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Blinken Claims 'Stiff Neck' Caused Wince When Biden Called Xi 'Dictator' at APEC Summit

Unlike with the Soviet Union in the 20th century, the US economy is closely intertwined with China's, making American strategists wary of totally severing relations with the nuclear superpower. This has made economic fora like the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) into key diplomatic arenas, too.

The APEC summit hosted by US President Joe Biden last month in California was supposed to [be a rapprochement with China](#) after another year of incriminations and hostility - that's why many were shocked to hear US President Joe Biden revive his old attacks on Chinese President Xi Jinping, who he called a "dictator" in comments at the summit.

"Well look, he is. I mean he is a dictator in the sense that he is a guy who runs a country that is a communist country that is based on a form of government that is totally different from ours," [Biden told reporters](#) when asked if he still believed Xi was a dictator.

Afterward, the Chinese Foreign Ministry called Biden's words "extremely wrong and irresponsible political manipulation."

When Biden made those remarks, his foreign minister, Antony Blinken, could be seen wincing in the background on footage of the presser, which many observers interpreted as him reacting to Biden putting his foot in his mouth again and potentially reversing some hard-fought diplomacy aimed at warming relations.

However, Blinken recently told US media that he was actually just really tired during the event. "I'm tempted to say that we'd had a really long day, a very important and intense conversation with China. My neck was a little bit stiff. And, you know, that happens," he said in a television interview that aired on Thursday.

"But look, as I said before, it's not exactly a secret that we have a very different system from China's. The president always speaks very clearly, very directly, and he speaks for everyone," he added.

US-China relations have deteriorated considerably since 2017, when the Pentagon adopted a new strategy of "great power competition" with Russia and China, treating the two nations as leading an anti-American charge to undermine the so-called "rules-based international order" and supplant Washington as world leader.

Intense [military and economic competition](#) has followed, including heavy sanctions on leading Chinese economic fields, such as artificial intelligence and smart phone manufacturing, and provocative military patrols near Chinese territory.

Relations reached their nadir in August 2022, when then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi flouted Chinese warnings and traveled to Taiwan, a Chinese island in rebellion against the mainland government, and gave a speech condemning Beijing.

Intense military drills followed that included firing ballistic missiles over Taiwan, and many prominent diplomatic and military [thinkers feared war](#) was on the horizon.

Those relations healed somewhat that November, when Biden and Xi met face-to-face in Indonesia and pledged to peacefully compete and Biden foreswore any desire to “contain” China, and several subsequent high-level meetings since then have aimed at cementing that cold detente.

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Eric Adams' Approval Rating Plummetts to 28%, Lowest Ever for a NYC Mayor

Eric Adams has lost the support of the majority of voters from both major political parties, according to a new poll by Quinnipiac University.

Published on Wednesday, [the poll asked New York voters](#) about their approval of the city's mayor at the end of his second year in office, as well as a slew of more specific questions about aspects of Adams' politics, administration, and even personality.

The poll found that just 28% of New York voters approve of the job Adams is doing as mayor and 58% actively disapprove of his administrations. Another 14% said they didn't know how they felt. By party affiliation, the Democratic mayor had 49% disapproval among his own party and 68% disapproval among Republicans, with 69% disapproval among Independent voters. Broken down by race, the city's first Black mayor had his largest bastion of support among the city's Black community, which is about one-fifth of the city's population. Forty-eight percent of Black voters support Adams and 38% disapprove - the only demographic where his approval rating was higher than disapproval.

"There's no good news for Mayor Adams in this poll," said Quinnipiac University Poll Assistant Director Mary Snow.

"Not only are voters giving him poor grades on the job he's doing at City Hall, their views on his character have dimmed. As the city faces across the board budget cuts while dealing with a migrant crisis, headlines about a federal investigation into the mayor's 2021 campaign and an accusation of sexual assault leveled against him from 30 years ago are taking a toll," she said. Adams' low rating is the worst-ever for a mayor of the Big Apple, eclipsing Michael Bloomberg's dismal 31% rating in July 2003.

Fabien Levy, the deputy mayor of communications for Adams' office, told the media on Wednesday that the poll was "incorrect."

"The real numbers cannot be questioned: Crime is down, jobs are up, and we continue to deliver billions of dollars into the pockets of working people," Levy said, adding that "There will always be more work to do, but there is no question that this city is in a better place under Mayor Adams' leadership."

Notably, the Quinnipiac poll found that very few Gotham residents are likely to agree with that statement, with only 4% saying they were "very satisfied" with "the way things are going in New York City today."

Although he's only been in office for two years, Adams' administration has been beset by crises and scandals that have alienated him from both liberals and conservatives. The poll reflected this dissatisfaction in its breakdown by issue, with 66% of voters saying they disapproved of his

vast budget cuts that have impacted numerous other areas, such as [public schools](#), where 53% disapproved of Adams' work; homelessness, of which 72% disapprove of Adams' policies; [and crime, of which](#) 60% of voters are unhappy with his handling.

Two-thirds of voters also said they disapproved of his handling of the migrant crisis, which is a crisis in many US border cities and ports, but which has been fanned by the [deportation of migrants](#) to NYC by Texas Governor Greg Abbott and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis. Adams has blamed the Democratic Joe Biden administration for failing to provide NYC with adequate funding to handle the crisis, which has clogged up the city's programs to house and find employment for migrant arrivals.

In addition, Adams has alienated voters with his [front-facing evangelical Christian](#) rhetoric, [an FBI investigation](#) into whether or not he illegally received cash from the Turkish government, and recent accusations of sexual assault made against him by a former Transit Police Department colleague.

Adams has [denied the accusation](#), and no charges have been levied against him as of yet. "The mayor does not know who this person is. If they ever met, he doesn't recall it. But he would never do anything to physically harm another person and vigorously denies any such claim," a City Hall spokesperson told US media recently.

Adams was elected in 2021 and will be up for re-election in 2025.

The poll was conducted between November 30 and December 4 in all five city boroughs, surveying 1,297 self-identified registered voters with a margin of sampling error of +/- 2.7 percentage points.

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Republican 'Reckoning': GOP Must Win Over Undecided Moderates to Clinch 2024 Victory

The non-Trump candidates competing for voter attention at the Republican debate Wednesday largely failed to make their key points most likely to resonate with voters, as they focused on poorly-researched attacks on each other and furious debate over "culture war" issues, an analyst told Sputnik.

Republicans held their [fourth presidential primary debate](#) on Wednesday evening, in which candidates vying for the GOP's nomination as their presidential candidate in November 2024 argued it out over a variety of issues.

The debate was hosted by News Nation in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and featured four of the five GOP candidates: Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, New York-based tech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy, former UN Ambassador and former South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, and former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie.

Physically absent from the debate stage was former US President Donald Trump, the far-and-away leader of the pack of candidates, although he was repeatedly invoked by the other candidates during the debate.

Trump has boycotted the GOP debates thus far, but holds a commanding lead in the race for the nomination, with 58% support among Republicans in a poll [published on Wednesday](#).

Behind him is DeSantis with 18% support, Haley with 12%, Ramaswamy with 4%, and Christie with 2%.

The candidate who wins the nomination in the July 2024 Republican National Convention will face off against the Democrats' candidate, which at the moment seems likely to be US President Joe Biden, plus any Independent candidates, in the 2024 election.

Political commentator Robin Biro told [Radio Sputnik's Fault Lines](#) on Thursday that nobody stood out in the debate, in large part because they failed to adequately prepare for the event. "My takeaway was that Donald Trump - Voldemort, if you will - didn't even need to be in the room because Vivek Ramaswamy was his puppeteer. It seems like Donald Trump was pulling the strings and Vivek was saying everything that you would expect to hear from Donald Trump. So it was a lot like having a surrogate, hitting on anyone that former President Trump would have an issue with."

"It was interesting to see them all gang up on Nikki Haley," he said. "She sort of held her own, in a way. I think Chris Christie had his chivalrous moment of going to bat for her, I think that's probably going to help him - it's actually going to hurt her, I would say, because you don't want to be in that position where a man is coming to defend you and you're just kind of standing there."

"I think that did really hurt when he asked Nikki Haley to name [three Ukrainian] provinces and it was just dead air," he said, referring to a challenge on foreign policy that Ramaswamy made to the other candidates.

He said that during debate prep, candidates are "taught to have a few succinct lines that maybe seem like cheap shots, but they're true and they sting, and you want to just have a few very memorable moments. If you can strike out three very memorable moments in a debate then you've pretty much won that debate."

"I watched, one by one, when DeSantis had his moments. Unfortunately for him, when they did the debate prep, they didn't really do all of the research, because one of the three was his cheap take on Chris Christie, talking about how he signed into law some transgender issue. And while that was technically true, there was a vote and it passed under the prior governor, so Chris Christie was just signing legislation that had already passed, this was not his bill, so I thought it was cheap."

"Nikki Haley didn't really get her moments in; Chris Christie got his moments in hardcore. My favorite Chris Christie moment was, the very first time out of the gate, he came up swinging and said 'it's been 17 minutes in this debate and you all are talking like one of you is going to be the president? Nobody's mentioned Trump and that's the bad guy in the room and that's the problem, and he just said that he would be a dictator 'on day one' and no one's mentioned it, and when all of you raised your hands saying that you would support him if he was convicted of federal crimes, that's weak.' We needed that, it needed to be said."

Biro said that accusations of corruption against Haley by Ramaswamy could land with voters "because Republicans hate that. They hate to hear about money in politics. Money and power corrupt and Nikki Haley has both of those."

"One thing I think is going to have the opposite effect of what he said is he called her 'bankrupt,'" Biro said. "I think that she had \$100,000 in the bank after her term as ambassador. I mean, who among us would consider having \$100,000 cash in the bank 'bankrupt', I mean, I would be really happy to have that."

“She should’ve hit harder on that. She should’ve said ‘you are out of touch with everyday Americans if you think having \$100,000 in the bank is bankrupt. You’re speaking from a point of privilege.’ She really missed an opportunity there.”

“But will these charges land? With some of the far-right, they hate the big people of influence - the Kochs, they just supported Nikki Haley, I mean, that’s going to endear her to some of the machine, the Bush-Cheney machine from back in the day, they’ll love that. But the Donald Trump-type voters, they’re going to recoil at that.”

“It would be really easy to win right-wing votes, hard-right votes, but just saying a few things - going after the LGBTQ community, talking about deportations and stuff like that - but what’s hard to do is to strike the balance that you need to capture the 10% of undecided voters. And I think that any one of the people on that stage, with the exception of Vivek, I think have a better opportunity of doing that than Donald Trump. So Republicans kind of have to do a reckoning and see, if we want to actually win this, we’re going to have to get some of the moderate votes.”

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Over Half of American Shoppers Say Cutting Back on Holiday Spending Due to Inflation

Persistent inflation of the US dollar has impacted holiday sales, with a poll showing a majority of shoppers have cut back on end-of-year purchases this year due to price increases.

The study, [published by Monmouth University](#) on Thursday, found that 55% of respondents were reducing their purchasing volume during the holidays this year.

Of the two answers included in that category, 36% said they were cutting back “a lot” as compared to last year and 19% said they were cutting back “a little.” Some 32% said their holiday shopping was about the same as last year, and 1% said they didn’t know. However, another 12% said they don’t do holiday shopping or don’t celebrate holidays in December. Of those who answered the poll, 89% said they celebrated Christmas, while 7% said they celebrated the Jewish holiday of Chanukah and 5% celebrated Kwanzaa, a secular African-American holiday, and 9% said they didn’t celebrate any of those options.

“The rate of inflation may be slowing but the damage has been done after a long stretch of rising prices,” Patrick Murray, director of the independent Monmouth University Polling Institute, said in the news release.

“There could be a number of reasons why more are cutting back this season. Perhaps those who kept to their usual spending habits as we came out of the pandemic are seeing it catch up with them now. Or maybe their budgets are the same, but they are exchanging fewer gifts or buying for fewer people. Whatever the reason, there is greater pessimism on the holiday gift-giving front,” he added.

