1.95 billion,” DSCA said in a press release.

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 Meets With Abbas to Discuss Situation in Gaza, West Bank - White House

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan met with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas to discuss the situations in Gaza and the West Bank, the White House said on Friday.

"Mr. Sullivan expressed his deepest sympathy for Palestinian civilians who have lost their lives in Gaza since October 7th. He discussed US efforts to increase the flow of life-saving humanitarian assistance for Palestinian civilians in Gaza and stressed the importance of enhancing the protection of civilians," the White House said in a statement.

Sullivan and Abbas also discussed efforts to promote stability in the West Bank, including efforts to counter settler violence against Palestinians, the statement said.

Sullivan reiterated the Biden administration's vision for a two-state solution that provides equal freedom and dignity for Israelis and Palestinians, the statement 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.

Hong Kong Activist Says to Continue Calling for Sanctions Despite Bounty on Her Head

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Exiled activist Frances Hui on Friday said she would continue calling for international sanctions on her country after Hong Kong authorities announced a HK \$1 million reward for information leading to her arrest for violating a national security law.

"I will continue to advocate for sanctioning Hong Kong officials and their mouthpieces. I will keep calling for the release of the political prisoners in Hong Kong and for the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] to be held accountable for violating Hong Kong's basic law and human rights," Hui said in remarks at the Hudson Institute in Washington.

The activist expressed confidence that the arrest warrant was issued because of her advocacy in the US, where she arrived to seek asylum in 2020, as well as for her calls to sanction Hong Kong officials.

Hong Kong national security police have announced a HK \$1 million (\$128,205) bounty on five dissidents living overseas, including Hui, a policy and advocacy coordinator at the Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation.

A police statement said the five activists had engaged in 'incitement to secession,' 'incitement to subversion,' and 'collusion with a foreign country or with external elements to endanger national security,'"

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 dissidents 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.

US, UK Defense Chiefs Discuss Houthi Attacks on Ships in Red Sea - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in a call with his UK counterpart on Friday discussed Houthi attacks on vessels in the Red Sea, the Pentagon said.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III conducted a call today with his United Kingdom

counterpart, Secretary of State for Defence Grant Shapps. The two leaders discussed the ongoing threat to civilians and global shipping posed by illegal attacks by Houthis on vessels in the vicinity of the Red Sea," Press Secretary Pat Ryder said in a statement.

Both underscored the significance of the Red Sea as a crucial artery for global commerce.

"They both noted that the scale and frequency of these attacks constitute a significant international problem that must be addressed," the statement added.

The Houthis warned last week that they will continue to prevent ships allegedly linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel from passing through the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea until Israel ends its military campaign in the Gaza Strip.

Since the onset of the conflict between Israel and Palestinian movement Hamas on October 7, the Houthis have conducted multiple missile and drone attacks, threatening civilian infrastructure in Israel and commercial shipping operating in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

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 House Republican Demands Ethics Probe of Judge Over Trump Comments - Complaint

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – US House Republican Conference Chair Elise Stefanik filed a complaint on Friday demanding an ethics probe of US District Court Judge Beryl Howell after she made controversial remarks about former President Donald Trump during a speech in November.

"I write today to express my serious concerns about, and request an ethics investigation of, DC U.S. District Judge Beryl Howell for her highly inappropriate political speech she gave last month, at which she suggested reelecting President Trump will lead to fascism in America," the complaint read.

According to Stefanik, Howell's speech at the Women's White Collar Defense Association awards gala on November 27 was nothing else but election interference that undermines public trust in US courts.

In her complaint, Stefanik called Howell's remarks "plainly inappropriate" and "unbecoming of a federal judge" and urged DC Court of Appeals Chief Judge Sri Srinivasan to investigate the judge's "partisan speech."

In her capacity as a chief judge between March 2016 and March 2023, Howell supervised proceedings in multiple cases involving those taking part in the January 6 events, including against Trump himself and his top aides.

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.

Group of Yazidi-Americans Sue Lafarge for Support of Islamic State Terrorists - Filing

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - A group of Yazidi-Americans are suing French building materials company Lafarge for conspiring to aid the Islamic State terrorist group (ISIS, banned in Russia), according to a complaint filed in the US District Court for the Eastern District of New York.

The civil lawsuit was filed Thursday by more than 400 Yazidi-Americans, led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Nadia Murad.

"Because Defendants [Lafarge] aided and abetted ISIS's acts of international terrorism and conspired with ISIS and its intermediaries, they must pay compensation to the survivors," the filing said.

