

12/22/23 Friday

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Journo: Israel-Hamas Prisoner Exchange Talks Blocked by US' Ceasefire Veto

Israel's behavior shows it has little regard for the safety of prisoners taken by Hamas, which has said there will be no more talk of releases or exchanges until there is a ceasefire, a journalist told Sputnik. Recently, Israeli soldiers shot three hostages carrying a white flag, prompting mass demonstrations against the war in Israel.

Israel has pressed ahead with its all-out assault on Gaza, with the latest reports indicating it's given evacuation orders for Khan Yunis, a southern city it previously told Palestinians to flee to from the north. Almost the entire population of 2.3 million people in the strip has been displaced by over two months of war, and nearly 25,000 people have been killed.

In Warsaw, talks between US, Qatari, and Hamas negotiators had sought the release of both Israelis held by Hamas as well as Palestinians held by Israel, until those talks fell through earlier this week. In the wake of their failure, [Hamas issued a statement](#) that "There is a Palestinian national decision that there should be no talk about prisoners or exchange deals except after a full cessation of aggression."

While the Israeli assault on Gaza has been justified by Netanyahu's government as aiming to both destroy Hamas as an organization and to liberate the hostages taken from nearby Israeli border towns [on October 7](#), only one has actually been released by the actions of IDF soldiers, with about half of the roughly 240 hostages being released by Hamas voluntarily as part of a "humanitarian pause" last month. By contrast, last week the IDF publicly apologized after its soldiers shot and killed three hostages in Gaza who were carrying a white flag.

Esteban Carrillo, editor of online news magazine The Cradle, told [Sputnik](#) that Israel has never shown much regard for the safety of Israelis in Palestinian custody, regardless of their claims otherwise.

"That has been exactly the practice, that they've been killing their own captives," Carrillo said. "Even on 7 October, it seems that many of the deaths were caused by the Israelis. That's what the evidence points at."

"As far as another prisoner exchange, you also need to consider what Hamas has said and the other resistance factions fighting in Gaza, and that is there will be no other prisoner exchange until the war stops, before actually letting humanitarian aid in. So what is holding this up is Israel and the United States, because Israel wants control of the trucks that are coming into Gaza because they don't trust the UN. So if that falls into place, then of course there's a possibility. It seems like Hamas is setting out a requirement. They're not saying 'we're not going to see a prisoner exchange', they're just saying 'we need a ceasefire first'," he said.

"And Israel is saying, the national security minister, this extremely anti-Arab and politician, said today that if the war slows down, like the United States has been trying to get Israel to agree to, then he would leave the coalition," he said, referring to Itamar Ben-Gvir of Otzma Yehudit

(Jewish Power), a right-wing party that advocates evicting and banning all Arabs from lands under Israeli control.

“You know, this man comes out every two weeks, every three weeks and says the same thing, because the moment his party leaves the coalition is the moment Netanyahu no longer has a majority in the parliament. And that’s the moment that Israel is plunged once again into chaos, into electoral, political chaos. So they don’t want to. The Israelis really, they don’t care. They see themselves as untouchable. That’s what they’re telling the world: ‘we are untouchable’.”

“Even look at what’s happening with Yemen. You know, the Arab world’s poorest country is doing more for the Palestinians than everyone in the Western world and most of the countries in the Arab world as well. And what does the United States do? They create [a naval coalition to confront Yemen](#), to protect Israel, and they want the Arabs to take part in this. So, it’s a lot of backroom dealing, a lot of ways to prolong this war, there doesn’t seem to be any concerted effort to actually end it.”

“At some point, you would hope that the [UN will do its job](#) and press for a ceasefire. It feels like The United States is just standing in the way, they’re too comfortable standing by and watching while tens of thousands of Palestinians get killed, millions get displaced, and nobody lifts a finger and Biden is just concerned about his poll numbers.”

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Pollster: Biden Approval Rating ‘Worst of Any Modern-Day President’ Seeking Reelection

A new poll has found that less than a year before he seeks reelection, US President Joe Biden has among the lowest poll numbers he has ever recorded.

Biden’s 39% approval rating in December 2023 is “the worst of any modern-day president heading into a tough reelection campaign,” the polling company [Gallup said on Friday](#).

While up slightly from 37% last month, December is still the fifth month in 2023 in which Biden polled below 40%. For the first few months and again during the summer, Biden’s job approval rating breached 40%, but especially since the autumn began it has been below that already-low threshold.

The head of state, who has been given the unenviable moniker of “Genocide Joe” by protesters furious over his administration’s support for Israel’s war in Gaza, has faced nonstop mass protests since early October, peaking in [a 500,000-strong rally](#) on November 4 demanding his administration press Israel for an immediate ceasefire. American Arabs and Muslims have [expressed their disappointment](#) with Biden’s decision, making popular the slogan “in November we remember,” joined by an increasing number [of American Jews](#) - small but important demographics for the Democratic Party when their opposition is increasingly embracing Islamophobic policies and antisemitic attitudes.

Still, he retains 78% support among Democrats, Gallup found, although that is among the lowest approval ratings from his own party since Biden took office in January 2021.

Just 5% of Republicans approve of Biden's job as president, a level unchanged since September, and 34% of Independents approve of the job he is doing - a substantial rise from 27% in November.

Compared to other recent presidents, Biden's polling is the lowest at this point in their reelection campaign. In December 2019, former US President Donald Trump was at 45%, while his predecessors Barack Obama was at 43% in December 2011; George W. Bush was at an enviable 58% in December 2003. Presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush were both at 51% in December 1995 and December 1991, respectively, whereas Ronald Reagan was at 54% at this time in 1983, as was Jimmy Carter in 1979.

Notably, Carter, the elder Bush, and Trump all failed to secure a second term, despite their stronger numbers.

However, the war in Gaza isn't the only thing dragging Biden's poll numbers down: his administration's support for the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the immigration crisis at the US-Mexico border, persistently elevated inflation numbers, and the scandal involving the business affairs of his son, Hunter Biden, have all contributed to disillusionment with the 81-year-old's job performance.

On the Democratic side of things, Biden is far and away the leading contender for the Democratic Party's nomination, with the Democratic National Committee going so far as to cancel all primary debates. On the Republican side, Trump holds a powerful lead over several other candidates, making him the presumptive nominee for the GOP.

In [recent polls on a hypothetical election](#) tomorrow between Biden and Trump, Biden is consistently a few points behind Trump, with Biden's vice president, Kamala Harris, faring even poorer when featured as the Democratic candidate instead of him.

Both Biden and Trump could face legal hurdles in the coming months, however, as Trump is [set to face trial](#) in four separate cases dealing with dozens of felony charges that could disqualify him from holding public office, and earlier this month, Biden saw the US House of Representatives vote to [formally open an impeachment inquiry](#) into the president's relationship with his son's business affairs.

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Hersh: Biden Made Decision to Destroy Nord Stream 2 'Few Weeks Before' Ukraine Operation Began

Since veteran investigative journalist Seymour Hersh revealed in February that the US blew up the Nord Stream 2 pipeline the previous September, Western media has rushed to create an alternate narrative involving Ukrainian operatives possibly working at Kiev's direction, and to discredit Hersh's revelations.

The White House had already made the decision to destroy the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline by early 2022, several weeks before the start of Russia's special operation in Ukraine, Seymour Hersh has reported in his latest expose story.