Last month, prior to the official start of the holiday season, Wallethub conducted [a smaller online survey](#) of “nearly 250 respondents” and found that while 58% said their holiday spending would be about the same, 34% said they would be foregoing gifts this year due to inflation, although it was unclear if that meant foregoing some gifts or all gifts.

Notably, the Wallethub survey found that 47% said they would be giving less to charities this year due to inflation, while 53% said it wouldn't impact their generosity.

Inflation in the US has been a persistent problem since the global shutdowns at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, which ground societies and economies to a halt. In the delicate economic recovery that followed, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell [tolerated high inflation](#) for fear of harming that recovery if the central bank acted against it - a trend that finally broke in early 2022, when the US recorded its highest inflation rate in four decades.

The central bank's primary tool to fight inflation, which is the depreciating value of the currency, is to raise interest rates. While this slows down spending by making borrowing more costly, it can also trigger a rise in unemployment and even a recession. Nonetheless, the Federal Reserve has maintained that its [steady rate hikes](#) from March 2022 to July 2023 will still produce a "soft landing" without crashing the economy.

The most recent Consumer Price Index ([CPI report available](#)) from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, on data from October 2023, showed inflation of 3.2%, meaning the aggregate prices of basic commodities were 3.2% higher that month than in October 2022. That's a big decline from the peak inflation of 9.1% in June 2022, but still above the Fed's goal of 2% inflation.

At its most recent meeting last month, the Federal Reserve [Board of Governors said](#) that despite the gains, "current inflation remained unacceptably high."

"All participants judged that it would be appropriate for policy to remain at a restrictive stance for some time until inflation is clearly moving down sustainably toward the Committee's objective," the minutes from their meeting said, which indicated the central bank might still raise interest rates again before the end of the year.

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Seychelles Declares Emergency After Heavy Flooding, Massive Blast at Explosives Depot

"This is a first for Seychelles," the president told reporters.

A state of emergency was temporarily declared by the president of Seychelles on Thursday after the country was hit with deadly flooding and a major blast at an explosives depot just hours later.

The flooding killed a reported three people and nearly 200 were injured in the explosion. No deaths have been reported from the blast thus far, but one person was reported to be in intensive care.

Seychelles President Wavel Ramkalawan has detailed the explosion occurred on the main island of Mahé and caused "massive damage" in the area of Providence and injured at least 178 people. Providence is located around 4.3 miles (7 kilometers) southwest of the capital of Victoria.

The company where the blast took place is the Civil Construction Company Limited. According to [reports](#), Ramkalawan said there had been concerns for at least 10 years regarding the stock of explosives and how they were stored. The company provides Crusher and quarry products, according to their [website](#).

"Four containers of explosives blew off... My heart is heavy right now and I know many families are being affected. I was shocked to see Providence, Petit Paris and Cascade in such a state. It was as if we went through a war," Ramkalawan told reporters.

"In order for us to put this under the microscope, in order for us to allow the police to do their investigation without people interfering," he added. "I felt it was necessary for us to have a state of emergency."

At 6 p.m. local time the state of emergency was lifted by the president.

The blast damaged commercial buildings and offices, as well as some homes in the area and left a 42-foot (13-meter) gorge in the ground. The international airport, which is located 2.5 miles (4 kilometers) away, was also damaged in the blast. Schools were shut down and hospitals were also closed except for emergencies.

The blast hit the archipelago, which is made up of 115 islands, at about 2 a.m. on Thursday, just hours after heavy rain and [flooding](#) which came ashore late Wednesday. The deadly flooding impacted the northern part of Mahe and flooded homes, destroying infrastructure as landslides hit in some areas. At least two of the three people who died in the flooding had been trapped in their homes at the time.

A deluge from the flooding also swept sewage into the ocean, and residents are being advised not to swim in the waters.

The airport is still operational, and the ferry services continue to operate between islands for visitors, the country's account said on [X](#). Made up of a little more than 100,000 people, Seychelles is reliant on tourism for its economy and is considered one of the most prosperous countries in Africa.

The Seychelles explosion has brought comparisons to the [2020 blast](#) in Lebanon that decimated the Port of Beirut, killing hundreds and leaving thousands of others injured.

The explosion was caused by nearly 3,000 tonnes of improperly stored ammonium nitrate that had been seized by authorities and placed in warehouses.

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'Good News': SpaceX's Starlink Service Clears US Military Tests

"This is good news," said a former Pentagon deputy assistant secretary.

SpaceX's Starlink satellite service has successfully cleared at least nine months of US military testing in the Arctic, marking a significant milestone as the Arctic is becoming an increasingly important area of competition between the US, Russia, and China.

The exercises, which ended in June, found the SpaceX satellite internet service to be a "reliable and high-performance communications system in the Arctic, including on-the-move applications," said [Brian Beal](#), a principal engineer with the Air Force Research Laboratory's Integrated Capabilities Directorate.

The tests essentially evaluated how useful billionaire Elon Musk's product is to the US Defense Department, Beal noted.

“We tested in some very high winds and very cold temperatures,” Beal said. “That all went smoothly though. Once we got the terminals mounted securely to withstand high winds, they worked great with no issues.”

Beal adds that the Air Force is also evaluating the London-based Eutelsat OneWeb, which has a few months of Arctic testing left.

“This is good news,” said Leonor Tomero, a vice president at JA Green and a former Pentagon deputy assistant secretary. “We need faster and additional communication layers to strengthen strategic deterrence.”

After the “good news” comes a possible military deal for Musk, whose company has [233 satellites](#) in polar orbit, with more than 5,000 Starlink satellites overall.

Already, SpaceX has business dealings with the Pentagon that include the ongoing competitive National Security Space Launch contracts, launch services and satellites for the US Space Development Agency and a \$70 million one-year Space Force “task order,” as well as continued contracts to provide Starlink satellite communications to [Ukraine](#).

The latest comes as Musk has been increasingly seen as a controversial figure. The 52-year-old first bought Twitter (which he renamed as X) in April 2022, a deal that was concluded months later in October. Musk was recently criticized for publicly endorsing an antisemitic tweet on the platform, which he later followed up by openly remarking during an event that major businesses, such as Disney, could go and [“f***” themselves](#) after they pulled their advertisements from X.

The billionaire also traveled to Israel last week to discuss “rising antisemitism” online - which he claimed was not part of an “apology tour” in light of his remarks, as well as operating Starlink satellite internet in Gaza.

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‘It is Broken’: US Politics Use Border Policies as Bait in Spending Bill Battle - Analysis

On Wednesday, the US Senate failed to advance the massive supplemental spending package that is supposed to ensure funding for Ukraine, Israel, Taiwan and the Southern border. In order to pass the Democrats’ massive spending bill, GOP senators are demanding changes to the bill’s immigration policy.

Jason Dzubow, an immigration attorney and writer for The Asylumist, sat down with [Sputnik’s Political Misfits](#) on Thursday to discuss immigration policy as it relates to a \$111 billion spending package that has become a partisan battle.

“It does seem like the Republicans at least believe they have an advantage here and I think probably polling supports this belief; that the American public is not thrilled with what’s going on at the Southern border, and that they’re very concerned about large numbers of people coming in every month—I think last month it was 189,000 or something,” Dzubow explained.

“So there’s large numbers of people arriving. I mean this has always been the case—it was the case under Trump, it’s sort of marginal differences from one administration to the next,” he explains, adding that the flow of immigrants is also dependent on other factors such as people’s

abilities to reach the US as well as the economies of both the US and other countries, as opposed to what is being done to "stop people" from entering the US.

Thus far, efforts to keep immigrants out of the US have included building a wall which Dzubow said has been "pretty ineffective".

"As they say, 'show me a 12-foot wall, I'll show you a 13-foot ladder'," Dzubow remarked.

What would be a more effective approach to immigration, says Dzubow, is to change the law about who qualifies for asylum.

"When someone arrives at the border they can say, 'I'm afraid to go back to my country I'm seeking asylum,' there's an initial evaluation of eligibility for asylum called a Credible Fear Interview, it's a relatively low standard, so trying to make that standard more difficult would make it more difficult for people to pass that initial step," he explains. "And if they failed that initial step they would return to Mexico [sic] or wherever they came from—whatever is their country of citizenship."

"And of course that's problematic from a human rights standpoint—from a practical standpoint it may also be problematic because Mexico was very reluctant to take people back, initially. There was an agreement to do so, but whether that will continue, whether they're willing to do it in large numbers we don't know."

"It is broken," Dzubow continued, adding that the system at the border has been broken for as long as he has been working as an immigration attorney which he says at this point has been "20 years". A legitimate, proposed solution to the broken system, he says, "remains to be seen".

"We want to do the right thing—protect people from harm," said Dzubow. "But on the other hand, the more we protect people the more people are going to try to come here to get protection."

"It's a very difficult balance, there's no easy solution."

"Immigration is a policy problem," explains Dzubow. "It's a policy problem that I think is amenable to policy solutions—maybe not perfect—but at least we could make significant improvements to maybe focus better on who we want to admit, who we want to protect—try to exclude people who we don't think are deserving of protection. But Congress is incapable, it seems, of actually having an intelligent conversation on this subject because it's so wrapped up in politics."

Dzubow went on to explain that border policy is a good talking point from perspective of the Republican party, as polling suggests that Americans are concerned about immigration and blame President Joe Biden for the failures at the [US-Mexico border](#).

In addition, he adds, Democrats seem to be detached from what Americans support. And regarding the battle over the billion-dollar spending package, Dzubow believes the GOP has the leverage they need to secure the border policies they desire.

Whether or not the two parties will reach a decision before their deadline, he adds, remains unclear. US lawmakers are only scheduled to be in session until the end of next week before they break, leaving little time for what would be a \$111 billion resolve.

On Wednesday before the vote on the spending package, Senate Minority Leader Mitch [McConnell](#) explained that Republicans would block the supplemental spending package because it does not seriously address America's "national security priorities" arguing that "fixing a badly broken asylum and parole system isn't hijacking the supplemental, it's strengthening it".

House Speaker Mike Johnson shared those same sentiments in a two-page letter on Tuesday, writing that “Ukraine funding is dependent upon enactment of transformative change to our nation’s border security laws”.

In his letter Johnson also voiced frustrations with the White House after they failed to provide the American people with “answers to our repeated questions concerning: the Administration’s strategy to prevail in Ukraine; clearly defined and obtainable objectives; transparency and accountability for U.S. taxpayer dollars invested there; and what specific resources are required to achieve victory and a sustainable peace.”

On Monday, US Management and Budget Director Shalanda Young told US lawmakers that as of mid-November the [Pentagon had already spent 96%](#) of the \$62.3 billion it had received on Ukraine. She warned leaders that resources allocated for Ukraine are running out.

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Amateur Archaeologists Discover Lost Tudor Palace in English Village

“We had no money, no expertise, no plans, no artist impressions to go off, and nothing remaining of the palace. It’s naivety and just hard work that has led us to it.”

Amateur archaeologists from the Collyweston Historical and Preservation Society (CHAPS) made an exciting discovery in the village of Collyweston, Northamptonshire. After a five-year search the CHAPS members discovered a long-lost Tudor palace that first began to fall into disrepair in the 17th century.

“Many of us were brought up in the village, and you hear about this lost palace, and wonder whether it’s a myth or real. So we just wanted to find it,” said [Chris Close](#), the chair of CHAPS. “But we’re a bunch of amateurs. We had no money, no expertise, no plans, no artist impressions to go off, and nothing remaining of the palace. It’s naivety and just hard work that has led us to it.”

What used to be the home of Lady Margaret Beaufort are now buried ruins. Beaufort was the mother of King Henry VII who ruled England from 1485 until 1509, and was the first monarch of the Tudor dynasty.

The palace also hosted pre-wedding festivities for Margaret Tudor (Henry VII’s daughter) and James IV of Scotland in 1503. In October of 1541 the palace was also where Henry VIII—who is best known for having six marriages—held his court.