Lafarge supplied money and cement to ISIS at the same time as the terror group was attacking Yazidis, killing and displacing hundreds of thousands of members of the ethnic group. ISIS used Lafarge cement to construct tunnels used to transport, trap and torture Yazidi hostages, the filing said.

The plaintiffs in the case are represented by human rights lawyer Amal Clooney.

"We hope that this case will send a clear message that supporting terrorists cannot be 'business as usual' and that there will be justice for the victims," Clooney said in a statement on the lawsuit.

The lawsuit, brought under the Anti-Terrorism Act, seeks to collect damages for the Yazidi victims of ISIS. Lafarge pleaded guilty last year to paying ISIS and another terrorist group nearly \$6 million between August 2013 and October 2014.

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.

Details of Opening Kerem Shalom Border Crossing Still Worked Out - UN Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, December 15 (Sputnik) - The details about the opening of the Kerem Shalom border crossing to deliver humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip are still being worked on, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"Those details [when crossing Kerem Shalom will be opened] are still being worked out," Dujarric said during a press briefing on Friday.

The United Nations is in contact with Israel's agency in charge of allowing access to Gaza, Dujarric added.

US State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said earlier that progress had been made on the reopening of the Kerem Shalom border crossing for the purpose of humanitarian aid deliveries.

On Monday, Israel indefinitely closed the Kerem Shalom crossing after its Defense Ministry inspectors found several pounds of explosives hidden in a shipment headed for the West Bank.

Gaza is inhabited by 2.3 million people and the Kerem Shalom crossing is the only commercial gateway linking the Palestinian enclave with the outside world.

Israel's full blockade of Gaza, including of food, water, medicines, fuel and electricity, has led to a humanitarian catastrophe. Some 19,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel's bombardments and invasion of Gaza since October 7, some 49,000 have been wounded and

1.8 million have been displaced.

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.

China Says Arms Exports Should Be Strictly Managed, Not Interfere in Internal Affairs

UNITED NATIONS, December 15 (Sputnik) - Major arms exporting nations should strictly regulate their shipments and not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, Chinese Ambassador to the UN Zhang Jun said on Friday.

"In particular, major arms exporting countries should set a good example by strictly managing their military exports and should stop interfering in the internal affairs of other countries through the arms trade," Zhang told a UN Security Council meeting on small arms.

They should stop transferring weapons to non-state actors and enflaming conflicts, he added. Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu said during the same meeting that the UN has observed an continuous increase in military expenditures worldwide.

Friday's UN Security Council meeting on small arms is an open debate, organized by the mission of Ecuador. Ecuador holds the Security Council presidency for the month of December.

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 Ambassador in Beijing Says China Seeks to Become 'More Influential' in Middle East

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns, on Friday, expressed his thoughts about China's ambitions to enhance its influence in the Middle East.

"China has, I think, a wish to become more influential in the Middle East," US Ambassador to China Nicholas Burns said during a discussion hosted by the Brookings Institution on Friday.

Burns said that in a crisis like the one involving Israel and Palestine, there is a need for genuine efforts to bring the conflict to an end.

The US ambassador expressed his belief that the responsibility for achieving such a resolution rests squarely on the shoulders of the United States.

"The Chinese just don't have that history in the Middle East. You've not seen that kind of involvement. I'm not being critical. I'm just stating the obvious," Burns said.

Since hostilities were renewed in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on October 7, China has called for restraint and pointed out the need for a peaceful resolution.

As the humanitarian catastrophe emerged with Israel's indiscriminate bombardment and invasion of Gaza, China has joined calls for a ceasefire and urged the delivery of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian enclave.

In addition, China has reiterated the call for a two-state solution to the conflict.

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 General Visits Iraq, Syria to Discuss Spike in Attacks on Troops - CENTCOM

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US Central Command (CENTCOM) Commander General Michael Erik Kurilla traveled to Iraq and Syria this week for talks with local officials on the recent surge in attacks on American troops in the Middle East, CENTCOM said in a statement on Friday.

"On December 13-14, General Michael Erik Kurilla, US Central Command Commander, traveled to Iraq and Syria to meet with key leaders, partner forces, and US Service Members," CENTCOM said in a post on X. "The leaders discussed current regional and local security concerns with a particular emphasis on the attacks against US forces."

While in Iraq, Kurilla met with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani, Chief of the General Staff of the Iraqi Armed Forces General Abdel Emir Yarallah and the Commander of Joint Operations Command Lieutenant General Qais al-Muhammadawi.

He also met with officers and soldiers stationed in Baghdad, Al Assad Air Base and Erbil Airfield as part of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the US-led mission to defeat the Islamic State (banned in Russia) terrorist group, "to receive an operational update and assess the current security situation," CENTCOM said.