According to his report, based on comments from an American official “who is knowledgeable about the political use of energy,” by the time US President Joe Biden hosted German Chancellor Olaf Scholz at the White House [on February 7, 2022](#), he had already given the order to a CIA-led team in Norway to find a way to destroy the Nord Stream 2 pipeline, a liquified natural gas line from Russia to Germany that was slated to soon open.

That was, he noted, “a few weeks before” Ukraine intensified its attacks on the Donbass people’s republics, forcing Moscow’s hand in recognizing the independence of the breakaway states from Kiev and sending its forces into the Donbass to defend them - events that set in motion the launching of Russia’s special operation to neutralize and de-Nazify the country several days later.

After Russian President Vladimir Putin recognized the Lugansk and Donetsk People’s Republics on February 22, 2022, Scholz [announced the termination](#) of the Nord Stream 2 project - something he had been under pressure from Washington as well as some other European Union leaders, such as Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, to do for years.

The month prior, Republicans in the US Congress [attempted to pass a bill](#) that would have sanctioned the Russian side of the pipeline project regardless of whether or not Russia sent troops into Ukraine, and Biden and his predecessor, Donald Trump, had repeatedly deferred implementation of other sanctions against the pipeline in order to keep Berlin in their good graces.

According to Hersh’s report, the CIA-led team had planted the explosives on three of the four Nord Stream 2 pipes along the seafloor of the North Sea by May of 2022, but Biden delayed their detonation for months without explanation until finally giving the order in late September of that year. The bombs were detonated using a “low frequency sonar device,” he reported.

The veteran investigative journalist suggested the timing was chosen, coming at the start of autumn, in order to ensure Berlin didn’t get cold feet about the operation.

Successive German governments had been enthusiastically in support of the pipeline, which would have brought plentiful and cheap gas into Western Europe, and downplayed Washington’s suggestion that it would give Moscow leverage over European affairs.

Earlier this week, Germany’s Sefo and Norway’s Equinor, their state-owned gas firms, [struck a massive \\$55 billion deal](#) that would see Norway supply one-third of German gas needs for the next 10 years - essentially the same volume that Nord Stream 2 would have brought.

The US official with whom Hersh spoke quipped that the deal was “an amazing stroke of good luck for Scholz, just when his base was facing another gas-free winter.”

“Magically,” the source added, “the deal coincides with Russia’s earlier closure of gas and oil fields that - except for the destruction of the Nord Stream pipelines - would have been the source of gas for the two pipelines.”

It’s unclear to what exactly the official was referring; possibly the May 2022 closure of western traffic in the Yamal-Europe pipeline, which runs from the northwestern Siberian Yamal Peninsula westward into Europe via Poland.

US President Joe Biden's 39% approval rating in December 2023 is "the worst of any modern-day president heading into a tough reelection campaign," Gallup said about the results of its latest poll.

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It is the fifth time in 2023 Biden has polled below 40%, barely breaching that threshold in the winter and summer.

While he has kept 78% approval among Democrats, even that number is among the lowest the 81-year-old has polled among his own party. A dismal 5% of GOP respondents approved of Biden's job as president, as did 34% of Independents.

Between his support for Israel's war in Gaza and for Ukraine, the US-Mexico border crisis, inflation, and the Hunter Biden scandal, almost everyone has something to be mad at Joe for.

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The US Supreme Court has rejected a request by special counsel Jack Smith to fast-track arguments on whether former US President Donald Trump can claim immunity from federal prosecution for alleged crimes committed while in office.

The high court did not offer an explanation for the ruling and no dissents were provided.

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New Execution Method in Alabama Compared to 'Tying Bag Over Their Head'

The state of Alabama plans to use nitrogen hypoxia as a new method to execute prisoners as the state has had difficulties obtaining the components needed for the drug cocktail mix used in more conventional lethal injection executions.

The never-before-tried method is believed to be painful. Nitrogen has no euphoric effects and the first prisoner scheduled to be executed with it, Kenneth Eugene Smith, will likely die from suffocation if a judge rules the execution can move forward.

Paul Wright, the managing editor of Prison Legal News and the executive director of the Human Rights Defense Center [told Sputnik's Political Misfits](#) on Thursday that the new execution method is the latest in a long list of government attempts to "medicalize and sterilize the process of killing people."

"I think it's worth pointing out from a historical perspective, the United States Supreme Court has never in its entire history ever found a means of execution to be unconstitutional in this country. They rubber-stamp everything," Wright explained. "They rubber-stamped the electric chair even when people were catching on fire. They're okay with hanging, even though people are decapitated by it. They're okay with the gas chamber, even when people are choking to death, even when there's a risk of killing the bystanders because the seals on the gas chamber haven't been properly maintained, as almost happened in Mississippi."

Wright notes that previous execution methods were all proposed as a more humane method, but each had their problems.

"The electric chair was posited as being an improvement over hanging people. The gas chamber was supposed to be an improvement over electrocuting people. Lethal injection was supposedly an improvement over all these other means of killing people. Now this nitrogen means of killing people is supposedly the answer to lethal injection," But, Wright adds that this method is not being advertised as more humane, but a more convenient way of killing inmates. "The reason lethal injection is falling from favor is not because the government suddenly decided, 'Hey, we're botching too many executions. It's cruel and unusual. We're inflicting suffering needlessly.' No, the reason they're moving away from lethal injection is because the drug companies that manufacture the drug that they use in these drug cocktails to kill people have been bought [through] European countries. And these European companies are saying, 'Hey, we're in the business of producing drugs to help people, not to kill people. We don't want our drugs being used for the murder of people.'"

The Department of Corrections has declined to release documents related to the execution, including waivers that had to be signed by Smith's religious counsel, to media outlets. Wright argues that is part of a growing trend of putting a shroud of secrecy around "state murder."

"When people are actually seeing how the death penalty is being carried out by the government, I think that's some of what led to the increasing public revulsion against the death penalty," Wright said. "Now they're [executing inmates] in prisons, behind high walls."

Wright compared the method to tying "a plastic bag over [the inmate's] head" and executing them that way.

Wright concludes by noting that public support of the death penalty has nevertheless been dropping since its modern peak in the early 1990s and that juries are returning fewer death sentences. "It seems like the only people that are really enamored of the death penalty in this country are politicians and justices," he said.

The judge in the Smith case is still considering whether the execution will be allowed to go forward, suggesting on Thursday that the state should change its policies to allow Smith to pray and say his final words before putting the gas mask on, but stressed that the suggestion should not be seen as a hint on how he will rule.

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New US Military Docs Leaked on 'War Thunder' Game Forum

The leak focused on the capabilities of the M2A2 Bradley Armored Infantry Fighting Vehicle (AIFV), which has been heavily utilized by Ukraine but has performed poorly during the special operation. On Tuesday, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said that at least 50 Bradley AIFVs have been destroyed by Russian forces since June.

The message board for the hyper-realistic military sim War Thunder has received increased scrutiny after military documents considered “sensitive” and “export-restricted” were posted on the platform.

The forum is often home to endless debates between military buffs, who often use technical documents and manuals to support their arguments. However, posting any classified or export-restricted materials is strictly forbidden on the forum.

“Classified information or not, you must refrain from disseminating any information which could be reasonably regarded as Export-restricted military-technical data,” the forum's rules read.

The documents appeared on the board last week for a few minutes before being removed by moderators. However, it was enough time for users to make copies of the post, who then shared it with military outlets.