“When Henry VII won the Battle of Bosworth, Lady Margaret Beaufort was gifted the site,” Close [explained](#). “In 1503 there was a big shindig at Collyweston. So all the great and the good came, because Henry VII’s daughter, Margaret was being sent off to Scotland to marry James IV and they had a two week party at Collyweston.”

“It was on the basis of that she got lots of new building work done to try and show off. That’s where Henry said goodbye to her at Collyweston.”

The palace, adds Close, is much larger in size than previously assumed. The crew is also searching for an “Elizabethan banqueting hall” that was added by Elizabeth I who hosted Privy Councils at the palace.

"You think this is just a mini-stately home and it turns out to be a complex of buildings which is over a thousand paces all the way around the outside," Close explained.

Attempts to find the palace were first made in the 1980s and 90s, but failed.

The CHAPS team, however, was well equipped with modern technology, and after using ground-penetrating radar and carrying out geophysical surveys, they were able to locate the palace walls in the back garden of homeowners. Historians from the University of York, who have verified the discovery, have agreed to assist the small society as they continue their excavations.

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UNSC Postpones Vote on Gaza Ceasefire Resolution to Friday Evening - Source

UNITED NATIONS, December 8 (Sputnik) - The vote on a UAE-drafted UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza has been postponed to Friday evening, UN sources told Sputnik.

"Yes, [the vote will take place at] 530 [p.m.]. In order to allow for more time and in response to some Council members," a source told Sputnik.

The vote was postponed to convince the United States not to veto the draft resolution, another source told Sputnik.

On Thursday, deputy US ambassador to the United Nations Robert Wood said that the United States believes that another UN Security Council resolution on Gaza will not be helpful right now.

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Trump Wants to Attend Inauguration of Argentine President-Elect – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) – Former US President Donald Trump wants to attend the inauguration of Argentine President-elect Javier Milei, The Washington Post reported on Friday, citing sources.

However, logistical issues could derail his trip, the report said.

During a recent rally in Iowa, Trump compared Milei to himself.

"He ran as Trump. It was Trump. 'Make Argentina Great Again,' the former president said, adding that "it was perfect."

In addition, a handful of House Republicans are planning to visit Buenos Aires for the swearing-in this weekend, the report said.

The US delegation to the inauguration will be led by Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm, the White House said earlier this week.

On November 19, far-right libertarian Milei won the presidential election runoff in Argentina. He

will officially assume office on December 10. During the presidential campaign, Milei spoke against joining BRICS and cooperating with China, Brazil and Russia, and advocated for a foreign policy oriented toward Israel and the United States.

On November 22, US President Joe Biden congratulated Milei by telephone and discussed the importance of continuing to build on a strong bilateral relationship between the two countries, according to the White House.

Milei later traveled to the US for a short visit where he met with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

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Blinken Meets With Qatar's Prime Minister to Discuss Situation in Gaza - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken held talks with Qatar's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani on the situation in Gaza and efforts to free hostages held by Hamas, State Department spokesperson Matthew Miller said in a readout on Friday.

"The Secretary expressed appreciation for Qatar's critical efforts to secure the release of hostages held by Hamas and the recent humanitarian pause in Gaza. The Secretary and Prime Minister Al Thani reiterated the importance of preventing the conflict from spreading and committed to continuing close coordination on ongoing efforts to facilitate the safe return of all remaining hostages while sustaining humanitarian assistance to civilians in Gaza," the readout said.

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US to Bar Imports From Three Chinese Companies Over 'Uyghur Forced Labor' - DHS

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States will bar imports from three Chinese companies over the alleged use of forced labor in China's Xinjiang province, the Department of Homeland Security said in a notice in the Federal Register on Friday.

"This update adds three entities to one of the lists of the UFLPA, which identifies entities working with the government of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region to recruit, transport, transfer, harbor or receive forced labor or Uyghurs, Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, or members of other persecuted groups out of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region," the notice said.

The entities were listed as COFCO Sugar Holdings Co., Ltd., Anhui Xinya New Materials Co., Ltd. and Sichuan Jingweida Technology Group Co., Ltd.

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

US Jobs Up 199,000 in November vs Forecast Growth of 183,000 - Labor Department

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The United States added 199,000 jobs in November, higher than the 183,000 forecast by Wall Street economists, in a report likely to disappoint the Federal Reserve, which wants to see a less ebullient labor market and wages in order to suppress inflation.

"Employment growth is below the average monthly gain of 240,000 over the prior 12 months but is in line with job growth in recent months," the Labor Department said in a news release. In October, the economy added only about 150,000 jobs — making last month's increase surprisingly higher.

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Hunter Biden Indicted by Feds on 9 Counts Related to Tax Evasion - Filing

(Adds details in paras 5-9, fixes date in para 4)

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US federal prosecutors filed nine new counts against Hunter Biden and alleged he engaged in a scheme to evade over a million in taxes, a court filing revealed.

"The Defendant engaged in a four-year scheme to not pay at least \$1.4 million in self-assessed federal taxes he owed for tax years 2016 through 2019, from in or about January 2017 through in or about October 15, 2020, and to evade the assessment of taxes for tax year 2018 when he filed false returns in or about February 2020," the document, filed in a federal court in California on Thursday, said.

The indictment alleges that Hunter Biden "spent millions of dollars on an extravagant lifestyle rather than paying his tax bills." He evaded taxes while getting paid millions, the document revealed.

Between 2016 and October 15, 2020, according to the document, Hunter Biden received more than \$7 million in total gross income. The document also said Burisma agreed to pay the defendant \$1 million annually, which they reduced to \$500,000 a year in March 2017.

The indictment also details Hunter Biden's business dealings with other foreign contacts.

Between 2015 and 2017, Hunter Biden and two business associates split a payment of \$3.1 million tied to attempts to help a Romanian businessperson contest bribery charges he was facing in his home country.

Hunter Biden and business associates in 2015 met with individuals tied to CEFC China Energy company for talks on infrastructure projects.

"On or about March 1, 2017, State Energy HK, a Hong Kong entity associated with CEFC, paid approximately \$3 million to Business Associate 1's entity for sourcing deals and for identifying other potential ventures. The Defendant [Hunter Biden] had an oral agreement with Business Associate 1 to receive one-third of those funds, or a million dollars. The Defendant, in turn,

directed a portion of those million dollars to Business Associate 3," the document said.

Republican-led House panels are probing Hunter Biden for alleged criminal activity, including foreign bribery and influence peddling. Last month, the Oversight Committee subpoenaed Hunter Biden to appear for a deposition.

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US Federal Prosecutors File New Charges Against Hunter Biden - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US Justice Department has filed new charges against Hunter Biden, CNN reported citing people familiar with the matter.

The report said on Thursday that it is unclear what the new charges are for since the court documents have not been made public yet.

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Majority of People in US Identify as Spiritual, Believe in Human Soul - Poll

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - A significant majority of adults in the United States identify as spiritual and believe in the existence of a human soul or spirit, according to a Pew Research poll report.

Seventy percent (70%) of US adults consider themselves spiritual in some way, including 22% who identify as spiritual but not religious, the poll report said on Thursday.

An even higher proportion of US adults, 83%, believe people possess a soul or spirit in addition to their physical body, the poll revealed.

Half of US adults believe that spirits or spiritual energy can inhabit graveyards, cemeteries or other memorial sites, the poll report said. Slightly under half of US adults, 48%, believe that nature can harbor such spiritual elements, and slightly over a quarter, 26%, believe that objects such as crystals and stones can contain them, the poll report said.

Most US adults, 71%, believe in heaven, while just 61% believe in hell, the poll report said. A majority of US adults also believe that people can reunite with loved ones in the afterlife, the poll report said.

However, less than half of US adults, 44%, indicated feeling a deep sense of spiritual peace or well-being at least once a month, the poll report said. Less than one-third of US adults, 31%, indicated feeling a deep sense of connection with humanity on a monthly basis, the poll report said.

Although previous polls have demonstrated a decline in traditional religious beliefs in practices in the US, the evidence that spirituality is replacing religion is weak, in part due to the challenges of defining and separating the two concepts, the poll report said.

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UN Chief Concerned Over Lack of Progress in Inter-Haitian Dialogue - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, December 8 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres is concerned over the small progress in dialogue aimed at democratic restoration of Haiti, Spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement.

"The Secretary-General is concerned over the limited progress in the inter-Haitian dialogue towards a lasting and inclusive political solution to restore the country's democratic institutions," Dujarric said on Thursday.

Guterres also would like to see an agreement on full restoration of democratic institutions and urges all actors to come together, he added.

In November, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) said that about 4,000 people have been killed and 3,000 kidnapped by armed gangs in Haiti since the beginning of 2023.

In October, the UN Security Council approved a resolution to deploy a task force to Haiti in cooperation with the Haitian government. The measure was approved with 13 votes in favor, with Russia and China abstaining. The task force is designed to coordinate activities with the Haitian authorities and provide support to the Haitian National Police during security-related

operations and as part of the protection of infrastructure.

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Fifty US Commercial Space Launches Failed Since 2000, Resulting in 12% Loss - Report

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Fifty US commercial space launches in the private sector have failed since the beginning of the 21st century, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report.

"Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) data show that 50 commercial space launches from 2000 through mid-January 2023 resulted in 'mishaps' - the industry term for incidents such as catastrophic explosions and other failures," the report said on Thursday.

That number represented about 12% of 433 launches during the period, the report said.

The failures often came as a result of explosions or other catastrophic accidents, the report added,

However, all the accidents, explosions and failures combined caused no fatalities, serious injuries or significant property damage to the public, according to the report.

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Texas AG Warns Hospitals of Possible Prosecution for Abortion Procedures - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has issued a warning to hospitals, including The Methodist Hospital, The Women's Hospital of Texas, and Texas Children's Hospital, against permitting a dilation and evacuation abortion on Kate Cox.

"It has come to our attention that Damla Karsan, M.D., a physician holding privileges at your hospital, intends to perform a dilation and evacuation abortion on Ms. Katelynn 'Kate' Cox. Today, an activist Travis County Judge signed a Temporary Restraining Order purporting to enjoin the Attorney General's Office and the Texas Medical Board from enforcing some of the state's abortion laws against Dr. Karsan if she performs an abortion on Ms. Cox. We feel it is important for you to understand the potential long-term implications if you permit such an abortion to occur at your facility," Paxton said on Thursday in a letter addressed to the hospitals.

According to the letter, the restraining order would not provide insulation for hospitals or individuals from civil and criminal liabilities concerning violations of Texas' abortion laws. The liabilities include first-degree felony prosecutions and civil penalties amounting to no less than \$100,000 for each violation.

"Your hospital may be liable for negligently credentialing the physician and failing to exercise appropriate professional judgment, among other potential regulatory and civil violations, if you permit Dr. Karsan to perform an unlawful abortion," the letter added.

The letter went on to say that the allegations in the lawsuit failed to establish that Cox qualified

for the medical exception to Texas' abortion laws.

Earlier on Thursday, a Texas judge ruled that a pregnant woman whose fetus was diagnosed with a fatal condition could get an abortion despite the state's strict laws against such procedures.

Cox, who is 20 weeks pregnant, earlier this week had filed a lawsuit against Paxton seeking a temporary restraining order that would allow a doctor to perform an abortion without the threat of prosecution.

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CNN Says Will Host Pair of Republican Primary Debates Next Month, Awaiting RNC Approval

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US media company CNN said that it plans to hold a pair of primary debates with Republican 2024 presidential candidates, although the events are not yet sanctioned by the Republican National Committee (RNC).

The first debate will occur on January 10 in Iowa, ahead of caucuses in the state, the company said on Thursday. The second debate will take place on January 21 in New Hampshire, the statement said.

Republican candidates must win at least 10% support in three national or Iowa caucus polls in order to participate in the first debate, the statement said. The candidates must also receive 10% support in three national or New Hampshire primary polls to qualify for the second debate, according to the release.