In Syria, Kurilla visited multiple bases housing OIR troops to assess force posture and measures to protect US soldiers in the country. He also received an update from "key partners" in the US-led mission against the IS terror group.

Kurilla's visit to Iraq and Syria comes amid an uptick in attacks on US forces in the Middle East, who have come under attack at least 92 times since October 17, according to the Pentagon.

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 Observes Continued Increase in Global Military Expenditures - Official

UNITED NATIONS, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United Nations has observed a continuous increase in military expenditures worldwide, Under-Secretary-General and High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu said on Friday.

"[W]e have seen a continued rise in global military expenditures," Nakamitsu said during a meeting of the UN Security Council on small arms.

The existing regulatory frameworks have served to decrease the trend but their implementation continues to be uneven and challenges persist, Nakamitsu said.

Illicit trafficking of weapons remains one of the biggest obstacles to peace, the official added.

The meeting, chaired by the Ecuadorean Foreign Affairs Minister Maria Gabriela Sommerfeld, was organized in an open debate format.

Ecuador presides over the UN Security Council during the month of December.

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 Lost Binder With Materials on Alleged Russian Elections Interference - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The United States has lost a binder containing classified materials related to Russia's alleged meddling in elections, CNN reported on Friday. The incident occurred more than two years ago but was not previously reported, the report said.

The binder was last seen at the White House during the final days of the Trump administration, the report said.

US intelligence officials were so concerned over the episode that they briefed Senate Intelligence Committee leaders last year about their efforts to find the missing binder, the report said.

The binder contained material that NATO allies had gathered on Russia and its agents, the report said.

In January 2021, former President Donald Trump directed his team to declassify most of the documents in the binder. Trump's aides created redacted copies to distribute them to lawmakers and journalists, the report said.

However, then-White House chief of staff Mark Meadows directed the Justice Department to hand-deliver a redacted copy for a last review. But the Justice Department has yet to release all the binder's document, the report said.

As a result of the alleged chaos during the final hours of the Trump administration, the original binder went missing, the report said.

Russia has repeatedly rejected the accusations by the United States and other countries in the collective West that it meddles in elections.

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, China in Strategic Competition for Global, Regional Power – Ambassador to Beijing

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The United States and China are “systemic rivals” that compete for global and regional power, US Ambassador to China Robert Nicholas Burns said on Friday.

“We are the two leading economies in the world and will be into the 2030s and 2040s. We are the two most powerful militaries in the world and certainly will be for the next two or three decades. We are the two countries with the widest global reach ... and we are vying for global power as well as regional power. I think we're systemic rivals,” Burns said during a discussion hosted by the Brookings Institution.

According to Burns, China's goal is to become the strongest power in the Indo-Pacific, while the United States continues to boost its geostrategic presence in the region, including in the Philippines, where Washington now has access to nine bases.

In November, Biden and Xi held extensive bilateral talks on the margins of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit in San Francisco, during which the leaders agreed to restore bilateral cooperation to ease rising tensions, including the resumption of direct military-to-military contacts.

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 Ambassador to China Says Not Optimistic About US-China Relations

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – US Ambassador to China Nicolas Burns said Friday that he does not feel optimistic about the future of US-China relations and needs to see how things develop over time.

“I don't feel optimistic about the future of US-China relations. I feel that we need to see how things develop,” Burns said at a Brookings talk.

Burns added that the US and China had recently had a “very good and productive meeting” in California and the question was whether engagement could be sustained and commitments would be kept.

He noted a “rollercoaster past” of on-and-off communications, saying that he was “hopeful...but hopeful is different than being optimistic.”

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 Enters Holiday Break Without Deal on Supplemental Funding, Border Security

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The House of Representatives is entering its scheduled break for the winter holiday season without reaching a deal with the Senate on the Biden's administration's supplemental funding request, to which Republican lawmakers have insisted Congress must attach stronger border security measures.

In October, the Biden administration requested \$106 billion in emergency funding to aid Ukraine and Israel, as well as bolster US military efforts in the Indo-Pacific region.

The request also included some funding for US border security measures, but Republicans have opposed passage of the request unless lawmakers include more stringent policies.

On Friday, House lawmakers adjourned for the week, with no more business days scheduled for December. However, the House of Representatives will meet in a pro-forma session on Tuesday.

House Speaker Mike Johnson said on Thursday that the lower chamber of Congress will not wait around for the Senate to propose an agreement.

"For some reason, the Biden Administration waited until this week to even begin negotiations with Congress on the border issue. While that work should continue, the House will not wait around to receive and debate a rushed product," Johnson said in a statement via X (formerly known as Twitter).