The documents included two pages out of the technical manual for the M2A2 Bradley Armored Infantry Fighting Vehicle, detailing its commander's hatch, turret assembly and spall liner (inner armor) details.

While the documents were unclassified they were still considered “export-controlled” which means they could be used to damage US national security interests. While the M2A2 Bradley has been retired by the Pentagon, US allies, including Ukraine, still utilize the older Bradley vehicle.

This is not the first time the War Thunder forums were at the center of a military leak. Earlier this year, classified information relating to the AH-64D Apache Longbow Attack Helicopter and the F-117 Nighthawk Stealth Attack Fighter were shared. Up to 14 leaks have occurred on the forums since the game's initial beta release in 2012.

While the Nighthawk is no longer in operation, the Apache is still utilized by the US military. However, the developers of War Thunder, Gaijin Entertainment, say its users are not to blame for the latest leak.

“As far as we know, this particular leak did not appear on War Thunder forums first. It was published online on December 8 or even earlier and has been spreading on various platforms for days until it landed on War Thunder forums,” Gaijin Entertainment founder Anton Yudintsev said. “While we did our part in helping to limit the leak spreading further by deleting that post, we can do nothing with what's happening on other platforms.”

Reddit and Discord were cited as the other platforms where the documents appeared first. Still, the user was banned from the site, per Gaijin Entertainment policies.

An Army spokesperson told [a military media](#) outlet they are aware of the leaks and will provide more information if it becomes available. It is not known if charges will be pursued against the user.

Violation of the Export Control Reform Act of 2018, which the US Defense Department says leaking export-controlled material would violate, carries a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison.

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US Will Sacrifice the Dollar if It Hands Russian Assets to Ukraine

Faced with a Congress that has refused to provide more aid to Ukraine, US media reported on Thursday that the US under President Joe Biden, is considering using the estimated \$300 billion in Russian assets that are frozen in Western banks to fund the Kiev government.

The United States is willing to sacrifice the US Dollar in order to not appear to lose to Russia in Ukraine, despite the catastrophic consequences, Mark Sleboda, an analyst for security and international relations told [Sputnik's Final Countdown](#) on Friday.

"I think the threat [to give frozen Russian assets to Ukraine] is real," Sleboda told hosts Angie Wong and Ted Rall. "I think rather than admit defeat to Russia in Ukraine, they absolutely will do something like this. I don't think that this is posturing. I think they're seriously considering it, despite the damage it could do to the US and the global economy down the line, because this is that important to them. They believe that their hegemony is on the line here."

Sleboda says that by taking assets that are legally Russia's and giving them to Ukraine, the US government will cause international trust in the dollar, currently the world's largest reserve currency, to plummet and encourage them to diversify their holdings.

"Other countries will say, 'well, the dollar is no longer a reliable global reserve currency' if the US can just seize somebody's money, whenever [they] have geopolitical problems with them. That breaks the terms of the global financial and economic system that was set up by the US and the West starting all the way back with Bretton Woods in the 1960s," Sleboda said, noting that by simply freezing the assets, the US already encouraged this process to begin, pointing to Saudi Arabia which has been looking for [alternatives to the petrodollar](#).

"When that happens, then [\\$30 trillion-plus of US national debt](#) becomes suddenly real and that could have severe economic effects, not just on the United States but the whole world," Sleboda argued.

Much of the inflation that should come from the trillions in US debt is counteracted, many economists say, because of its status as the global reserve currency. When the US borrows money from foreign countries, they hold that debt for future international transactions, including transactions with other countries besides the US. That process prevents the cash from hitting the street and increasing inflation.

But, the US is willing to risk its global economic hegemony if it believes it might save its global military hegemony, noting that the \$300 billion in Russian assets held by the United States would be enough to fund the Kiev regime for years.

"They're talking about \$61 billion from the US for one year. So, even if not all of it is stolen - because that's what it would be, theft. Then that could fund the Kiev regime's economy, which is [entirely dependent on the West](#) to a tune of some 50 to \$60 billion a year, plus their military expenses on top of that. So it is a considerable sum of money."

However, Sleboda notes that Russia could respond in kind, putting an end to the global economic rules that have held sway over the globe for decades.

“Boom, [Western assets in Russia are] gone. Russia already made that clear. If the US and other Western countries do that, they will seize every Western asset by companies, by private individuals. Anything they can seize in Russia, they will seize,” Sleboda explained. “And then we are in a whole new, I mean, the rules of the global economy that have existed certainly for the last 30 some years, but really, for the last 70 years could all come crashing down. And what starts with Russia could easily spread once you open this genie's bottle, it's hard to put it back in.”

But Sleboda says the United States under the Biden administration is likely willing to take that risk. “I can't stress to you how important they feel not being seen as losing to Russia in Ukraine is.”

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USAF Combing Two Damaged F-35s To Make 'Franken-Bird'

The F-35 project has been a boondoggle for the US government since its inception. Now estimated to cost \$1.7 trillion, it is over budget and behind schedule. There have also been safety issues with its design, software and questions about how it will perform in military missions.

The US Air Force (USAF) and Lockheed Martin are attempting to combine two damaged F-35 Joint Strike Fighters into one plane that can fly in a project that has been dubbed “Franken-bird.” Both planes were damaged in separate incidents, one with the tail number AF-211 damaged its nose beyond repair after a failure of its forward landing gear. The other, with tail number AF-27, was damaged in a severe engine fire but its nose was recoverable.

The Pentagon's F-35 Joint Procurement Office (JPO) said that the office is constantly looking for new parts but this will be its first attempt to create a new plane out of parts of two damaged planes.

“Not only will this project return a combat asset back to the war fighter, but it opens the door for repairing future mishap aircraft using tooling, equipment, techniques and knowledge that has been developed,” says Dan Santos, the heavy maintenance manager for the JPO said.

The hope is that the Franken-bird will be completed by March 2025.

“The F-35 program is still young compared to all legacy airframes,” says Dave Myers, lead engineer for the JPO's support team. “We are doing this for the first time, and organizationally for the future, we are creating a process we can move forward with.”

Scott Taylor, the lead mechanical engineer on the Franken-bird project for Lockheed Martin said that the procedures and tools being developed could be utilized in normal maintenance operations.

“All of the aircraft sections can be de-mated and re-mated theoretically, but it's just never been done before,” Taylor adds. “This is the first F-35 Franken-bird to date.”

The USAF added that specialized tools, fixtures and equipment have been developed that will allow F-35s to be repaired overseas. “We've designed versatile tooling that fits neatly into a

[container] box, making it transportable to various locations, including forward operation areas,” Taylor said.

Eight NATO countries and five non-NATO partners have contracts for F-35 Jets. Each plane [costs an estimated \\$110.3 to \\$135.8 million](#), not including operating and maintenance.

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Tape Appears to Show Trump Pressuring Electors in Michigan

Former US President Donald Trump has been charged with alleged election meddling in Georgia, but no case has been brought against him in Michigan.

A newly released audio recording appears to show then-US President Donald Trump pressuring two Republican members of the Wayne County Board of Canvassers in Michigan not to sign certification documents for the 2020 presidential election, according to recordings reviewed by [The Detroit News](#).

The call, from November 17, two weeks after the 2020 election, included Trump, Republican National Committee Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel, and the two members of the Wayne County Board of Canvassers, Monica Palmer and William Hartmann.

Wayne County includes Detroit and most of the surrounding suburbs and is the most populous county in the state.