Former US President Donald Trump, former US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley and Florida Governor Ron DeSantis have so far reached 10% support in three national polls, as well as one of Iowa caucusgoers, the release added.

The company anticipates that the RNC will release candidates later this week from requirements that restrict their participation in non-RNC-sanctioned debates, the statement said.

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US Government Using AI to Probe Cancer Risks From Low-Dose Radiation - Report

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - The US Department of Energy has pursued a more than \$22 million artificial intelligence (AI) research project over the past four years to investigate cancer risks and other potential side effects of low-level doses of radiation on biological life forms, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) said in a report.

"New research is focused on using artificial intelligence (AI) to better understand low-dose radiation biology," the report said on Thursday.

The Energy Department invested \$22.3 million in this research in fiscal years 2020 through 2023, the report said.

One of the funded projects uses AI to build a framework for estimating cancer risk based on long-term exposure to radiation, the report added.

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UK Foreign Minister Expresses Hope US Will Continue to Provide Aid to Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - UK Foreign Minister David Cameron expressed confidence that the US Congress will adopt the Biden administration's supplemental funding request with aid for Ukraine.

"In terms of what would happen if the United States did not come forward with the supplementary package, I believe the United States will. I am not an expert in your political system, but in Congress, there is a majority supporting Ukraine," Cameron said during a joint press conference with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday.

Cameron also said he was sure that good will prevail and the United States will provide the necessary support for the Ukrainian government.

In October, the White House announced that the funds approved by Congress for additional military assistance to Ukraine were almost exhausted and the volume of aid packages has been consistently reduced.

President Joe Biden's \$106 billion supplemental funding request to Congress includes \$61 billion in aid for Ukraine.

In December, the total request grew to nearly \$111 billion as Senate Democrats released new draft legislation, but it drew opposition and a number of disagreements among lawmakers.

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US Talks to Israelis About Length of Gaza Operation, But Decision Up to Them - Blinken -

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said US officials discuss with their Israeli colleagues how long their military operation in Gaza may last but stressed that these are decisions for Tel Aviv to make.

"In our conversations with Israel we talk about how long this campaign will take and also how it is being prosecuted, but these are decisions for Israel to make," Blinken said at a presser on Thursday.

On October 7, the Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from Gaza. Israel declared war on Hamas and initiated massive and indiscriminate strikes on Gaza while also imposing a complete blockade on the Palestinian enclave. Israel then launched a ground invasion into Gaza on October 27.

The blockade has cut off Gaza from water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel supplies, and in conjunction with bombardments and military activities has created a humanitarian catastrophe.

Nearly 1.8 million Palestinians out of 2.3 million in Gaza have been displaced, 18,000 killed and more than 38,000 wounded during Israel's bombardments and invasion of Gaza. Some 1,200 Israelis, military and civilians, were killed in the Hamas attack

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UK's Cameron Says Sees No Case For Unilateral Action by Venezuela in Guyana Border Dispute

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - UK Foreign Minister David Cameron said he does not see any basis for Caracas' unilateral action concerning the border with Guyana.

"One issue also that we discussed in our meeting is the situation on the border between Venezuela and Guyana. These borders were settled in 1899," Cameron said in a press briefing alongside US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday. "I see absolutely no case for unilateral action by Venezuela. It should cease. It's wrong."

Cameron added that later he will hold phone talks with Guyanese President Irfaan Ali and others in the region.

Last week, Venezuela held a referendum in which almost 96% of the population voted in favor of incorporating the Essequibo region. On Wednesday, Ali said that Georgetown was considering Caracas' actions to incorporate Essequibo, which makes up two-thirds of the territory controlled by Guyana, a threat to the country's national security and would raise the issue at the United Nations Security Council.

Venezuela gained independence from Spain in 1845 and recognized Essequibo as part of its sovereign territory. In 1899, however, the United Kingdom filed and won an arbitration claim to recognize Essequibo as part of its then-Caribbean colony of British Guiana. Independent Guyana cited this Arbitral Award in its 2018 International Court of Justice suit against Venezuela, claiming sovereignty over the disputed territory.

On December 1, the ICJ, the principal judicial organ of the United Nations, ruled that currently Guyana administers and exercises control over that area and Venezuela must refrain from any actions to modify that situation.

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Blinken Urges Israel to Focus on Protecting Civilians in Gaza Strip

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken is urging Israel to focus on protecting civilians in the Gaza Strip.

"It is imperative, it remains imperative, that Israel put a premium on civilian protection," Blinken told reporters.

Blinken emphasized the necessity to focus not only on keeping safe corridors in Gaza, but also

on maintaining communications so residents know when and where they could go.

Blinken pointed out the importance of areas that are not in the conflict zone remaining peaceful. "This is something we are talking about with the Israelis on a regular basis, including as recent as today," Blinken said.

On October 7, the Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from Gaza. Israel declared war on Hamas and initiated massive strikes on Gaza while also imposing a complete blockade on the Palestinian enclave. Israel then launched a ground invasion into Gaza on October 27.

The blockade has cut off Gaza from water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel supplies, and in conjunction with bombardments and military activities has created a humanitarian catastrophe.

Nearly 1.8 million Palestinians out of 2.3 million in Gaza have been displaced, some 18,000 killed and more than 38,000 wounded during Israel's bombardments and invasion. Some 1,200 Israelis, military and civilians, were killed in the Hamas attack.

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IMF Says Restoring WTO Dispute Settlement System to Support Global Trade Growth

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Restoring the World Trade Organization's (WTO) dispute settlement system would support growth in global trade, an International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson told Sputnik.

"To secure the future, we need strengthened trade rules and cooperation to address longstanding sources of trade tensions like subsidies and tariffs; securing open markets in modern areas of the global economy, like services and e-commerce; and restoration of the WTO dispute settlement system," the IMF official said.

The official noted that trade drives economic opportunities, productivity, economic growth and poverty reduction.

"To be most effective, trade requires international cooperation that is backed by a strong, stable and rules-based trading system," the official said.

It is therefore necessary to build resilience to trade shocks, diversify input sourcing across countries, improve infrastructure, logistics and information systems as well as reduce trade costs.

"Greater efforts to promote transparency, analysis, and dialogue on critical areas like subsidies and other industrial policies would go far to alleviate tensions," he added.

On Wednesday, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said there were about 3,000 trade restrictions worldwide in 2023 as opposed to only 500 in 2017.

Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov said in October that the IMF has to solve the trade restrictions issue by assessing their negative impact on the global economy and by providing specific multilateral and country-specific solutions to eliminate them.

Due to the United States blocking the appointment of new arbitrators, the WTO Appellate Body has not been functioning since December 2019 and has not considered new appeals.

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Biden Admin Vows to Keep Up Fight for Abortion Rights After Key Texas Ruling - White House

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will continue to work to ensure that women in the US have the access to emergency medical care, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said after a Texas court granted a woman's request for an emergency abortion.

Earlier on Thursday, a Texas judge ruled that a pregnant woman whose fetus was diagnosed with a fatal condition could get an abortion despite the state's strict laws against such procedures.

"Ensuring women have access to emergency medical care has been a core focus of this administration ... And we're going to continue to fight for that," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

The remarks came after Travis County District Judge Maya Guerra Gamble ruled that Kate Cox, a pregnant woman whose fetus was diagnosed with trisomy 18 and very low chances of survival outside the womb, could terminate her pregnancy.

Cox, who is 20 weeks pregnant, earlier this week had filed a lawsuit against Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton seeking a temporary restraining order that would allow a doctor to perform an abortion without the threat of prosecution.

"No woman should have to go to a court to get the healthcare that she needs. That should not be the case," Jean-Pierre said.

Jean-Pierre added that stories akin to Kate Cox's are increasingly prevalent in states where Republican-elected officials are implementing hard-line abortion bills that pose a threat to the lives of women.

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US, UK United in Preventing Mideast Conflict From Spreading - Blinken

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - Washington and London are on the same page when it comes to preventing the Israel-Hamas conflict from spilling across the region, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said during a press conference with British Foreign Minister David Cameron.

"When it comes to conflict in the Middle East, we are absolutely united in doing everything possible to prevent it from spreading," Blinken said on Thursday.

On October 7, the Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from Gaza. Israel declared war on Hamas and initiated massive strikes on Gaza while also imposing a complete blockade on the Palestinian enclave. Israel then launched a ground invasion into Gaza on October 27.

The blockade has cut off Gaza from water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel supplies, and in

conjunction with bombardments and military activities has created a humanitarian catastrophe. Nearly 1.8 million Palestinians out of 2.3 million in Gaza have been displaced, 18,000 killed and more than 38,000 wounded during Israel's bombardments and invasion of Gaza. Some 1,200 Israelis, military and civilians, were killed in the Hamas attack.

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Biden, Netanyahu Discuss Humanitarian Aid for Gaza, Settlers' Violence - White House

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu discussed by phone the situation in the Gaza Strip, including the flow of humanitarian aid and fuel to the Palestinian enclave, as well as extremist Israeli settlers' violence in the West Bank, the White House said.

"The president underscored the importance of the continuous and sustained flow of humanitarian aid into Gaza. He welcomed the recent Israeli decision to ensure that fuel levels will meet requisite needs, but stressed that much more assistance was urgently required across the board," the White House said in a press release on Thursday.

Biden reiterated his concern about extremist violence committed against Palestinians and the need to increase stability in the West Bank, the release added.

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Austin Threatens to Send US Soldiers to Fight Russia Without More Ukraine Aid - Carlson

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin threatened to send Americans to fight Russia if lawmakers do not approve more aid for Ukraine, media personality Tucker Carlson said via X (formerly Twitter).

"We'll send your uncles, cousins and sons to fight Russia," Carlson quoted Austin as saying during a classified briefing to the House of Representatives earlier this week.

Carlson said he confirmed the veracity of Austin's threat to lawmakers, after billionaire businessman Elon Musk questioned him about the report.

The Biden administration held classified briefings with members of Congress to inform them about the situation in Ukraine, in an effort to rally support behind the supplemental funding request with aid for Ukraine.

The Defense Department has warned that the United States risks running out of resources to support Ukraine and backfill its own defense stocks without further congressional action.

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US, Ukraine Officials in Meetings Agree Counteroffensive Against Russia Failed - Reports

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - US and Ukrainian officials agreed during a series of meetings over the past two months that the Ukrainian counteroffensive against Russia had failed and reached a stalemate, The Messenger reported on Thursday, citing unnamed US officials.

During the meetings, the officials identified a range of problems facing the Ukrainian military in its confrontation with Russia, including low ammunition stocks, poor mobilization results and a growing rift between President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Commander-in-chief Valerii Zaluzhnyi, the report said.

US officials went as far as to suggest that the Biden administration has decided to revisit its policy to let Kiev define the terms of victory, the report said.

Biden administration officials have repeatedly admitted that the Ukrainian counteroffensive failed to achieve its goals, including regaining lost territory and establishing a land corridor from Russia to Crimea.

Hungarian Foreign Minister Peter Szijjarto said last week that NATO foreign ministers admitted during their meeting in Brussels that the Ukrainian counteroffensive had failed and that its results were far below what they had hoped for.

The Ukrainian counteroffensive began on June 4 with brigades trained by NATO instructors and armed with Western equipment, including the much touted Leopard 2 tanks. Three months later, Russian President Vladimir Putin said that Kiev's push had failed, with Ukraine suffering significant losses in soldiers and equipment. On November 1, Zaluzhnyi said in an interview that the conflict with Russia has reached a "stalemate." Zaluzhnyi said according to NATO's textbooks and the plans for the counteroffensive, "four months should have been enough time for us to have reached Crimea, to have fought in Crimea, to return from Crimea and to have gone back in and out again."

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 8 (Sputnik) -

PUTIN-RAISI TALKS

* Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday told his Iranian counterpart Ebrahim Raisi that it is important to exchange views on the situation in the region, especially the conflict in Palestine.