On Thursday, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said the Senate will remain in session next week to vote on the supplemental funding request.

Schumer has contended that if Republican lawmakers were serious about addressing border security, they would remain in Washington to work on a deal.

The White House has likewise urged lawmakers to remain in Washington to provide aid to Ukraine before the end of the year. Ukraine needs aid now, "not after the eggnog," National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.

Johnson said that he has consistently told Schumer and the White House that the United States must secure its own borders before those of a foreign country.

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.

RPT - Kremlin Says Ukraine Conflict 'Too Complicated' to Be Resolved in 24 Hours

(Fixes typo in lede)

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The Ukraine conflict is "too complicated" to be resolved in 24 hours, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told NBC News, when asked about former US President Donald Trump's claim that he could end the war in 24 hours if reelected. "It's too complicated" to be resolved that easily, Peskov said in an interview.

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.

Kremlin Says Russia Open to Negotiations With US, But On Its Terms

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Russia is open to talks with the United States but will only do so on its own terms, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told NBC News in an interview on Friday.

"The world is less safe than it used to be before our dialogue was shut down," Peskov 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.

Kremlin Says Ukraine Conflict 'Too Complicated' to Be Resolved in 24 Hours

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The Ukraine complicit is "too complicated" to be resolved in 24 hours, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told NBC News, when asked about former US President Donald Trump's claim that he could end the war in 24 hours if reelected. "It's too complicated" to be resolved that easily, Peskov said in an interview.

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.

Mossad Plans to Assassinate Overseas Hamas Leaders Once Hostages Released - US Official

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - The Israeli intelligence agency Mossad is tracking Hamas leaders outside of Gaza and will assassinate all of them once the last hostage held in the Palestinian enclave is back on Israeli soil, US investigative journalist Seymour Hersh reported on Friday, citing a US official.

"The minute the last hostage is on Israeli soil, the entire [Hamas] leadership - political, religious and military - will be killed in the countries where they live," the official told Hersh, as quoted on his Substack blog.

Mossad is already tracking the Hamas leaders, but killing them before the hostages are out is risky, the official said.

The official also said intelligence had indicated that Iranian and Hezbollah officials have accused Hamas' political leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, of "going too far" in ordering an all-out attack on Israel on October 7.

The official also said that 700 Hamas fighters in Gaza have surrendered over the past week or so to Israeli forces, including a senior aide to Sinwar in charge of communications.

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 Says Israel Will Open Kerem Shalom Border Crossing for Delivering Aid to Gaza

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan said on Friday that Israel has decided to open the Kerem Shalom border crossing for aid delivery to the Gaza Strip.

"Before departing Israel, I was informed by my counterpart, Israeli National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi, that the government of Israel has taken the decision to open its border crossing at Kerem Shalom for direct delivery of humanitarian assistance to Palestinian civilians in Gaza," Sullivan said in a release.

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.

Putin Wants US President Who is 'More Constructive' Toward Russia - Kremlin

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Russian President Vladimir Putin wants a US president who would seek constructive relations with Moscow, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told NBC News.

"I have no doubt that President Putin would like to see someone who is more constructive to our country," Peskov said, when asked whether the Russian president would like to see a change at the White House.

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.

Kremlin Says Ukraine Will Never Match Russia's Potential Even With Western Aid - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Ukraine will never match Russia's potential even with support from the collective West, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov told NBC News on Friday.

Ukraine can never match Russia's military and economic potential even if the collective West continues to provide aid to the Kiev regime, Peskov said.

The Kremlin spokesperson added that such a situation makes resistance futile, Peskov 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.

Putin to Work With Any US President Who Takes Russia's Concerns Seriously - Kremlin

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Russian President Vladimir Putin is ready to work with any US president who understands that they have to take into account Moscow's concerns, Kremlin spokesman Dimitry Peskov told NBC News.

Putin is ready to work with "anyone who will understand that from now on, you have to be more careful with Russia and you have to take into account its concerns," Peskov said, when asked whether Putin could work with the Republican front-runner and former President Donald Trump.

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.

Kremlin Says US Assistance Has Not Helped Ukraine, Only Prolongs Conflict

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The billions of dollars the United States has spent to support Ukraine have not helped Kiev achieve its goals on the battlefield, but have only prolonged its conflict with Russia, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told NBC News.

"You have to understand your responsibility for this," Peskov said. "You are making this conflict longer."

Peskov accused the Biden administration of fruitlessly throwing billions of US taxpayer dollars "into the wind" by providing military and financial aid to Kiev.