The canvassers had originally voted against certification, before agreeing to it on the condition that some precincts in Wayne County were audited at a later date. During the call, which reportedly happened 30 minutes after the meeting when Hartmann and Palmer agreed to sign the certification, Trump told them they would look “horrible” if they voted to approve the election results after first voting against them.

“We’ve got to fight for our country,” Trump said. “We can’t let these people take our country away from us.”

Later in the call, McDaniel told the canvassers “If you can go home tonight, do not sign it. [...] We will get you attorneys,” with Trump adding “We’ll take care of that.”

Palmer and Hartmann then left the meeting without signing the official statement of votes for Wayne County. The next day, they tried unsuccessfully to rescind their votes. Had they been successful, it could have thrown the election into chaos as the Michigan election would have been put into doubt. The recordings seem to implicate Trump as having direct involvement in efforts to overturn the election results in Michigan, a state Biden won by roughly 154,000 votes. Previously, Trump came under fire for a phone call he had with Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger in early January 2021, in which Trump said they “need only 11,000 votes” to win the state.

No one in the call has disputed the Detroit News’ summary of the call, Hartmann died in 2021. Trump campaign spokesman, Steven Cheung, told media outlets that Trump’s actions on the call “were taken in furtherance of his duty as president of the United States to faithfully take care of the laws and ensure election integrity, including investigating the rigged and stolen 2020 presidential election.”

A Republican-controlled state Senate committee investigated claims of voter fraud in the state but found no evidence of widespread fraud and Trump actually performed better in Wayne County in 2020 than he did in 2016.

In the days after the meeting, Palmer and Hartmann said their certification vote was the result of "intense bullying and coercion" and bad legal advice that they received after initially voting no. While it was reported that Trump had called the two canvassers, the contents of the call were described as Trump expressing his gratitude. Palmer told the House Select Committee to Investigate the January 6 Attack on the United States Capitol in 2021 that she could not recall the exact words Trump used on the call or if he raised issues of the election.

But the call, according to the media outlet that heard it, Trump was focused on the 2020 election during the call, saying that Republicans have been "cheated" and that "everybody knows Detroit is crooked as hell."

As he did in his Georgia call, Trump reportedly pushed the conspiracy that more votes were counted than had been counted, a discrepancy he attributes came from illegally cast absentee ballots. That claim has not been proven and multiple lawsuits focused on the 2020 election failed to make it to court, even when Trump-appointed judges were ruling on them.

In addition, Michigan's election director, Jonathan Brater, said in an affidavit that the difference between absentee ballots tabulated and names in the poll was only 150 less than it should have been, not significantly larger, as Trump claimed.

"If ballots had been illegally counted, there would be substantially more, not slightly fewer, ballots tabulated than names in the poll books," Brater said.

Trump is facing a case in Georgia for alleged election interference, with his conversation with Raffensperger playing a part in that indictment.

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US Supreme Court Rejects Special Counsel's Request to Fast-Track Trump Immunity Dispute

Special counsel Jack Smith had asked the Supreme Court to rule on the issue quickly after Trump appealed a DC District Court ruling that found he is not immune from prosecution. Smith was hoping to skip over the circuit court to move the trial along quickly.

The US Supreme Court on Friday announced it would not decide immediately on whether former US President Donald Trump is immune from prosecution on allegations that he attempted to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

The one-line decision was not signed and noted no dissenters. "The petition for a writ of certiorari before judgment is denied."

The order sends the case back to the DC Circuit Court, allowing the normal appeal process to play out.

However the Circuit Court rules, the losing party is allowed and will be expected to appeal the decision to the Supreme Court again, which will then be more likely to hear it. That means the trial, currently set for March 4, could be delayed further, a clear legal win for the Trump team.

Smith has been urging the courts to act before the election cycle begins in earnest. Meanwhile, the Trump legal team has pushed for the trials to be delayed until after the election. If elected, Trump could theoretically pardon himself, though that power has not been tested and it is unclear how the courts would rule in that case.

Trump was indicted in August on four charges: conspiracy to defraud the United States; conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding; obstruction of and attempt to obstruct an official proceeding; and conspiracy against rights. He has pleaded not guilty to all charges and has decried all the cases against him as politically motivated "witch hunts."

Trump's legal team said that the request to leapfrog the Circuit Court was evidence that Smith is acting in a partisan matter.

"The Special Counsel's extraordinary request, combined with its vague, threadbare justification, creates the compelling appearance of a partisan motivation: To ensure that President Trump — the leading Republican candidate for President, and the greatest electoral threat to President Biden — will face a months-long criminal trial at the height of his presidential campaign," they wrote.

Smith has repeatedly asserted that a speedy trial is in the best interest of the public.

"Nothing could be more vital to our democracy than that a president who abuses the electoral system to remain in office is held accountable for criminal conduct," he wrote when requesting the Supreme Court to hear the case.

The Supreme Court is separately hearing a case focused on the reach of a law used to prosecute more than 300 people allegedly involved in the Jan. 6 riots, one of the same laws used to indict Trump. That case is expected to be heard in June and could delay Trump's trial further.

It is also expected that Trump's legal team will appeal a Colorado Supreme Court decision to remove the former president from the ballot in that state. In that case, the US Supreme Court is expected to move quickly.

In addition to the case in DC, Trump is facing another federal case in Florida over his alleged mishandling of classified documents, a state case in Georgia over his alleged election meddling and a state case in New York over alleged falsifying of business records related to hush money payments made to adult-film star Stormy Daniels. He is also facing numerous lawsuits and civil trials.

Trump is expected to be the Republican nomination for President.

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No Trump, No Biden, No Election? - Cartoon

After the Colorado Supreme Court ruled that former US President Donald Trump - the heavy favorite to win the Republican nomination, should be removed from the ballot under the 14th Amendment, Republicans in red states started threatening to reciprocate by removing current US President Joe Biden from the ballot.

The 14th Amendment, ratified after the Civil War, disbars anyone who has taken an oath of Office and then engaged in “insurrection or rebellion against [the US], or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof,” from holding office, though officials and generals who worked for the Confederate States were given amnesty four years after its ratification.

Trump has not been charged or found guilty of insurrection or rebellion. In the case related to his actions during and before the January 6, 2021 riots on the Capitol building, Trump was charged with conspiracy to defraud the United States, conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding, obstruction of and attempt to obstruct an official proceeding and conspiracy against rights, but not insurrection or rebellion.

The Colorado Supreme Court stayed the ruling, expecting an appeal to the US Supreme Court. On Tuesday, Texas Lt. Governor Dan Patrick suggested Biden could be removed from the ballot in Texas because of his handling of immigration at the southern US Border.

“Seeing what happened in Colorado tonight ... makes me think — except we believe in democracy in Texas — maybe we should take Joe Biden off the ballot in Texas for allowing 8 million people to cross the border since he’s been president, disrupting our state far more than anything anyone else has done in recent history,” Patrick said during an interview with US media.

At this rate, the 2024 election could prove to be the world’s first without any major candidates on the ballot.

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US Trade Office Extends China Tariff Exclusions for Public Consultation - Registry

WASHINGTON, December 26 (Sputnik) - The US Trade Representative Office announced on Tuesday that it would further extend the Section 301 tariff exclusions on certain products from China until May 31, according to a registry notice.

"The Office of the United States Trade Representative today announced the further extension through May 31, 2024, of the reinstated and COVID-related exclusions in the China Section 301 Investigation. The exclusions were previously scheduled to expire on December 31, 2023," the release stated.