* The attacks on Gaza need to be stopped as soon as possible, and finding a quick solution to the escalation is necessary, Raisi said.

* Russia is actively working with Iran in all areas, including in the field of energy, Putin said.

ISRAEL INVASION OF GAZA

* The death toll from the Israeli bombing of the Gaza Strip has increased to 17,177 people since October 7, the Palestinian Health Ministry said on Thursday.

* The United States has resumed drone flights over Gaza in support of the ongoing hostage recovery efforts, Defense Department spokesperson Lisa Lawrence said.

* The United States is not close to securing another agreement on a humanitarian pause in the Gaza Strip, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said.

ARMENIA-AZERBAIJAN RELATIONS

* Armenia withdraws its candidacy to host the 29th session of the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 29) in favor of Azerbaijan's candidacy, the Presidential Administration of Azerbaijan and the Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia said in a joint statement on Thursday.

* Azerbaijan is releasing 32 Armenian soldiers, according to a joint statement by the Administration of the President of Azerbaijan and the Office of the Prime Minister of Armenia.

IMF FINANCING OF UKRAINE

* The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects that Ukraine will need about \$42 billion in financing in 2024, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

* The IMF Executive Board will discuss the second review of Ukraine's Extended Fund Facility Program on December 11, Kozack said.

RUSSIAN ECONOMY

* Russia's GDP will grow by at least 3.5% by the end of this year and this is a good indicator for the Russian economy, President Vladimir Putin said on Thursday.

* The Ministry of Economic Development maintains its inflation estimate of 7.5% by the end of 2023, Economic Development Minister Maxim Reshetnikov said.

LONDON CLAIMS RUSSIA INTERFERES IN UK AFFAIRS

* Russian Ambassador in London Andrei Kelin has been summoned to the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office due to alleged Russian interference in the country's domestic affairs, Sky News reported on Thursday.

* The Russian embassy in London denied the United Kingdom's claims of Moscow's interference in the UK's internal affairs, saying there is no evidence to support such statements.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

* The United States is unable to promise Ukraine that any additional funding will to be provided amid Congress' failure to approve President Joe Biden's supplemental funding bill, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said on Thursday.

* President Joe Biden's nominee for US Deputy Secretary of State, Kurt Campbell, said that the conflict in Ukraine is no longer a regional one because many outside players are now hugely invested in it.

* The Ukrainian military is using "very effectively" the MIM-104 Patriot surface-to-air missile systems provided by the United States, to fend off Russian missile attacks, Brig. Gen. Clair Gill said.

* Internal US contradictions regarding support for Kiev cannot but be projected onto the general sentiment, including those of the Europeans, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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Ukraine Doesn't Need to Conduct Strikes in Russia to Succeed on Battlefield - White House

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Ukraine does not need to carry out strikes inside Russia to succeed on the battlefield, US Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer said on Thursday.

"We also don't think that that is essential for them to succeed on the battlefield," Finer said during the Aspen Security Forum.

Finer also underscored that the United States still does not support or enable Ukrainian strikes into Russia.

As Congress currently struggles to approve new funding for Ukraine, Finer emphasized that it is crucial assistance is renewed for next year in order to keep Kiev in the fight.

Western countries stepped up their military and financial assistance to Ukraine and rolled out several sanctions packages against Russia after Moscow launched its military operation in Ukraine in February 2022. Moscow has condemned foreign military supplies to Ukraine. In April 2022, Russia sent a diplomatic note to all NATO countries on the issue of arms supplies to Ukraine.

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US Leading Effort Against Houthi Attacks Threatening Global Commerce - White House

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is spearheading an international coordinated effort to counter the Houthi attacks and address their significant threat to global commerce, White House National Security Council Spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We are leading an international coordinated effort to condemn these Houthi attacks and their threat to global commerce," Kirby said at a press briefing.

Kirby added that the United States acknowledges the international nature of the problem and asserts that an international solution is crucial.

Earlier today, US government imposed sanctions on 13 individuals and entities who it claims are funneling Iranian financial support to the Houthis in Yemen.

Since October, the Houthis have conducted multiple missile and drone attacks threatening civilian infrastructure in Israel and commercial ships 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.

UPDATE US State Dept. Approves \$300M In Sale of Lightweight Torpedoes to Germany - Pentagon

(adds details in paras 3-4)

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US State Department approved the potential sale of lightweight MK-54 torpedoes to Germany in a \$300 million deal, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Thursday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Government of Germany of MK 54 Lightweight Torpedoes and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$300 million," DSCA statement said.

The purchase deal would include up to 80 units of MK-54 All Up Round Lightweight Torpedoes (LWT), as well as recoverable exercise torpedoes and their containers, among other equipment, the statement said.

DSCA said that the sale would support US foreign policy and national security by assisting a NATO ally, further noting that by greenlighting the potential deal, Germany would be able to upgrade its anti-submarine warfare capabilities and ensure its ability to meet current and eventual related threats.

The main contractor would be Raytheon Integrated Defense Systems, the statement said, adding that there were no known alternative agreements proposed in connection to the sale.

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US Does Not Rule Out Military Action Against Houthis Over Recent Attacks - White House

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States does not rule out taking military action against the Houthi rebels in Yemen following recent attacks against commercial ships in the Middle East, US Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer said on Thursday.

"We have certainly not ruled out the possibility of taking military action, we reserve that right," Finer said during the Aspen Security Forum.

The United States is mostly looking at imposing sanctions and creating a maritime coalition to provide reassurance and security for commercial sea lanes in light of the recent Houthi attacks, Finer said.

Finer pointed out that the recent Houthi attacks have not targeted US forces in the region.

Since October, 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. US warships operating in international waters have responded to them.

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UPDATE - US Senate Advances National Defense Authorization Act, Staging Votes for Next Week

(Adds details in para 7)

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US Senate agreed to begin debate on the reconciled version of the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) on Thursday, setting up votes on the legislation next week.

Senators advanced the NDAA conference report in a vote of 82-15.

"I will file cloture on the NDAA later today. Members can expect to take votes on this early next week," Schumer said during remarks on the Senate floor.

US congressional leadership struck a closed-door deal on the annual defense policy bill without input from NDAA conference members, Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene said earlier this week.

US House Speaker Mike Johnson and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer agreed to include Ukraine aid and surveillance authority extensions in a "sell-out" of conservative principles, Greene said.

Greene also criticized congressional leadership for not giving lawmakers more time to consider the more than 3,000-page conference report.

The bill authorizes more than \$874 billion in national defense spending, including \$300 million for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative in 2024 and another \$300 million in 2025. The legislation also authorizes a 5.2% pay raise for US troops.

The legislation contains a measure prohibiting information sharing related to the New START Treaty but provides a waiver.

Moreover, the legislation authorizes the United States to sell Virginia class nuclear-powered submarines to Australia. The bill also requires the Pentagon to establish a military training program for Taiwan and enhance the island's cybersecurity.

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White House Says US Has Not Given Israel Firm Deadline to End Operation in Gaza

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has not given Israel a firm deadline to end its major military operation in Gaza, US Principal Deputy National Security Advisor Jon Finer said on Thursday.

"No, we have not given a firm deadline to Israel, not really our role," Finer said during the Aspen Security Forum.

Moreover, Finer said the United States believes there are many legitimate military targets that remain in southern Gaza, possibly most of the Hamas leadership.

Israel has every right to go after those targets, Finer added.

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

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

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Canada's Flight Safety Rating Falls to C Following Major Downgrade by ICAO – Reports

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – Canada's flight safety rating suffered a major downgrade from A+ to C grade following an audit by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), CTV News reported on Thursday.

ICAO decided to downgrade Canada's A+ grade on flight safety and oversight to C, effectively positioning the country far below the majority of its international peers, the report said, citing a confidential audit.

The audit highlighted that since 2005, Canada has taken an abrupt fall in three safety categories, namely aircraft operations, airports and air navigation, the report said.

ICAO has reportedly issued a recommendation to the Canadian government, tasking it with establishing a system that would ensure all airlines and airports comply with regulations, shore up dangerous goods certification, and properly administrate training and fatigue management for traffic controllers.

Ottawa had until October 30 to submit its answer to ICAO's draft audit, the report said. A final report is expected to be delivered by the organization in the coming months.

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US Senate Advances National Defense Authorization Act, Staging Votes for Next Week

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US Military Personnel Injured by Attacks on Bases in Iraq, Syria Reaches 66

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Sixty-six US military personnel have been injured in a spree of attacks on bases in Iraq and Syria, Deputy Pentagon Press Secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"As of December 4, it's still about 66 of our folks who have received non-serious, non-life-threatening injuries," Singh said during a press briefing.

All of the injured service members have returned to work, Singh added.

There have been 78 recent attacks on bases in Iraq and Syria, although none in the last 24 hours, Singh said.

The wave of attacks on US forces in Iraq and Syria comes amid heightened tensions in the region, following an attack on Israel by Palestinian Hamas militants in October, as well as an increase in incidents involving US warships in the Red Sea.

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US State Dept. Approves \$300Mln Sale of Lightweight Torpedoes to Germany - Pentagon

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Biden Grieves Lives Lost in UNLV Shooting, Another Act of 'Senseless' Gun Violence - WH

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden expressed sorrow over the tragic loss of three lives in the University of Nevada at Las Vegas (UNLV) shooting, White House Spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre said on Thursday.

On Wednesday, three individuals were killed when a gunman opened fire at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas. The assailant involved in the shooting was later found deceased.

"The President and the First Lady grieve the three lives lost at UNLV yesterday [in] yet another act of senseless gun violence. And our thoughts are with those who survived this incident and are undoubtedly traumatized by this horrific event," Jean-Pierre said during a press briefing.

Biden will travel to Las Vegas on Friday to address the "horrific" shooting, the White House said.

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Pentagon Says Does Not Have Enough Money to Backfill Its Stocks to Keep Supplying Ukraine

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – The US Department of Defense does not have enough funds to backfill its stocks to be able to supply Ukraine unless Congress approves President Joe Biden's supplemental request, deputy press secretary Sabrina Singh said on Thursday.

"The biggest problem that we are running up against is we don't have enough money to backfill our own stocks, which means we don't have enough to continue to supply Ukraine with what it needs. Because it is our weapons, our capabilities, our systems being pulled off our shelves, and being shipped over to Ukraine, and if we can't backfill that's going to also impact our own readiness," Singh said during a press briefing.

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US, Saudi Defense Chiefs Discuss Houthi Threat in Red Sea - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his Saudi counterpart discussed threats to the navigation in the Red Sea by the Houthis, Pentagon spokesperson Pat Ryder said on Thursday.

"Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III called His Royal Highness Prince Khalid bin Salman, Saudi Minister of Defense, today to discuss Houthi threats to freedom of navigation in the Red Sea," Ryder said in a statement.

Austin stressed that Houthi aggression toward vessels transiting critical waterways poses risks to the free flow of commerce and the international shipping industry, according to the statement.

"He also underscored Iran's dangerous role in advising, arming, and training the Houthis," Ryder said, adding that the US is ready to work with all nations to maintain the principle of freedom of navigation and ensure safe passage for global shipping.

A US defense official told Sputnik on Wednesday that a US Navy destroyer shot down a Houthi drone in the Red Sea that was launched from Yemen.

The US Central Command said earlier in the week that three commercial vessels were attacked in the Red Sea by drones allegedly launched by the Houthis.

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Egypt's Top Diplomat Says No Consensus in World to Put End to Israel-Gaza War

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The international community has failed to reach a consensus on the need to cease hostilities between Israel and Gaza, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said on Thursday.

"I think that the voice of the consensus has not materialized within the International community to call for a humanitarian suspension of this crisis," Shoukry said at the Aspen Security Forum.

On Wednesday, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres invoked Article 99 of the UN Charter for the first time in his tenure to appeal for a humanitarian ceasefire and "avert a humanitarian catastrophe" in Gaza. Under the article, the UN chief "may bring to the attention of the Security Council any matter which in his opinion, may threaten the maintenance of international peace and security."