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.

Kremlin Says US Aware That Ukraine Cannot Win in Conflict With Russia

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The United States is aware that Ukraine cannot win in its conflict with Russia but continues to encourage Ukrainians to die in the battlefield, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday.

"You are telling them — go and die. Don't worry, we will give you enough money and enough armaments, but you should go and die. And you know pretty well that they cannot win," Peskov said in an interview with NBC News.

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.

Kremlin Says Ukraine Will Never Match Russia's Potential Even With West's Support

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Ukraine will never be able to match Russia's potential even with the West's support for Kiev, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told NBC News.

Even if the West continues to support Kiev, Ukraine will not be able to match Russia's military and economic potential, making resistance futile and Washington's signals to its leadership conflicting, Peskov said in an interview.

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.

Kremlin Says US Prolonging Conflict, Wasting Taxpayer Money in Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told NBC News that the United States is prolonging the conflict in Ukraine while wasting its taxpayer money on aid to Kiev.

"You have to understand your responsibility for this," Peskov said in the sit-down interview. "You are making this conflict longer."

Peskov also chided Washington for throwing billions of taxpayer dollars "into the wind" by providing military aid to Kiev that has not produced a battlefield victory.

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.

Kremlin Says US Aware That Ukraine Cannot Win in Conflict With Russia

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The United States is aware that Ukraine cannot win in its conflict with Russia but continues to encourage Ukrainians to die in the battlefield, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Friday.

“You are telling them — go and die. Don’t worry, we will give you enough money and enough armaments, but you should go and die. And you know pretty well that they cannot win,” Peskov said in an interview with NBC News.

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.

Kremlin Says Ukraine Conflict a Hybrid War Led by US

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) - Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told NBC News that the Russia-Ukraine conflict is a hybrid war led by the United States.

"It is a hybrid war that actually the United States is orchestrating against our country," Peskov said during an interview, when asked whether Russia sees its military operation as a war.

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.

Ukraine Could Hold Out Several Months Without West’s Help, May Lose by Summer – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 15 (Sputnik) – The Ukrainian military could hold out several months without support from the West and suffer a defeat by the summer, CNN reported on Friday, citing a senior US military official.

The official said that under a worst-case scenario, Kiev may face a severe setback or even defeat by the summer.

Another senior US military official did not rule out Ukraine’s failure even with Western aid.

"There is no guarantee of success with us, but they are certain to fail without us," the official said.

Volodymyr Zelenskyy visited Washington this week to lobby Congress to approve more aid for Ukraine as the current 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.

White House Strategic Communications Coordinator John Kirby urged Congress on Thursday

to immediately adopt the supplemental package, including aid for Ukraine, without delay for the holiday recess.

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.

“For the first time ever from a military hardware perspective, we are five to seven years behind our near-peer adversaries in a critical kinetic piece of technology,” former US official said.

Questions over funding and planning have stymied US plans to create massive drone swarms to overwhelm China and other potential military adversaries.

Having accepted the US’ shortfall in ships, missiles, and troops compared to the Asian superpower, the so-called Replicator program proposes to use novel drone technology to resolve the issue cheaply.

But a chicken-and-egg problem has emerged as the Pentagon waits for Silicon Valley innovation while tech firms wait for Pentagon funding.

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.

■ Vietnam is enjoying a kingmaker position in the rivalry between China and the United States, with both powers seeking greater economic cooperation with the East Asian country.

The legacy of the Vietnam War, in which some 3 million people died, colors US relations with Hanoi. But China also has a complex relationship with the country.

Sputnik offers insight on the unique history that influences Chinese and US relations with Vietnam and explains why both world powers are attempting to build an economic alliance.

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.

Dependency, Forced Displacement, and Child Slavery: The Dark Side of Green Tech

Abuses in Africa have attracted criticism from some influential quarters, including Amnesty International and Pope Francis.

As US President Joe Biden touts his administration’s climate agenda, some observers are drawing attention to the consequences of the global drive towards green energy.

“Biden’s renewable energy crusade exploits and enslaves thousands in poor nations,” [says](#) Jason Isaac, the founder and CEO of the American Energy Institute. “The human suffering caused by mining for electric vehicle batteries and wind turbine construction is unimaginable — as is the environmental destruction caused by these mines and their toxic byproducts.” As the head of a group funded by US-based petroleum producers, Isaac has ample incentive to critique the burgeoning green energy industry. But he isn’t the only one questioning the response to the [climate crisis](#).

Sputnik breaks down some of the criticisms of the push for green tech and considers how they can be addressed.