The extension will allow for public consultation, starting on January 22, on whether to sunset the tariff exclusions, as part of a statutory four-year review.

The tariffs were originally launched during the Trump administration under Section 301 of the Trade Act. The tariff exclusions include 352 Chinese products related to technology transfer and intellectual property, ranging from car parts to vacuum cleaners, and 77 COVID-19-related medical care products, such as face masks and gloves.

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Current US Christmas Values Different from 'Original Meaning'-Member of Russian Diaspora

WASHINGTON, December 21 (Sputnik)- Modern Christmas traditions in the US have little in common with the original meaning of Christmas, one of the oldest members of the Russian Diaspora in America, Eugenia Bailey, told Sputnik.

Bailey was born in 1923, four months after her parents arrived in the US on the USS Merritt in the first group of refugees from the Russian Empire.

"There is so much pressure in the US on buying gifts during the Christmas season that the real meaning of the holiday is no longer that prevalent," Bailey said. "It is mostly a time for getting together with friends, having parties, and giving each other gifts. But there is nothing about the original meaning of Christmas."

Bailey said that she was raised with the understanding that Christmas has a religious significance, which is the main idea behind it and that is the Birth of Christ.

While Christmas and other Orthodox church holidays were very important to Russian emigrants, many of them, like Bailey's father, had to work during the day and attend university classes at night.

However, Bailey recalls that she and her mother participated in Christmas pageants organized by the church with a performance by Grandfather Frost (Russian version of Santa Claus) and gifts for all the children.

Most Americans celebrate Christmas on December 25th, however, the Russian Orthodox Church celebrates the holiday on January 7th, a difference, Bailey said, that did not bother Russian Americans much.

Moreover, Bailey said that her family celebrated both Christmases and that her parents always gave her gifts on both holidays.

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US Saw 3rd Highest Monthly Number of Crossings on Southern Border Under Biden in November

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States recorded the third highest number of illegal crossings on the US southern border under the Biden administration this past November, US Customs and Border Protection (CBP) revealed in newly released data.

CBP data revealed on Friday that there were 242,418 illegal crossings on the US southern border in November, the third most number of illegal crossings in a month since President Joe Biden took office in January 2021. The other two months that saw the highest number of illegal crossings under Biden are 252,315 in December 2022 and 269,735 in September 2023, according to CBP. The United States had its third record-setting year in a row on the US southern border with more than 2.4 million apprehensions in fiscal year 2023, which ended in September.

Republicans in the Senate are currently negotiating with Senate Democrats and White House officials to include border policy changes in the Biden supplemental bill to deter the massive

number of illegal crossings on the border. The White House is reportedly willing to make such concessions in exchange for Republicans supporting the bill, which includes more than \$60 billion in additional aid for Ukraine.

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Lockheed Martin Gets \$141Mln Contract Boost on AEGIS Air Defense System - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 23 (SPutnik) - The US Navy has given Lockheed Martin Rotary and Mission Systems a more than \$141 million contract extension to further develop the anti-aircraft and anti-missile AEGIS combat system deployed on destroyers and cruisers, the Defense Department announced.

"Lockheed Martin Rotary and Mission Systems, Moorestown New Jersey, is awarded a \$141,510,746 modification contract ... in support of current configurations of the AEGIS combat system," the Defense Department said in a press release on Friday.

Under the extended contract, the Navy will exercise its options for capability package development and fielding, system integration and fielding, and in-service sustainment of the AEGIS systems it already operates, the release said.

Work on the contract will be performed in Moorestown in the US state of New Jersey over the next year and is expected to be completed by December 31, 2024, the release added.

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Biden Congratulates Spain's Sanchez on Reelection, Discuss Red Sea Coalition

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in a telephone call with Spanish President Pedro Sanchez congratulated the leader on reelection and discussed security cooperation, including protecting commercial shipping vessels from attacks in the Red Sea, the White House said in a press release.

Last Thursday, Sanchez, the leader of Socialist Workers' Party, was reelected as Spain's prime minister.

"President Joseph R. Biden, Jr. spoke today with President Pedro Sanchez of Spain," the release said on Friday. "President Biden congratulated President Sanchez on securing a new term and affirmed the enduring friendship between the United States and Spain, including our close defense and security cooperation."

The release added that Biden and Sanchez stressed the importance of ensuring the conflict does not expand in the Middle East region; they condemned the ongoing Houthi attacks against commercial vessels in the Red Sea.

The two leaders also discussed working together to continue facilitating the sustained delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza, the release said.

Earlier this week, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in a statement said that the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, and Spain will take part in a new multinational operation to secure shipping routes in the Red Sea amid a surge of attacks by Houthi rebels.

The Houthi rebels vowed they will continue to prevent the passage in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the latter's military actions in the Gaza Strip end. The Houthis also vowed to attack any ships that join the US-led maritime coalition.

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US Navy Orders 47 More Raytheon Air-to-Ground Standoff Missiles for Bahrain - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Raytheon Missile Systems has received a new \$155.7 million US Navy order for 53 Joint Standoff Weapon Air-To-Ground Missiles, including 47 missiles for Bahrain, the US Defense Department announced.

"Raytheon Missile Systems [of] Tucson, Arizona is awarded a \$155,697,776 ...order ...for the production and delivery of 53 Joint Standoff Weapon Air-To-Ground Missiles (AGM-154 Block III C)," the Defense Department said in a press release on Friday.

The order includes 47 missiles for the government of Bahrain as well as six replacement missiles for the US Navy, the release said.

About two thirds of the work (65.29%) on the contract will be performed in Tucson, Arizona, and the rest will be carried out at various locations across the United States as well as at two sites in the United Kingdom, the release added.

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US Navy Orders \$772Mln More Parts for Virginia-Class Nuclear Submarines - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Bechtel Plant Machinery has received another \$772,299,996 US Navy contract for naval nuclear propulsion components, the US Defense Department announced.

"Bechtel Plant Machinery [of] Monroeville, Pennsylvania is awarded a \$772,299,996 ... contract for naval nuclear propulsion components," the Defense Department said in a press release on Friday.

Work on the contract will be carried out in Monroeville, Pennsylvania, and Schenectady, New York, the release said.

The parts will be supplied over the next decade and the work is expected to be completed by September 2033, the release added.

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Trump Denies Comparisons to Hitler, Says Never Read Nazi Leader's Books

(Updates with background in para 5-7)

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said in an interview that he has never read the works of Nazi German leader Adolf Hitler, contending that recent comparisons with him are unwarranted.

Earlier this month, Trump said in a speech that migrants are "poisoning the blood" of the United States, drawing criticism and comparisons to Hitler's beliefs.

"I never knew that Hitler said it," Trump said on Friday, when asked about the reactions to his remarks. "First of all, I know nothing about Hitler. I'm not a student of Hitler. I never read his works."

Trump said that his statement is a "very different kind" from Hitler's. He explained that the United States is being destroyed by criminals and mentally ill people who enter the country, Trump said in an attempt to further clarify his remarks.

On Wednesday, President Joe Biden's campaign released a graphic comparing quotes from Trump and Hitler side by side, including his statement on immigrants.

Meanwhile, a recent Gallop poll found that Biden's current 39% rating, measured from December 1-20, was the lowest among the past seven US presidents at the same point in their terms in office.

Hitler's book "Mein Kampf" is legally considered extremist material in the Russian Federation and is banned there.