His appeal comes after a week-long truce ended last Friday and Israel expanded ground operations to the south of Gaza.

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Senator Says Never Been More Worried About a Terrorist Attack Against US Than Right Now

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Republican Senator Lindsey Graham said on Thursday that he has never been more worried about a terrorist attack against the United States than he is at present.

"I've never been more worried about a terrorist attack on our nation than I am right now, just not me saying it, it's all the people in the intelligence community," Graham said during a press conference. "The number of people that want to punish us for helping Israel is through the roof."

Graham mentioned that the threat level on the US southern border is at an all-time high.

According to the Department of Homeland Security's Homeland Threat Assessment, this year US border agents have encountered a growing number of migrants on the FBI's terrorist watchlist trying to illegally cross the US-Mexico border.

Graham said the Biden administration is on track to see 10 million illegal crossings by migrants on the US southern border over the US president's four-year tenure.

On Wednesday, Senate Republicans blocked legislation to advance Biden's \$110 billion supplemental bill over concerns it does not include "credible" measures to address the crisis on the US southern border.

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US Urges Venezuela, Guyana to Seek Peaceful Solution to Border Dispute - White House

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik). - The United States is calling on both Venezuela and Guyana to work on a peaceful resolution to the crisis over disputed territory, White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.

"We are going to urge Venezuela and Guyana to continue to seek a peaceful resolution to this dispute diplomatically including by the International Court of Justice," Kirby said.

Last week, Venezuela held a referendum in which almost 96% of the population voted in favor of incorporating the Essequibo region. On Wednesday, Guyanese President Irfaan Ali said that Georgetown was considering Caracas' actions to incorporate Essequibo, which makes up two-thirds of the territory controlled by Guyana, a threat to the country's national security and would raise the issue at the United Nations Security Council.

Venezuela gained independence from Spain in 1845 and recognized Essequibo as part of its sovereign territory. In 1899, however, the United Kingdom filed and won an arbitration claim to recognize Essequibo as part of its then-Caribbean colony of British Guiana. Independent Guyana cited this Arbitral Award in its 2018 International Court of Justice suit against Venezuela, claiming sovereignty over the disputed territory.

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Russian Mission in Jerusalem to Report to ROCOR Hierarchs on Work Amid Conflict - Priest

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – Hierarchs of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR) will discuss the activities of its ecclesiastical mission in Jerusalem against the backdrop of the ongoing conflict in Gaza, ROCOR Synod of Bishops Chancellor Archpriest

Serafim Gan told Sputnik on Thursday.

The Synod of Bishops will hold its regular meeting in New York on December 8-9.

"Head of the mission in Jerusalem, Archimandrite Roman (Krassovsky) will report about the situation in our monastery and the school for girls in Bethany [a Palestinian town in the West Bank] due to the military activity and unrest," Father Serafim said.

Archimandrite Roman told Sputnik in November that the mission in Jerusalem is facing significant funding issues. He explained that the Hamas-Israel war has affected the mission financially because a major part of its income is derived from pilgrims who currently cannot visit Israel.

Speaking of other topics on the agenda of the upcoming Synod meeting, Father Serafim said that the hierarchs would consider inter-Orthodox relations with other churches, as well as administrative, economic, legal, property, and church-disciplinary matters.

The ROCOR is an autonomous part of the Russian Orthodox Church. The church has approximately 400 parishes and about 20 monasteries and monastic communities worldwide.

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US Not Engaging Anymore in One-Size-Fits-All Trade Agreements - Trade Representative

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has stopped making one-size-fits-all trade agreements with its partners due to shifts in the global marketplace and the requirement that each deal has to be innovative, US Trade Representative Katherine Tai said on Thursday.

Tai made the comment in a discussion at the Aspen Security Forum on the evolving US-Taiwan trade deal:

"The negotiation we're having with Taiwan right now - and I'll just highlight here, every trade negotiation we're doing right now - has an element of innovation that's baked into it. And this is because we're trying to be responsive to the data in the feedback that we are receiving from the world economy," Tai said.

The trade representative explained that there are so many changes going on simultaneously that no one can explain exactly what is happening or predict exactly what is going to happen next.

Tai's remarks came after Taiwan's top trade negotiator signaled this week a desire to expand the country's agreement with the United States reached earlier this year into one that more closely resembles a free trade deal.

On Friday, Taiwan's Office of Trade Negotiations chief John Deng said that Taiwanese trade officials have been talking with their US counterparts about broadening the scope of the current arrangement.

Known formally as the US-Taiwan Initiative on 21st Century Trade, the discussion between the two states covers issues such as regulatory practices, customs and corruption.

Tai said The Office of the US Trade Representative has been "very disciplined" in customizing trade programs according to the needs and wants of each of the United States' trading partners.

"From a trade policy perspective, what we have been trying to do is to say, let us bring a trade

program to each one of our partners that's tailored to that partner, that's tailored to their interests and our interest in the partnership," she said.

Tai also said the deal Washington was negotiating with Taipei will account for the shifts in the global economy "that is fit for the times and the times are very challenging now. And so, this is one of our accomplishments that we are particularly proud of and committed to."

Tai also said trade agreements of yore where the United States' approach was to craft "a very comprehensive maximally-liberalizing or aggressively-liberalizing agreement" were outdated in today's economy.

"We're not doing that with anybody right now. It's actually insensitive to the dynamics in the global economy and the US economy right now to push on with that program, which may have been fit for the 80s and the 90s," Tai said. "We need new policies. There's innovation going on all around us."

The US-Taiwan trade deal will exclude tariff reductions, traditionally called "market access," as these are thorny issues that are difficult to resolve, given tensions between the United States and China. Beijing claims the democratically ruled island as part of its own territory and opposes any US-Taiwan trade deal.

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US Senate Talks on \$110Bln Supplemental Bill 'Not Failing' - Republican Whip Thune

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Negotiations in the Senate to reach a deal on President Joe Biden's supplemental bill are not failing and there's hope it will produce a result soon, the second highest ranked Republican in the upper chamber, John Thune, said on Thursday.

On Wednesday, the Senate blocked legislation to advance Biden's \$110 billion supplemental bill over concerns it does not include "credible" measures to address the crisis on the US southern border.

"I don't think talks are failing, there's conversations going on right now, and I'm hopeful they're going to produce a result," Thune said during a press conference.

Policy changes are needed to the current US immigration system, which is facilitating the record number of migrants arriving on the US southern border under the Biden administration, Thune added.

Earlier this week, Biden said that he is willing to make significant compromises on border security if it means getting his supplemental bill through the Senate, which includes more aid for Ukraine that is due to run out by the end of the year.

US Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said he would let Republicans include an amendment that will address their border security concerns, but it will need 60 votes to be adopted into the legislation.

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US Not in Position to Make Promises to Ukraine About Any Forthcoming Aid - Kirby

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is unable to promise Ukraine that any additional funding is going to be provided to them amid Congress' failure to approve President Joe Biden's supplemental bill, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters on Thursday.

"We are not in a position to make that promise to Ukraine given where things are on the [Capitol] Hill," Kirby said, when asked whether the US can offer any assurances that more funding is coming Ukraine's way.

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Canadian Premiers Oppose Federal Draft Proposing Oil, Gas Greenhouse Emissions Cap

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The premiers of Canada's Alberta and Saskatchewan on Thursday said they opposed a federally introduced draft framework to cap the country's 2030 oil and gas greenhouse emissions.

Earlier on Thursday, Canadian Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault, and Natural Resources Minister Jonathan Wilkinson introduced a draft framework to cap the country's 2030 oil and gas greenhouse emissions at a level between 35% and 38% below 2019 levels. The measure aims at limiting the amount of pollution that the oil and gas sectors can emit, while also advancing Canada's 2050 net-zero goals.

"Today's announced de facto production cap on Alberta's oil and gas sector amounts to an intentional attack by the federal government on the economy of Alberta and the financial well-being of millions of Albertans and Canadians," Alberta Premier Danielle Smith said via X (formerly Twitter).

Smith said Alberta has the constitutional right to exercise exclusive jurisdiction on the way in develops and manages the provinces resources. Through the proposal, Ottawa is undermining Canadian unity, something Albertans will not tolerate, she added.

The Albertan government will work on the creation of a constitutional shield to protect the province from recent attacks targeting Alberta, Smith said, adding that the current administration of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is becoming one of the "most damaging" in the country's history.

Smith called on Trudeau and the federal government to stay out of the provincial constitutional jurisdiction, and rather jointly work with Albertan authorities and their ongoing emissions reduction efforts.

Saskatchewan Premier Scott Moe echoed Smith's stance.

"Saskatchewan remains opposed to the new methane regulations and the oil and gas emissions cap, and we will protect our constitutional right to build our economy in accordance with the priorities of Saskatchewan families and businesses' Moe said via X.

Moe said that Ottawa's policies will have serious economic impacts on Canadians and will limit the country's ability to sell sustainable energy electricity and heating-related products to global

markets.

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UN Chief Talks to 7 Foreign Ministers to Help Avert Disaster in Gaza - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, December 7 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres talked by telephone with seven foreign affairs ministers after sending a letter to the UN Security Council urging action to avert a humanitarian disaster in Gaza, United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said.

"Since the letter, he had about seven phone calls with Foreign Ministers yesterday," Dujarric said during a press briefing on Thursday.

Guterres spoke with the foreign ministers of UAE, Jordan and the US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, the spokesperson added.

Earlier this week, Guterres asked the UN Security Council to avert a humanitarian disaster in Gaza under UN Charter Article 99.

On October 7, the Palestinian movement Hamas attacked Israel from Gaza. Israel declared war on Hamas and initiated massive and indiscriminate strikes on Gaza while also imposing a complete blockade on the Palestinian enclave. Israel then launched a ground invasion into Gaza on October 27.

The blockade has cut off Gaza from water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel supplies, and in conjunction with bombardments and military activities has created a humanitarian catastrophe.

Nearly 1.8 million Palestinians out of 2.3 million in Gaza have been displaced, 18,000 killed and more than 38,000 wounded during Israel's bombardments and invasion of Gaza. Some 1,200 Israelis, military and civilians, were killed in the Hamas attack.

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White House Says 'Not Close' to Securing Another Deal on Humanitarian Pause in Gaza

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is not close to securing another agreement on a humanitarian pause in the Gaza Strip, National Security Council spokesperson John Kirby said on Thursday.

"We are not close to inking another deal on a humanitarian pause [in Gaza]," Kirby said during a press briefing.

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UN Says Discussions Ongoing to Open Kerem Shalom Crossing to Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations said on Thursday that discussions are ongoing to open Kerem Shalom crossing for Gaza aid amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas war.

"On Kerem Shalom, there are discussions ongoing... he [Martin Griffiths] and his colleagues are in the lead on that," spokesperson Stephane Dujarric told a briefing.

Earlier in the day, UN Humanitarian Coordinator Martin Griffiths said that countries in the Middle East are receptive toward opening the Kerem Shalom border crossing for delivery of humanitarian aid.

The UN official also said a United Nations representative in Jordan has been lining up the potential deliveries of aid from Jordan to the Kerem Shalom crossing.

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

Last Friday, a week-long truce between Israel and Hamas ended and Israel expanded ground operations to the south of Gaza.

The conflict has killed about 1,200 people in Israel and over 17,000 in Gaza.

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CIBC Fined \$1Mln by Canada's Anti-Money Laundering Agency Over Compliance Violations

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce (CIBC) was fined C\$1.3 million (US\$1 million) for its failure to comply with money laundering and terrorist financing regulations, the country's financial intelligence agency said on Thursday.

"Following a compliance examination in 2021, this bank in Toronto, Ontario, was imposed an administrative monetary penalty of \$1,329,150 on October 23, 2023, for non-compliance with Part 1 of the Proceeds of Crime (Money Laundering) and Terrorist Financing Act and its associated Regulations," the Financial Transactions and Reports Analysis Center of Canada (FINTRC) said in a statement.