Global Working Conditions

“The sustainable development goals set a target for the elimination of child labor of 2025,” says Ben Smith, a senior technical officer focused on child labor at the International Labor Organization. “We are far from achieving it.”

A key issue is the mining of cobalt, an important component of many rechargeable batteries. The metal is mined throughout the African continent, especially in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), and the working conditions of those extracting it often attract harsh criticism. “Cobalt is a critical component in rechargeable car batteries, and the European Union’s 2030 climate target will only increase demand for this metal,” says Czech politician Tomáš Zdechovský.

“Despite the [European] commission’s zero-tolerance approach to [child labor](#) in trade agreements, it is estimated, according to reports by UN agencies, that in the southern Katanga province, more than 40,000 children are working in hazardous conditions in cobalt mines with inadequate safety equipment and for very little money.”

Reports indicate children sometimes labor for \$5 per day working long hours in dangerous tunnels where they’re often exposed to cancer-causing chemicals. The conditions have been called “modern-day child slavery.”

“Labor in cobalt mining is a serious violation of children’s rights that puts the health and safety, and even the lives of many children, at risk,” says Smith. “This vicious cycle of poverty and child labor must be broken for the sake of the children exposed to this harsh reality and for the social and economic progress of countries like the DRC.”

Professor Chukwuemezie Raphael Eze of Nnamdi Azikiwe University in Nigeria [says the low wages](#) serve another important purpose for Western companies beyond merely the cheap acquisition of raw materials. Low pay and poor conditions drive Africans to migrate to the United States and Europe where they can also be utilized for cheap labor.

Eze claims the economic consequences “destabilize Africa’s political economy” while Western collaboration with local militias drives a divide-and-conquer policy that undermines internal unity.

Forced Out

Transnational mining giants are eager to cash in on the global trend towards renewable energy, and human rights group Amnesty International notes they don’t always play fair.

“The people living in the region should be benefiting from the growth in mining,” [said the organization](#) in a report focusing on the DRC’s southern province of Lualaba. “Instead, many are being forced out of their homes and farmland to make way for the expansion of large-scale industrial mining projects.”

The report claimed that industrial giants often remove people from their land “with little concern for the rights of affected communities and little heed for national laws meant to curtail forced evictions in the mining sector.”

In the villages of Samukonga and Tshamundenda, hundreds lost access to nearby farmland. Farmers told Amnesty International they were sometimes forced to accept insufficient compensation for their land while being intimidated by the presence of military officials. Some received no compensation at all.

Military personnel sometimes used “unlawful force” while evicting residents, or destroyed farmers’ crops without notice, according to the report.

“One evictee claimed that she was sexually assaulted by military forces while attempting to retrieve crops,” the report claimed.

When residents were compensated with new housing, it was often cheaply-built and lacked running water, electricity, and sewage connections.

“The forced evictions taking place as companies seek to expand industrial-scale copper and cobalt mining projects are wrecking lives and must stop now,” said Agnes Callamard, the secretary general of Amnesty International.

Dependency Syndrome

Experts say mining transnationals’ conduct in Africa perpetuates a cycle wherein the continent serves to provide cheap raw materials for the West rather than developing economically, a phenomenon called dependency syndrome.

“The [Western preaching](#) of human rights and democracy promotion in relation to Africa is of double standard and national interest-oriented as despotic African leaders that cooperate with Western parasitic economic interests are protected,” says Eze. “Anti-imperialistic and nationalistic leaders are always either directly or indirectly eliminated, visited with excruciating sanctions, or arbitrary sent to International Criminal Court.

Economic interests have long been recognized to be a major driver of the West’s foreign policy, as when Belgium [backed](#) the assassination of pan-Africanist leader Patrice Lumumba. French interests are [said](#) to be behind the killing of African revolutionary Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso, and [research](#) has shown the involvement of US-trained military officers in a dozen coups throughout the continent.

The combined effects of political and economic interference mean that the historical pattern of Western exploitation of Africa continues, a relationship that Ghanaian politician Kwame Nkrumah termed “neocolonialism.”

“The angle of human rights abuse has, over the past few decades, been referred to by academics as the ‘Resource Curse’,” [says](#) researcher Ashraf Patel, “a thesis that says if a nation has valuable resources that the global economy needs (i.e. oil, minerals, coal, copper) than it is bound to be cursed with conflict.”

Patel noted a similar pattern throughout the 1990s when cell phones first saw widespread adoption. At that time lithium was the hot commodity. Today it’s joined by copper and cobalt.

“In a sense African development is frozen and trapped in this ‘Back to The Future’ dystopia,” says Patel.

A Way Out?