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Trump Praises Top US Court for Rejecting Smith's Request to Fast-Track Immunity Case

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Former President Donald Trump issued a statement praising the US Supreme Court's decision to reject Special Counsel Jack Smith's request to immediately decide whether he is immune in the US election interference case.

"The Supreme Court has unanimously rejected Deranged Jack Smith's desperate attempt to short circuit our Great Constitution," Trump said on Friday. "Crooked Joe Biden and his henchmen waited three years to bring this sham case, and now they have tried and failed to rush this Witch Hunt through the courts...Looking forward to the very important arguments on Presidential Immunity in front of the DC Circuit Court of Appeals."

The Washington, DC Circuit Court of Appeals is scheduled to have oral arguments on January 9.

Trump emphasized that he is entitled to presidential immunity considering he was a US president and had the right to investigate and speak on what he says was a rigged and stolen US presidential election in 2020.

Trump was indicted by a grand jury in August on four charges connected to the US Capitol riot on January 6, 2021. The former president has pleaded not guilty. The trial for the election interference case is currently set to begin March 4.

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"I never knew that Hitler said it," Trump said on Friday, when asked about reactions to his remarks. "First of all, I know nothing about Hitler. I'm not a student of Hitler. I never read his works."

Trump said that his statement is a "very different kind" from Hitler's. The US is being destroyed by criminals and mentally ill people who enter the country, Trump said, in clarification of his remarks.

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Trump Says Looks Forward to Holding 2024 Presidential Debates With Biden

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - Former US President Donald Trump said in an interview that he looks forward to debating current officeholder Joe Biden as part of the 2024 presidential election.

"Oh, will I look forward to that," Trump said on Friday, when asked whether he would debate Biden if both men win their respective parties' nominations. "How about 10 debates?"

Trump has so far declined to participate in any Republican Party primary debates. Trump said during the interview that he would be open to a primary debate if polling were close; however, polling is not close, Trump added.

Trump also criticized the Presidential Debate Commission as "corrupt," but said that he would debate Biden numerous times even if the events were organized by the group.

Although Trump is eager to debate, Biden will never show up to the events, the former president said.

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UPDATE 2 - White House Says Iran "Deeply Involved" in Attacks Against Commercial Ships in Red Sea

(Updates with details in paras 3-5)

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States knows that Iran is deeply involved in planning operations against commercial shipping vessels in the Red Sea, White House National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said in a statement obtained by Sputnik.

"We know that Iran was deeply involved in planning the operations against commercial vessels in the Red Sea," Watson said on Friday. "This is consistent with Iran's long-term material support and encouragement of the Houthis' destabilizing actions in the region."

Watson said that since 2015, Iran has transferred advanced weapons systems to the Houthis, including surveillance and attack drones, Land Attack Cruise Missiles (LACM), and ballistic missiles that have been used in attacks against ships, including commercial vessels with no known links to Israel, and in attacks against Israel since October.

Iran has already rejected accusations from Western countries over Tehran's alleged involvement in the Houthi attacks on merchant ships in the Red Sea. In addition, Iran emphasized that resistance groups in the Middle East, such as the Houthis, do not receive any instructions from Iran.

Houthi rebels have conducted numerous attacks against commercial shipping vessels transiting through the Red Sea in response to Israel's operation in Gaza.

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Biden Says US Citizen Gad Haggai Now Believed Killed by Hamas on October 7

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said that US citizen Gad Haggai is believed to have been killed by the Palestinian movement Hamas during the surprise attack it conducted against Israel on October 7.

"Jill and I are heartbroken by the news that Gad Haggai is now believed to have been killed by Hamas on October 7," Biden said in a statement.

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UPDATE - White House Says Iran "Deeply Involved" in Attacks Against Commercial Ships in Red Sea

(Updates with details in para 4, background in paras 5-6)

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - The United States knows that Iran is deeply involved in planning operations against commercial shipping vessels in the Red Sea, White House National Security Council spokesperson Adrienne Watson said in a statement obtained by Sputnik.

"We know that Iran was deeply involved in planning the operations against commercial vessels in the Red Sea," Watson said on Friday. "This is consistent with Iran's long-term material support and encouragement of the Houthis' destabilizing actions in the region."

Houthi rebels have conducted numerous attacks against commercial shipping vessels transiting through the Red Sea in response to Israel's operation in Gaza.

Watson said that since 2015, Iran has transferred advanced weapons systems to the Houthis, including surveillance and attack drones, Land Attack Cruise Missiles (LACM), and ballistic missiles that have been used in attacks against ships, including commercial vessels with no known links to Israel, and in attacks against Israel since October.

Moreover, Watson stated that "Iranian-provided tactical intelligence has been critical in enabling Houthi targeting of maritime vessels since the group commenced attacks in November."

Earlier this week, US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin in a statement said that the United Kingdom, Bahrain, Canada, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, the Seychelles, and Spain will take part in a new multinational operation to secure shipping routes in the Red Sea amid the surge of attacks by Houthi rebels.

The Houthi rebels vowed they would continue to prevent the passage in the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea of ships linked to Israeli companies or bound for Israel until the latter's military actions in the Gaza Strip end. The Houthis also vowed to attack any ships that join the US-led maritime coalition.

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Biden Says Signed 2024 US Defense Authorization Bill

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday that he signed the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) into law, authorizing national defense spending and policies.

"The Act provides the critical authorities we need to build the military required to deter future conflicts, while supporting service members and their spouses and families who carry out that mission every day," Biden said in the statement.

Earlier this month, the US Congress passed the annual legislation, which supports more than \$880 billion in national defense funding for 2024.

Lawmakers passed the legislation despite concerns about an extension of Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) Section 702 authorities, which Biden thanked the Congress for including

in his statement.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, December 23 (Sputnik) -

US SANCTIONS AGAINST RUSSIA

- * US President Joe Biden on Friday signed an executive order to boost sanctions authorities against Russia, the White House said.
- * The United States announced that it is banning four types of seafood imports from Russia, the Treasury Department said in a notice.
- * The United States has issued a general license authorizing transactions related to certain Russian seafood products through February 21, 2024, the Treasury Department said.

ISRAEL INVASION IN GAZA

- * A candidate has been chosen for the newly created Gaza aid coordinator position and is currently undergoing vetting before an official announcement as soon as next week, a UN source told Sputnik on Friday.
- * The spillover from the Israel-Gaza conflict is already happening, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said.
- * Israel has not allowed additional trucks to operate in Gaza after many UN vehicles were destroyed or left behind, Guterres said.
- * The United States has vetoed a Russian-proposed amendment to the UN Security Council draft resolution on the Gaza Strip, which called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, a Sputnik correspondent reported.
- * Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia proposed during a UN Security Council meeting an amendment to the draft resolution on Gaza to include a call for an immediate suspension of hostilities.

CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

- * Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte said on Friday that he had informed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy about the government's decision to prepare the first 18 F-16 fighters for the delivery to Ukraine.
- * Ukraine has lost more than 1,610 soldiers both killed and wounded in the Donetsk direction over the past week, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
- * Russia's air defense systems have destroyed a Ukrainian drone over the territory of the Moscow Region, the Russian Defense Ministry said.
- * Possible steps by Western countries to use Russia's frozen assets to help Ukraine cannot but have consequences, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

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"We know that Iran was deeply involved in planning the operations against commercial vessels in the Red Sea," Watson said in the statement. "This is consistent with Iran's long-term material support and encouragement of the Houthis' destabilizing actions in the region."