CIBC failed to submit a suspicious transaction report where there were reasonable grounds to suspect that transactions were related to a money laundering or terrorist activity financing offense. In addition, CIBC failed to submit incoming electronic funds transfer reports with prescribed information, the statement said.

FINTRAC emphasized that the CIBC did not commit any criminal offenses related to money laundering or terrorist activity financing, and that the penalty was only imposed for administrative violations of the act. The Bank has already paid the financial penalty in full, putting an end to proceedings against it.

The administrative monetary penalty measure taken on the CIBC follow up on Tuesday's decision to impose a \$5.5 million penalty on the Royal Bank of Canada for similar reasons.

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US Targets 2 Russians With Cyber-Related Sanctions in Coordination With UK - Treasury

(Updates with more details in paras 3-9)

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has targeted two Russians with cyber-related sanctions in a move coordinated with the United Kingdom, the Treasury Department said in a statement on Thursday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), in coordination with the United Kingdom, designated two individuals associated with an advanced persistent threat (APT) group that is sponsored by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and has targeted individuals and entities in the United States, United Kingdom, and other allied and partner countries," the statement said.

The designated individuals are Ruslan Aleksandrovich Peretyatko, identified as an FSB officer, and Andrey Stanislavovich Korinets, an IT worker, the statement said.

Between at least 2016 and 2020, Korinets fraudulently created and registered malicious domain infrastructure for FSB spear phishing campaigns, the statement said.

Korinets anonymously created shortened URL links that would be embedded in spear phishing emails and established 39 domains across five registrars, employing aliases and false

addresses to conceal his identity, the statement also said.

Between at least 2016 and 2020, Peretyatko used several email addresses that were designed to mimic legitimate management accounts of well-known technology companies to send spear phishing emails, some of which contained the domain infrastructure created by Korinets, the statement said.

"In 2022, FSB actors were responsible for malicious cyber activity directed at facilities of a US government agency. The malicious activity included impersonating agency employees and one Department of State employee by creating spoofed email accounts for the purpose of mimicking these employees in order to send spear phishing emails to unsuspecting and specifically targeted employees at the facilities," the statement said.

The FSB's spear phishing campaigns are used to access email accounts, maintain persistent access to the accounts and associated networks as well as potentially exfiltrate sensitive information, the statement added.

Any property or interests in property owned by the individuals mentioned, located in the United States or under the possession or control of US persons, must be blocked and reported to the Treasury Department, according to the statement.

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Blinken Attributes Wince During Biden's China Remarks to 'Stiff' Neck

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken explained his apparent discomfort when President Joe Biden labeled Chinese President Xi Jinping a "dictator" by claiming his neck was feeling stiff at the time.

"I'm tempted to say that we'd had a really long day, a very important and intense conversation with China. My neck was a little bit stiff. And, you know, that happens," Blinken told CNN in an interview.

Blinken said that the differences between the political systems of the United States and China were no secret.

The secretary stated that "the president always speaks very clearly, very directly, and he speaks for everyone."

Biden made his "dictator" comment following bilateral talks with President Xi on the margins of the APEC summit in San Francisco last month.

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Senior US Official Says Worried N. Korea No Longer Interested in Diplomacy With Washington

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - National Security Council Coordinator for the Indo-Pacific Kurt Campbell said on Thursday that he is concerned North Korea is no longer

interested in engaging in diplomacy with the United States on the denuclearization issue.

"I am worried that North Korea in the current environment has decided that they are no longer interested in diplomacy with the United States, and that means that we're going to have to focus even more on deterrence," Campbell said during his Senate nomination hearing to be the next US Deputy Secretary of State.

The last "constructive" diplomatic engagement between the United States and North Korea took place in 2019 in Vietnam between Kim Jong Un and President Donald Trump, according to Campbell.

Since 2019, North Koreans have rebuffed every US effort utilized to try to reach out to Pyongyang, Campbell added.

Campbell further said he is also concerned that North Korea continues to perfect its long-range missile and nuclear capabilities in ways that are antithetical, not only to the region, but to the United States as well.

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Campbell Says Conflict in Ukraine No Longer Regional as Other Actors 'Hugely Invested'

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's nominee for US Deputy Secretary of State, Kurt Campbell, said during his confirmation hearing on Thursday that the conflict in Ukraine is no longer a regional one because many outside players are now hugely invested in it.

"The truth is the struggle, the desperate struggle in Ukraine is no longer just a regional conflict. Many outside players are hugely invested," Campbell told the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Campbell pointed out that a major change is that Indo-Pacific players now understand how Europe is increasingly linked to the Indo-Pacific and are providing resources to Ukraine.

Thus, the resources flowing to Ukraine are not only from the United States and Europe, he said.

Campbell also said that he is worried China will learn the wrong lessons from the conflict in Ukraine judging by Beijing's defense doctrine.

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Russia Postpones Informal UNSC Meeting on Ukraine's Maidan to Discuss Gaza Crisis - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 7 (Sputnik) - Russia has postponed its informal UNSC meeting on Ukraine's Maidan that was scheduled for December 8 to free up time for a UNSC meeting to discuss the situation in Gaza, Russian Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations Dmitry Polyanskiy said on Thursday.

"The Arria Formula meeting on the Maidan events, which was scheduled for the same time, has been tentatively postponed to December 26. Obviously, it is now objectively more important for the Council to discuss the situation in Gaza," Polyanskiy wrote on Telegram.

Earlier this week, Russia, the UAE and China requested an urgent UNSC meeting on Gaza for December 8.

It came after a temporary truce between Israel and Hamas ended last Friday and Israel expanded ground operations to the south of Gaza.

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Regional States Receptive to Opening Kerem Shalom Border Crossing - UN Official

UNITED NATIONS, December 7 (Sputnik) - Countries in the Middle East are receptive to opening the Kerem Shalom border crossing for delivery of humanitarian aid, UN Humanitarian Coordinator Martin Griffiths said on Thursday.

"[T]here have been some signs that the member states related... have become much more open to the idea of opening Kerem Shalom. Probably not in one go but certainly gradually," Griffiths said.

The UN official also said a United Nations representative in Jordan has been lining up the potential deliveries from Jordan to the Kerem Shalom crossing.

"If we get that, it would be the first miracle we have seen for some weeks," Griffiths added.

On October 7, Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip. Israel declared war on Hamas and initiated massive and indiscriminate strikes on Gaza while also imposing a complete blockade on the Palestinian enclave. Israel then launched a ground invasion into Gaza on October 27.

The blockade has cut off Gaza from water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel supplies, causing a humanitarian catastrophe.

Some 1,200 Israelis were killed during the Hamas attack, and 18,000 Palestinians have been killed and more than 38,000 wounded during Israel's bombardments and invasion of Gaza.

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US Senate Blocks Resolution Directing Removal of US Forces From Syria

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US Senate on Thursday blocked a joint resolution introduced by Senator Rand Paul that directs the Biden administration to remove US military forces from Syria within 30 days.

Senators rejected a motion to advance the resolution in a vote of 13 members in favor and 84 opposed.

"The American people have had enough of endless wars in the Middle East. Yet, 900 US troops remain in Syria with no vital US interest at stake, no definition of victory, no exit strategy, and no

congressional authorization to be there," Paul said in a statement on the resolution.

The resolution directs the president to remove US troops from hostilities "in or affecting Syria" within 30 days of adoption, unless a declaration of war or other authorization for use of force is enacted by Congress.

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US No. 2 Diplomat Nominee Says US Opposed Hong Kong Leader Attending APEC

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of State nominee Kurt Campbell said on Thursday that the US had made it clear that Hong Kong Chief Executive John Lee was not welcome at the APEC summit held last month in San Francisco.

"We made clear to both China and Hong Kong authorities that he would not be welcome in San Francisco and indeed he would need to be sending a second, which he did. So I do want to underscore that that we never intended for him to participate," Campbell testified at his nomination hearing at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Campbell was responding to Sen. Risch's request to provide the committee with a detailed explanation of why the Biden administration did not repudiate Lee's claim that he had been invited to APEC.

The Hong Kong government stated on October 31 that Lee had been invited by the US to attend the summit but was prevented by "scheduling issues" and Financial Secretary Paul Chan would go in his place.

The announcement followed months of speculation over whether the US would permit Lee to attend the summit. He is among 11 Hong Kong officials sanctioned for their role in the 2020 imposition of the National Security Law in the city.

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US No. 2 Diplomat Nominee Says JCPOA Not Currently Viable

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of State nominee Kurt Campbell said on Thursday there is no chance in the current environment for the United States and Iran to resume the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

"I don't think anyone sees that there's any chance in the current environment to go back to the JCPOA. It's just not on the table," Campbell testified at his nomination hearing at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Campbell described the environment as Iran "taking a role that is so antithetical to our interests, that we must be even more vigilant."

He added that the US should continue to isolate Iran diplomatically and send a military

message to Iran that its "provocations" would be met with "stern responses."

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Meeting Requested by Guyana at UNSC to Be Held on Friday Afternoon - Source

UNITED NATIONS, December 7 (Sputnik) - The meeting requested by Guyana at the UN Security Council will be held on Friday afternoon, a United Nations source told Sputnik.

"In response to the request by the permanent representative of Guyana, closed consultations will be held on Friday, December 8, 2023 at 3:00 p.m.," the source said on Thursday.

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US Deputy Secretary of State Nominee Says Israel, Saudi Arabia Talks Still Viable

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – US Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell said on Thursday that he believes there is “still a willingness among the key players” to restart Israel and Saudi Arabia’s normalization talks.

“I think we can be carefully encouraged by some of the discussions that we've had to date that indicate that there still is a willingness among the key players to restart this process and continue it,” Campbell testified at his nomination hearing at the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Campbell reiterated his commitment to America’s ultimate goal to “entrench Israel diplomatically in the region,” saying that it was in “our best interests.”

He noted that the discussions were “quiet” and “difficult” amid Israel’s war on Gaza but that dialogue had to be maintained.

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UN Humanitarian Aid to Gaza Being Processed at Rafah Crossing Amid Uncertainty - Official

UNITED NATIONS, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is still processing humanitarian trucks in the Gaza Strip at the Rafah crossing amid great uncertainty what may happen, UN Humanitarian Coordinator Martin Griffiths said on Thursday.

"We are still unloading trucks at the Rafah crossing. But what we don't have is any sense of clarity of planning, any sense of what's going to happen tomorrow," Griffiths said during a press briefing.

Griffiths emphasized that nobody knows where the Gaza residents who are in the southern part

of the Palestinian enclave will go, nor when the military operations will end.

On October 7, Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip. Israel declared war on Hamas and initiated massive and indiscriminate strikes on Gaza and then launched a ground invasion of the Palestinian enclave.

Israel also imposed a complete blockade on Gaza, cutting it off from water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel supplies, which created a humanitarian catastrophe.

Some 1,200 Israelis were killed during the Hamas attack, and 18,000 Palestinians have been killed and more than 38,000 wounded during Israel's bombardments and invasion of Gaza.

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US Resumes Drone Flights Over Gaza in Support of Hostage Recovery Efforts - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States has resumed drone flights over the Gaza Strip in support of the ongoing hostage recovery efforts, Defense Department spokesperson Lisa Lawrence said on Thursday.

"In support of hostage recovery efforts, the US has resumed unarmed UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle] flights over Gaza, and we continue to provide advice and assistance to support our Israeli partner as they work on their hostage recovery efforts," Lawrence said.

The US military had suspended drone flights in the region following a ceasefire agreed upon by Israel and Hamas on November 24.

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Environment Canada Introduces Draft Proposal to Cap Gas, Oil Greenhouse Emissions

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government on Thursday introduced a draft framework to cap the country's 2030 oil and gas greenhouse emissions at a level between 35% and 38% below 2019 levels.

The draft framework was jointly introduced by Canadian Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault, and Natural Resources Minister Jonathan Wilkinson in a bid to limit the amount of pollution that the oil and gas sectors can emit, while also advancing Canada's 2050 net-zero goals.