At an event earlier this year in DRC capital Kinshasa, Pope Francis spoke with uncharacteristic bluntness regarding the economic forces that stifle Africa’s development.

“Hands off Africa,” he declared. “Stop choking Africa. It is not a mine to be stripped or a terrain to be plundered.”

After decades of exploitation, many Africans feel the same. And while Western leaders claim companies based in China and elsewhere merely seek to duplicate the same patterns of dependency and “debt trap diplomacy,” several African leaders have found solidarity with fellow nations in the Global South.

“The most promising new multilateral institution-forum is BRICS Plus, which is offering a more equitable deal for the Developing South and for Africa,” says Patel. “Institutions such as the New Development Bank and alternative currencies, as well as technology support can go a long way to meet the real development and industrial needs.”

Patel called BRICS the “anchor of the Global South” and praised its potential to reconfigure global power relations. While US-backed institutions like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have required countries receiving loans to pursue neoliberal “structural adjustment” policies that open the doors to Western multinationals, China-backed development programs are largely agnostic over the policy pursued by other nations.

Africa “refutes the view that a new colonialism is taking hold in Africa as our detractors would have us believe,” [said](#) South African president Cyril Ramaphosa at a recent forum on China-Africa cooperation.

Rather than viewing China as a predatory force, many African nations instead see the Asian power as an inspirational example of a formerly poor country able to dramatically improve its economic position. Some leaders are even [pursuing](#) greater ideological cooperation with Chinese leaders.

Professor Eze advocates the rise of “courageous political leadership” across the continent and the strengthening of ties “with the less exploitative and less dehumanizing world powers like Russia and China.”

The academic claims the two countries offer “checks and balances” on the world stage, challenging a global paradigm where “might makes right and justice is the advantage of the stronger.”

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.

North Korea Commemorates Death of Kim Jong Il With Ballistic Missile Launch

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has ramped up its defensive capabilities in recent years as the United States has sought an expanded presence in the region.

The DPRK made a highly-visible show of force Sunday when it [fired](#) a short-range ballistic missile on the 12th anniversary of the [death of ex-leader Kim Jong Il](#).

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff announced the incident shortly after the missile's launch at about 10:38 pm. Although South Korean National Security Advisor Kim Tae-hyo had recently speculated the North could fire an intercontinental ballistic missile in the coming days, the projectile was confirmed as a short-range variety.

The missile reportedly flew about 570 kilometers before landing in the sea.

“While elevating our alert readiness, our military is maintaining a full readiness posture by closely sharing data on the 'North Korean ballistic missile' with the United States and Japan,” said the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff in a statement.

Seoul is working with the US and Japan to launch a system by the end of the year to share data on the North’s missile launches.

Meanwhile, the DPRK’s defense ministry released a statement slamming the recent Nuclear Consultative Group meeting held between South Korea and the United States, calling it “an open declaration on nuclear confrontation.

“The hostile forces’... attempt to use armed forces against the DPRK will face a preemptive and deadly counteraction,” read the missive, which denounced the US’ sending of military assets to the Korean Peninsula this year.

The United States has increased their presence in the region recently under the pretext of countering China as well as the DPRK. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has condemned the actions as preparation for another invasion of the North.

Launched in 1950, the Korean War saw elements in the South join with the United States to wreak devastation on the North. The war led to widespread destruction in modern-day North Korea.

Census records [suggest](#) the North lost one-fifth of their population during the war, a figure [confirmed](#) by US General Curtis LeMay.

“We went over there and fought the war and eventually burned down every town in North Korea anyway, some way or another,” recalled the military leader. “Over a period of three years or so, we killed off, what, 20 percent of the population?”

The war led to the balkanization of the Korean Peninsula and lasting hostility from the DPRK towards the United States. A dictatorship [endured](#) in the South until the late 1980s. North Korean leadership has consistently proclaimed their desire for reunification with the South although deep divisions remain between the regimes governing on each side of the 38th parallel.

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.

Lack of Leadership, Funding Stalls Pentagon’s Anti-China Drone Swarm Program

“For the first time ever from a military hardware perspective, we are five to seven years behind our near-peer adversaries in a critical kinetic piece of technology,” said one former US official. With an estimated 1.43 billion people, the People’s Republic of China seems destined to enjoy numerical advantages over the United States in any hypothetical military conflict. This summer the Pentagon announced a creative plan to address the matter, but lingering questions over the program have so far stymied progress.

The Replicator program [proposed](#) a novel solution to the larger numbers of ships, missiles, and troops enjoyed by China. Rather than matching the Asian power weapon-for-weapon, the United States would develop large numbers of autonomous drones to overwhelm the enemy.