Houthi rebels have conducted numerous attacks against commercial shipping vessels transiting through the Red Seas in connection to Israel's operation in Gaza.

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US State Dept. Approves \$780Mln Sale of Stinger Missiles to NATO - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US State Department approved the possible \$780 million sale of Stinger missiles and related equipment to NATO, the Pentagon's Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) said on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the NATO Support and Procurement Agency of Stinger missiles and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$780 million," DSCA said in a press release.

The US sale would include 940 Stinger missiles for NATO, according to the release.

DSCA said in a separate press release that the US State Department also approved the potential \$150 million sale of C-17 maintenance support to NATO.

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Trudeau Worried Over Implications of Trump's Return for Climate Change Mitigation Efforts

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) – Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau told CBC News in a year-end interview that he sees with great concern the implications a potential reelection of Donald Trump could have on climate change mitigation efforts.

Trudeau's remarks on Trump addressed a question regarding the steps the Canadian government was taking in preparation for the potential return of the former US President at the White House, following the 2024 elections.

“Yes, there's a concern particularly around the environment at a time where it's so important to move forward on protecting and building an economy of the future ... A Trump presidency that goes back on the fight against climate change would slow down the world's progress in ways that are concerning to me,” Trudeau said.

Trudeau added that working with any of the three different US administration he has dealt with since he became Prime Minister in 2015 has always been challenging for his government.

“The US's interests and its focus are always going to be something that we have to work through or work around,” he said.

Nonetheless, Trudeau pointing out to some successes in bilateral diplomacy when Trump was in office, notably when it came to maintaining the North American Free Trade Agreement, whose existence was “threatened” by the US.

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US Senators Call on Biden to Use Qatar Ties to Secure Release of Gaza Hostages - Letter

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - A bipartisan pair of US senators sent a letter to President Joe Biden on Friday, urging the administration to leverage the United States' relationship with Qatar to secure the release of hostages held in Gaza by Hamas.

“We are grateful for your engagement and focus on releasing the hostages, and request that you further leverage the US partnership with Qatar to secure the release of the remaining hostages,” US Senators Joni Ernst and Jacky Rosen said in the letter.

Qatar maintains close ties to Hamas, hosts some of its senior leaders and provides significant funding to the group, the letter said. As such, Doha maintains “outsized access and influence” to engage in hostage negotiations, the letter said.

The lawmakers are appreciative of Qatar's efforts so far to help secure the release of some hostages but are concerned that the country is not utilizing its leverage to reach a deal with Hamas, the letter said.

“Therefore, we ask that you [Biden] make clear to Qatar that the United States is closely watching ongoing hostage negotiations and convey that Qatar's inability to deliver on its commitments regarding the safe return of all remaining hostages will significantly impact bilateral relations,” the letter said.

Every diplomatic option must be on the table to secure the release of the hostages, the letter said.

On October 7, the Palestinian Hamas movement launched a large-scale rocket attack against Israel from the Gaza Strip, while its fighters breached the border, opening fire on the military and civilians. As a result, over 1,200 people in Israel were killed and some 240 others abducted.

Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground incursion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas fighters and rescuing the hostages. Over 20,000 people have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes, local authorities said.

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 ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1.

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Candidate Selected For UN's Gaza Coordinator Post, Announcement Possible Next Week
-Source

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - A candidate has been chosen for the newly created Gaza aid coordinator position and is currently undergoing vetting before an official announcement as soon as next week, a UN source told Sputnik on Friday.

"[A] Candidate has been selected and is now going through the vetting process. An announcement could be expected next week," the source told Sputnik.

The UN Security Council earlier on Friday adopted a resolution that calls for the appointment of a Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator to facilitate and monitor humanitarian aid deliveries into Gaza.

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Top US Court Denies Request to Quickly Decide on Trump Immunity in Election Case - Order

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US Supreme Court rejected Special Counsel Jack Smith's request to quickly decide whether former President Donald Trump can claim immunity in the 2020 election inference case, a court order revealed on Friday.

"The petition for a writ of certiorari before judgment is denied," the court stated in the order.

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US Approves Possible \$1Bln Sale of Blanket Order Training to Saudi Arabia - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The US State Department approved a potential \$1 billion sale of so-called Blanket Order Training to Saudi Arabia, the Pentagon said on Friday.

"The State Department has made a determination approving a possible Foreign Military Sale to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia of Blanket Order Training and related equipment for an estimated cost of \$1 billion," the Pentagon said in a press release.

Blanket Order Training includes flight, technical and specialized training, professional military education and English language training, among other type of training, according to the

Pentagon.

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Four Out of 5 Hungriest People Anywhere in World 'Are in Gaza' - UN Chief

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - Four out of five of the hungriest people worldwide are found in the Gaza Strip, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday.

"Four out of five of the hungriest people anywhere in the world are in Gaza," Guterres said.

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UN Chief Says Spillover From Gaza Conflict Already Happening

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - The spillover from the Israel-Gaza conflict is already happening, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said on Friday.

"The spillover is already happening," Guterres said during a press conference.

Houthi rebels have conducted numerous attacks against commercial shipping vessels transiting through the Red Seas in connection to Israel's operation in Gaza.

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UN Chief Says Disappointed Senior Israel Officials Put Two-State Solution Into Question

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday that he is disappointed by comments from senior Israeli officials putting the two-state solution into question.

"Looking at the longer-term, I am extremely disappointed by comments from senior Israeli officials that put the two-state solution into question," Guterres said during a press conference.

"As difficult as it might appear today, the two-state solution, in line with UN resolutions, international law and previous agreements, is the only path to sustainable peace."

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UNSC Adopts Resolution Appointing Humanitarian Coordinator to Facilitate Aid Into Gaza

(Updates with more details, background in paras 5-8)

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) – The UN Security Council adopted a United Arab Emirates (UAE)-drafted resolution calling for an appointment of a coordinator to facilitate humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Friday.

The resolution was adopted in a 13-0 vote, with Russia and the United States abstaining.

The resolution requests that the UN Secretary-General appoint a Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator, who will be responsible for "facilitating, monitoring and verifying the humanitarian nature of all relief consignments to Gaza provided through states that are not party to the conflict."

The resolution also calls for urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors throughout Gaza for a sufficient number of days to enable humanitarian access.

The resolution also calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages and the provision of fuel to Gaza at levels that will meet requisite humanitarian needs.

In addition, the resolution calls on both parties of the conflict to fully and promptly implement the reopening of the Karem Abu Salem/Kerem Shalom border crossing for the provision of humanitarian assistance.

On October 7, the Palestinian movement Hamas fighters breached the border into Israel from the Gaza Strip, opening fire on the military and civilians, while concurrently conducting rocket attacks. As a result, more than 1,200 Israelis were killed and some 240 others taken hostage. Israel launched retaliatory strikes, ordered a complete blockade of Gaza and launched a ground invasion into the Palestinian enclave with the declared goal of eliminating Hamas and rescuing the hostages. More than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed so far in Gaza as a result of Israeli strikes and military operations, according to the local authorities.

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 on delivery of humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip. The ceasefire was extended several times and expired on December 1.

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Israel Hasn't Allowed More Trucks in Gaza After Several UN Vehicles Disabled - UN Chief

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - Israel has not allowed additional trucks to operate in Gaza after many UN vehicles were destroyed or left behind, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said on Friday.