"The proposed Regulatory Framework for an Oil and Gas Sector Greenhouse Gas Emissions Cap was developed following extensive engagement with industry, Indigenous groups, provinces and territories, and stakeholders," Environment and Climate Change Canada said. "It proposes to cap 2030 emissions at 35 to 38 percent below 2019 levels, while providing compliance flexibilities to emit up to a level about 20 to 23 percent below 2019 levels."

The ministry noted that the draft framework aims at both reducing oil and gas-related emissions while also ensuring that the sector has enough flexibility to address global demand.

Accordingly, facilities involved in oil and gas production will be able to purchase a limited amount of carbon "offset credits," or to contribute to a decarbonization fund, the ministry said. Those proceeds would then be reinvested in further reducing emissions in the sector.

The Canadian government will remain engaged with the industry, as well as all other involved parties and stakeholders, the ministry said, noting that comments on the proposed framework should be submitted by February 5.

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Federal Reserve Must Keep US Interest Rates at Current Level in 2024 - IMF

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) considers it appropriate for the Federal Reserve to keep US interest rates at their current level in 2024, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"When we take this picture comprehensively, we think that the current policy settings are the right ones for the US on the monetary policy side and that interest rates will likely need to stay at current levels well into 2024," Kozack said.

The spokesperson pointed out that the US economy was "exceptionally strong in the third quarter of 2023" and that wage and price inflation is decreasing.

"We are also confident that the Federal Reserve is cognizant of the upside risks to inflation and will act accordingly if these risks are realized," Kozack said.

Since March 2022, the Federal Reserve has increased the benchmark interest rate 11 times, rate from 0.25% to 5.5% per year. Fed Chairman Jerome Powell did not rule out last week the possibility of further increases if needed.

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US Government Targets 13 Men, Entities Funding Houthis For Iran - Treasury Department

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US government imposed sanctions on 13 individuals and entities who it claims are funneling Iranian financial support to the Houthis in Yemen, the Department of the Treasury announced in a press release on Thursday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctioned 13 individuals and entities responsible for providing tens of millions of dollars' worth of foreign currency generated from the sale and shipment of Iranian commodities, backed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF), to the Houthis in Yemen," the release said.

The targeted entities and individuals operated through a complex network of exchange houses and companies in multiple countries under the auspices of US-sanctioned Houthi and IRGC-QF financial facilitator Said al-Jamal to funnel Iranian money to the Houthi forces, the Treasury said. The Treasury alleges that Jamal relied on international businessman Fadi Deniz and a network

of entities in St. Kitts and Nevis, Russia, Lebanon, the United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates, Turkey to funnel the funds.

"The Houthis continue to receive funding and support from Iran, and the result is unsurprising: unprovoked attacks on civilian infrastructure and commercial shipping, disrupting maritime security and threatening international commercial trade," Under Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence Brian Nelson said in the release.

Since October, 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 and US warships operating in international waters have responded to them, the release said.

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Ukraine Uses Patriot System 'Very Effectively' Against Russian Missiles - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The Ukrainian military is using "very effectively" the MIM-104 Patriot surface-to-air missile systems provided by the United States, to fend off Russian missile attacks, Brig. Gen. Clair Gill said in a congressional testimony on Thursday.

"The Ukrainians have used it very effectively against the Russian missile attacks," Gill told the US House Armed Services Committee. "So, I think we're seeing a very effective use of it."

Gill made the comment in response to a question about what were the most important lessons learnt by the US military in Ukraine amid Russia's special military operation there.

Gill, who serves as deputy director for Regional Operations and Force Management at the Pentagon, also noted that the United States has not used the Patriot system in 20 years.

Maj. Gen. Sean Gainey also testified during the hearing and said that the extensive use of drones in the Ukraine and other conflicts has highlighted the necessity to develop an integrated approach that nets shooters and sensors together.

Such an approach will allow for an appropriate response depending on the nature of the system that the drones are tasked to counter.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Space and Missile Defense Policy John Hill said during the hearing that the integrated air and missile defense employed in Ukraine is what has allowed the country to maintain its sovereignty.

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Trump Says Ahead of Court Hearing He Did Nothing Wrong, Calls Attorney General 'Lunatic'

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump said on Thursday before his court proceeding that he has done nothing wrong and called New York Attorney General Letitia James a lunatic.

"If you look at the case, we did nothing wrong. There were no victims. The bank loves us," Trump told reporters on Thursday. "This attorney general who is crazed, she's a lunatic, the attorney general sits here because she knows that she has a judge that no matter all of the evidence, the judge is going to rule in her favor."

Trump is set to testify in a civil fraud trial brought against him by James for allegedly making false statements about the value of his properties in New York.

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US House Censures Congressman Bowman for Needlessly Pulling Fire Alarm

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed a resolution to censure Congressman Jamaal Bowman for needlessly pulling a fire alarm at a US Capitol office building before a government funding vote earlier this year.

House lawmakers passed the resolution with 214 members in favor, 191 opposed and five voting present.

Bowman pulled a fire alarm before a government funding vote in September, causing the Cannon House Office Building to evacuate.

In October, Bowman pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges connected to the incident and agreed to pay a \$1,000 penalty.

Censure in the House of Representatives is formal condemnation of a lawmaker's actions and involves rebuking by the House speaker.

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IMF Says Global Economic Impact of Conflict in Gaza Contained, Highly Uncertain

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – The impact of the conflict in Gaza on the global economy remains “relatively contained” but highly uncertain, International Monetary Fund (IMF) spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

“From the global perspective, the economic impact so far has been relatively contained, but it is, of course, highly uncertain,” Kozack told reporters.

She acknowledged that the economies of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza will be hardest hit but said the ultimate impact would depend on the duration and the intensity of the conflict.

“We do expect the conflict to severely depress economic activity in both the West Bank and Gaza, where even before the conflict, GDP growth was set to decline over the medium term,” Kozack said.

On October 7, Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip and during the course of military operations captured several hundred Israeli soldiers and civilians as well as citizens of other nations.

Israel declared war on Hamas and initiated massive and indiscriminate strikes on Gaza while also imposing a complete blockade on the Palestinian enclave, cutting it off from water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel supplies. Israel then launched a ground invasion into Gaza on October 27.

Some 1,200 Israelis were killed during the Hamas attack, and 18,000 Palestinians have been killed and more than 38,000 wounded during Israel's bombardments and invasion of Gaza.

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US House Passes Resolution Disapproving Biden Administration's Student Debt Payment Plan

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives on Thursday passed a joint resolution disapproving of the Biden administration's plan to reform the Department of Education's income-driven student debt repayment program.

House lawmakers passed the resolution, which disapproves and blocks enforcement of the Biden administration's Savings on a Valuable Education (SAVE) plan, in a vote of 210-189.

The SAVE plan was unveiled after the US Supreme Court struck down the Biden administration's initial student loan forgiveness plan in June. The plan alters the Education Department's Income-Driven Repayment program and halves the amount borrowers have to pay each month from 10% to 5% of income while expanding exempted income.

"President Biden is once again attempting to circumvent the rule of law and leave hardworking Americans who never went to college with a \$559 billion bill for another of his radical Far Left student loan schemes," the House Republicans said in a statement.

The lawmakers emphasized in the statement that they are committed to reining in Biden's "reckless spending that burdens taxpayers and circumvents established laws."

In addition, the House Republicans vowed that they will continue to safeguard against "costly and radical" proposals from the Biden administration, the statement said.

The joint resolution now heads to the Democrat-majority US Senate for consideration.

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IMF Expects Ukraine Will Need \$42 Billion in Financing for 2024 - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) expects that Ukraine will need about \$42 billion in financing next year, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"For 2024, IMF staff estimates that the country will need about \$42 billion in financing and support from the international community, including from the European Union, the United States, the Group of Seven (G7) and, of course, the international financial institutions [whose role] will

be essential," Kozack said.

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US Targets 2 Russians With Cyber-Related Sanctions in Coordination With UK - Treasury

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States is targeting two Russians with cyber-related sanctions in a move coordinated with the United Kingdom, the Treasury said on Thursday.

"Today, the Department of the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC), in coordination with the United Kingdom, designated two individuals associated with an advanced persistent threat (APT) group that is sponsored by the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) and has targeted individuals and entities in the United States, United Kingdom, and other allied and partner countries," the Treasury said in a statement.

The two sanctioned Russians are Ruslan Peretyatko and Andrey Korinets.

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IMF Board to Discuss Second Review of Ukraine Program on December 11 - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) – The International Monetary Fund's Executive Board will discuss the second review of Ukraine's Extended Fund Facility Program on December 11, IMF spokesperson Julie Kozack said on Thursday.

"The Executive Board is expected to meet on Monday, December 11, to consider the second review. Approval by the Executive Board would enable a disbursement of \$900 million," Kozack told reporters.

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US House to Consider Measure to Formalize Biden Impeachment Probe Next Week - Notice

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - The US House of Representatives will consider a resolution next week to formalize an impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden, according to a notice released on Thursday.

Lawmakers will consider the resolution, which directs House committees to continue their ongoing investigations into Biden, on Tuesday, the notice said.

The House of Representatives has been investigating the president and his family for alleged criminal activity, including foreign influence peddling and bribery.

House Speaker Mike Johnson has said that the inquiry is intended to gather evidence to help lawmakers determine whether to pursue impeachment against Biden.

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US Will Pursue 'Every Effort' to Release Gaza Hostages - National Security Official

WASHINGTON, December 6 (Sputnik) - Phil Gordon, national security advisor to Vice President Kamala Harris, met with the families of Americans held hostage by Hamas in the Gaza Strip and emphasized that the Biden administration will undertake any effort to secure their release, the White House said in a readout of the conversation on Thursday.

"Dr. Gordon emphasized that the Biden-Harris administration will relentlessly pursue every effort to secure the release of all hostages," the readout said about the meeting which took place on Wednesday.

Gordon said what the hostages and their families are going through is an "agonizing ordeal" and expressed the steadfast support of the entire Biden administration, the readout said.

The well-being of the hostages continues to be the focus of diplomatic talks and the United States remains committed to working with Israel, Qatar and Egypt to reach a new deal to release more hostages, the readout said.

On October 7, Hamas attacked Israel from the Gaza Strip and during the course of military operations captured several hundred Israeli soldiers and civilians as well as citizens of other nations.

Israel declared war on Hamas and initiated massive and indiscriminate strikes on Gaza while also imposing a complete blockade on the Palestinian enclave, cutting it off from water, food, medicines, electricity and fuel supplies. Israel then launched a ground invasion on October 27.

Some 1,200 Israelis were killed during Hamas' attack and 18,000 Palestinians killed during Israel's bombardments and invasion of Gaza, with more than 38,000 Palestinians being wounded.

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US Believes UNSC Resolution on Gaza Won't Be Helpful Now - Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 7 (Sputnik) - The United States believes that another UN Security Council resolution on Gaza will not be helpful right now, deputy US ambassador to the United Nations Robert Wood said on Thursday.

Earlier in the day, UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed said that the country has submitted a draft resolution to the UN Security Council on an immediate ceasefire in the Gaza Strip on humanitarian grounds.

"Our position hasn't changed." Wood told journalists. "We haven't had any discussions with the

UAE about their text so I don't know what their plans are... but we don't think another Security Council product right now is gonna be helpful in the situation."

Russia and the UAE have requested a UN Security Council meeting on Gaza for Friday.

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US Southern Command to Conduct Military Flights in Guyana Today - Embassy

WASHINGTON, December 7 (Sputnik) - US forces will conduct flight exercises inside Guyanese territory on Thursday, the US Embassy in Georgetown said in a statement amid mounting tensions between Guyana and Venezuela over an oil-rich border region.

"In collaboration with the Guyana Defence Force (GDF), the U.S. Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM) will conduct flight operations within Guyana on December 7. This exercise builds upon routine engagement and operations to enhance security partnership between the United States and Guyana, and to strengthen regional cooperation," the statement said.