The program seemed to offer an ideal solution as the PRC threatens to solidify military superiority over the US. The drones could be produced more quickly than traditional weapons, and their use would entail fewer US troops being placed in harm's way. The plan would also save the United States billions of dollars.

But a chicken-an-egg problem has so far delayed progress on the initiative. The Pentagon is looking to Silicon Valley for technological breakthroughs to help shape the scope and capabilities of the program. But in the absence of guaranteed funding, private companies have hesitated to pour resources into development.

Observers believe a quarter of the two-year period for the program to be ready will have passed before a budget next spring allows tech startups to move forward.

"It's just very disorganized and confusing," said one anonymous tech company executive to US media, lamenting that the initiative is so far "not actually associated with any dollars to make things happen."

Adam Broecker, vice president of Lockheed Martin's LM Evolve program, agreed. "People will follow contracts, they will follow that command signal," said Broecker.

For some analysts, the quandary is representative of larger problems within the United States' defense industry. Since the 1940s, the industry has seen large-scale privatization efforts. During World War II nearly 90% of the country's ships, aircraft, guns, and ammunition were produced in government-owned facilities.

Now, around that same percentage of items [procured](#) by the military are produced for profit. War is a big business, with private capital investing over \$6 billion per year into the US defense industry.

An article in US media entitled "How America Broke Its War Machine" details the perspective of many concerning the issue. The military Keynesianism that kept factories across the country humming and helped pull the United States out of the Great Depression remains, but now, private CEOs capture billions in profits.

Additionally, defense contractors increasingly pursue contracts for "expensive, experimental weaponry" that reaps greater profits than the small arms and ammunition that are the bread and butter of any military. Consider the metaphor of large pharmaceutical companies that prefer to invest in the next blockbuster drug rather than producing penicillin.

The resulting inefficiency has been blamed for the shortages, waste, and lack of prioritization that has [hampere](#)d US efforts to assist Ukraine in their proxy conflict with Russia.

But the widespread use of drones by both sides in Russia's special military operation continues to convince officials that the technology is the way of the future. Rep. Ken Calvert (R-CA) hopes the kinks can be worked out to get the Pentagon's new program on track.

"The department needs to define Replicator more precisely, and they have to understand there needs to be funding tied to that," said the congressman, who serves as head of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee. "What do they want to do with Replicator?... We need to define that, pick it and move on it as rapidly as possible."

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.

Vietnam Plays an Outsized Role in US-China Rivalry

Both the United States and China have a complex history with Vietnam that colors relations with the East Asian country to this day.

For two decades during the latter half of the twentieth century, a proxy conflict between major powers ensured Vietnam remained front-and-center in the world's imagination. Now a new rivalry is [ensuring](#) the East Asian country's continued importance, although this time the struggle is in the economic arena.

Both the United States and China have made major diplomatic overtures towards the country in recent months. In September, President Joe Biden [elevated](#) the US' relationship with Vietnam to "strategic partnership" status, continuing Democratic administrations' attempts to strengthen ties with Hanoi since former President Bill Clinton normalized relations in the 1990s.

Last week, Chinese President Xi Jinping made his own effort to enhance his nation's relationship with the country during a visit where he met with leaders of the ruling Communist Party of Vietnam.

A Vietnamese friendship with China may seem obvious given the ideological sympathies shared by the two countries, especially after US involvement in the Vietnam War contributed to the death of some three million people. But China also has a difficult history with Hanoi going back to the time of the Chinese imperial dynasties, which often sought control in East Asia.

The two countries were involved in a brief military clash as recently as 1979. Vietnam was more closely aligned with the Soviet Union during that period, while China's foreign policy often saw them take the same side as the United States in various conflicts. A recent [statement](#) from China after former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger's death called him an "old and good friend," demonstrating the affinity shared between the countries.

The world has changed dramatically in the more than 40 years since that time, and now China and the United States each seek greater partnership with Vietnam to enhance their global economic position. The United States courts the country as a part of their broader "pivot to Asia" since the Obama administration, hoping to help contain China.

For China, Vietnam is an economic go-between that helps them engage with the world economy. US sanctions and tariffs have complicated that effort in recent years. By finishing their products in Vietnam, Chinese companies are able to sell on the global market and avoid the "made in China" designation.

For now Hanoi seems to be enjoying their kingmaker status, pursuing relations with both China and the United States where it favors the country's development. Long-term it remains to be seen whether ideological sympathies or pure economic calculation will play the leading role in determining Vietnam's foreign policy.

If Hanoi is eventually forced to choose between one country or the other, China's growing economic power may make the decision obvious.