"Many of our vehicles and trucks were destroyed or left behind following our forced, hurried evacuation from the north, but the Israeli authorities have not allowed any additional trucks to operate in Gaza. This is massively hampering the aid operation," Guterres said during a press conference.

Guterres also urged Israeli authorities to lift restrictions on commercial activity immediately.

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UN Sees Palestinian Authority as Legitimate Representative of Palestinians - Guterres

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United Nations considers the Palestinian Authority to be the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday.

"We believe that the legitimate representative of the Palestinian people is the Palestinian Authority," Guterres said during a press conference.

The UN wants to see the creation of conditions that would allow the Palestinian Authority to assume responsibilities in Gaza, which could allow for the realization of a two-state solution, Guterres said.

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US Blocks Russian Bid to Include Call for Ceasefire in UNSC Resolution on Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States has vetoed a Russian-proposed amendment to the UN Security Council draft resolution on the Gaza Strip, which called for an immediate cessation of hostilities, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Friday.

The original version of the resolution contained a provision calling for "urgent suspension of hostilities" as well as "urgent steps toward a sustainable cessation of hostilities."

However, according to Russia's Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia, the United States pressured UN Security Council members, which resulted in a significantly neutered wording of the draft resolution. Russia then proposed including an amendment that called for an immediate suspension of hostilities, which the United States vetoed.

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Repetition of Black Sea Grain Deal Would Not Make Sense - Guterres

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - Repetition of the Black Sea grain deal would not make sense, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday.

"I don't think the repetition of the grain deal would make sense," Guterres said during a press conference.

The UN is in contact with both Russia and Ukraine to explore "new forms" of an agreement,

Guterres added.

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Israel's Way of Conducting Offensive Blocks Distribution of Aid in Gaza- Guterres

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - The UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said on Friday that the big problem with Israel's offensive is that Tel Aviv is blocking humanitarian aid inside Gaza.

"The real problem is that the way Israel is conducting this offensive is creating massive obstacles to the distribution of humanitarian aid inside Gaza," Guterres told journalists.

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UNSC Adopts Resolution Appointing Humanitarian Coordinator to Facilitate Aid Into Gaza

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) – The UN Security Council adopted a UAE-drafted resolution calling for an appointment of a Humanitarian Coordinator' with responsibility to facilitate humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip, a Sputnik correspondent reported on Friday.

The resolution was adopted in a 13-0 vote, with Russia and the United States abstaining.

The resolution requests the Secretary-General appoint a Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator, who will be responsible for "facilitating, monitoring and verifying the humanitarian nature of all relief consignments to Gaza provided through states that are not party to the conflict."

The resolution also calls for "urgent and extended humanitarian pauses and corridors" throughout the Gaza Strip for a sufficient number of days to enable humanitarian access, as well as calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all hostages.

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US Pressure Left Wording of UNSC Resolution on Gaza Significantly Neutered - Nebenzia

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States attempts to exert pressure and blackmail UN Council members has resulted in a draft-resolution on Gaza with a significantly neutered text, Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.

"They have resorted to their favorite tactic of gross pressure, blackmail and twisting arms so that at the last minute they'd be able to present the members of the Council with an ultimatum," Nebenzia said.

Nebenzia also said that the wording in the UN Security Council resolution on Gaza that is set to be voted on has been significantly neutered.

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UNSC Resolution Includes Dangerous Element For Gaza, Removes Cessation Of Violence-Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) - Russia, attributing to the American delegation's efforts, warns that the altered draft introduces a dangerous element for Gaza's future by replacing the crucial call for an immediate cessation of violence with an ambiguous phrase, Permanent Representative to the UN Vassily Nebenzia said on Friday.

"Through the efforts of the American-delegation, that draft resolution has included an extremely-dangerous element for the future of Gaza," Nebenzia said.

"Instead of the wording on an immediate cessation of violence in op two, [an] ambiguous phrase has appeared calling for the parties to create conditions for a cessation of hostilities," Nebenzia added.

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Russia Proposes Including Call for Immediate Ceasefire in UNSC Resolution on Gaza – Envoy

UNITED NATIONS, December 22 (Sputnik) – During a meeting of the UN Security Council on Friday Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia proposed an amendment to the draft resolution on Gaza to include a call for an immediate suspension of hostilities.

"The Russian Federation proposed the following oral amendment ... 'and in this regard calls for an urgent suspension of hostilities to allow safe and unhindered humanitarian access and for urgent steps toward a sustainable cessation of hostilities,'" Nebenzia said.

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Fed Preferred Inflation Gauge PCE Index Up 2.6% in Year to November, Below Key 3% Mark

(Updates with more details, background in para 3-7)

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - A US inflation indicator closely followed by the Federal Reserve grew 2.6% in the year to November, below Wall Street's forecast, and below the key 3% mark that suggested a greater likelihood of the central bank cutting interest rates significantly next year.

The so-called Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) Index was up 3% during the 12 months to October. Wall Street economists had expected at least a 2.8% growth for last month. US inflation hit four-decade highs after the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak as a global supply chain breakdown coincided with trillions of dollars of pandemic relief spending by the government. In June 2022, the PCE Index peaked at an annualized rate of 7.1%, its most since the early 1980s. To fight inflation, the Fed hiked interest rates 11 times between March 2022 and August 2023, raising them by 5.25% from a base rate of 0.25%.

Since July, however, the Fed has held rates unchanged, skipping three opportunities to revise them. That has led to bets that the Fed will be ready to cut rates instead from 2024.

"The market continues to price in 154 bps in cuts," economist Adam Button said on the ForexLive platform, referring to a potential slashing of 1.54% in rates from the current base of 5.25%. The Fed seeks to cap inflation at 2% per year over the long term.

President Joe Biden said in a statement that annual inflation at below 3% had been achieved without a spike in joblessness and a slowdown in the economy.

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US Government Wasted \$900Bln in 2023 Through Incompetence, Frivolousness - Senator Paul

WASHINGTON, December 22 (Sputnik) - The United States wasted approximately \$900 billion in 2023 on a variety of programs that underscore the government's incompetence and frivolous spending, US Senator Rand Paul said on Friday.

"This year, I am highlighting a whopping ~\$900,000,000,000 of waste... No matter how much money the government has already wasted, politicians keep demanding even more," Paul said in his so-called Festivus Report, released annually.

US taxpayers are forced to pay the price for lawmakers spending money on favored industries and pet projects, Paul said.

A \$2.7 million National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant was sub-granted to researchers in Russia, who studied cats' ability to walk on treadmills, Paul said. Researchers in Mississippi also used NIH grant funds to test the impact of methamphetamine on monkeys' sleep habits, Paul said.

Moreover, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases used \$477,121 in taxpayer funds to study the susceptibility of forcibly feminized monkeys to HIV, Paul said.

However, the US government not only wasted taxpayer money on such frivolous studies, but also through incompetence, Paul said. COVID-19 relief funds were distributed to fraudsters who used pictures of Barbie dolls as proof of identity, Paul said.

The US also paid \$38 million in COVID-19 relief funds to dead people, Paul said. The US government made a total of \$236 billion in improper payments in 2023, Paul said.

"As always, taking the path to fiscal responsibility is often a lonely journey, but, as I've done in years past, I will continue my fight against government waste this holiday season," Paul said.

The US national debt will continue to grow by an estimated \$2 trillion a year for the next decade — more than \$5 billion every day or \$60,000 every second — Paul said.

